

The Exile of Dissidence: Restrictions on the Right to Communicate in Democracies

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Abstract

This paper argues that full enjoyment of the right to communicate is contingent upon information availability. It is suggested that gatekeeping and agenda-setting processes dominated by political, economic and social elites contribute to information deprivation and homogenization of news content in mainstream US media, limiting dialogic options critical to democracy. Gatekeeping is reconceptualized as a three-tiered process influencing media and public agendas, and the framing of news presentations. It is argued that realization of the right to communicate can be proscribed by conditions unrelated to access to mass media technologies, either for information origination or reception.

Keywords: Right to Communicate; Information Deprivation; Agenda Setting; Democracies; Gate-keeping.

Introduction

This paper makes the argument that enactment of the right to communicate is suppressed in democracies as a consequence of gatekeeping and agenda setting processes controlled by political, social, and economic elites (Mills, 1956). Included under the rubric are the political class, often themselves at or near the apex of both the social and economic hierarchy, and its sponsors, who command privilege in a quid pro quo attached to sponsorship. These are the ownership classes that, in many cases control media directly through ownership or as members of boards of directors and whose welfare is inextricably intertwined with conservative politics (Bagdikian, 2000 & 2004). The consequence in mainstream news media is homogenization of content, justifying the status quo, and marginalizing minorities, curtailing expression of dissident viewpoints, naturalizing a distorted reality, and restricting dialectical possibilities available for public discourse. In short, access to technology, the frequent focus of policy efforts directed at ensuring realization of the right to communicate, does not guarantee under either totalitarian or democratic political systems unfettered opportunities for public interaction. Under both political conditions, there may be the subversive intervention of information deprivation.

As a contemporary public policy issue, efforts to achieve a global codification of the historically contested right to communicate can be traced to the United Nations 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In 1974, UNESCO Resolution 4.121 called for an examination of control over and public access to then current and anticipated future developments in communication technology. UNESCO Resolution 3.2 (1983) asserted

that protection and exercise of fundamental human rights is contingent upon access to communication resources.

The IIC Cologne Description of the Right to Communicate was published in 1975, the UNESCO MacBride report in 1980, and the Bratislava Declaration in 1993. Also in 1993, the People's Communication Charter appeared, and a year later the Buenos Aires Declaration on Global Telecommunication. The AMARC Milan Declaration on Communication and Human Rights was published in 1998, the Tash Resolution in 1992, (rev. 2000), and the Katmandu Declaration in 2003. All were concerned with communication as a fundamental human right, and were responses largely to curtailments of the right under oppressive political regimes (<http://www.righttocommunicate.org>).

Homogenizing forces exerted on media content in democracies also abridge realization of the right, however, and are similar in hegemonic effect to those operating upon media artifacts of authoritarian regimes (McChesney, 2002). The consequence is an impoverished ideological diversity favoring elites and significantly abridging interpretations of reality that can be reasonably assigned and debated by media content consumers (see Mapes, 2005; Gitlin, 2003; Lee and Solomon, 1991; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Postman, 1985; & Schudson, 2005, 1972).

Principal homogenizing influences include media consolidation, apotheosis of elites through pervasive media use of public relations encomiums; the use by news workers of a common pool of inherently biased spokespersons intent on selling the dominate ideology; the inclination across news production operatives and operations to fashion a consensual interpretation of events and activities sympathetic to the power structure; and wire services, which deliver the same topically, thematically, and ideologically congenial content to all subscribers and, via them, audiences (Payne, 2008). Additionally, gatekeeping and agenda setting are dominant influences, and the particular focus of this paper.

Gatekeepers and Gatekeeping

Traditional conceptualizations of gatekeeping and agenda setting have tended to sanitize and trivialize both, in that they have failed to account for limiting effects on public discourse. The limitations are imposed principally by gatekeepers' content choices, which dictate the public agenda, what people think about as a consequence of their mass media engagement (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Gatekeepers are traditionally cast as relatively low-level, well-intentioned functionaries in news production operations, hirelings who decide, by reference to some set of explicit and implicit criteria consonant with the ideological position of their superiors, what gets published or broadcast and what doesn't (Jencks, 1987). The public agenda is distinct from the media agenda, which is preoccupied with framing. Framing or the ideological contextualization of gatekeeper content choices, influences *how* people think (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009, pp. 150-153; McCombs, 2004, pp. 86-97).

Conceptually, gatekeeping has been treated traditionally as a univariate construct, and agenda setting as dichotomous, encompassing both public and media agendas. Ignored has been the presence of a gatekeeping hierarchy and its leverage in establishing a homogenized media agenda that subsequently emerges as an information-deficient public agenda, delimiting topics and perspectives available for debate (see Boczkowski & Santos, 2007; Gitlin, 2003; Tuchman, 1978).

Content Homogenization

Mass media content homogenization is a product of a complex, three-tiered set of interacting gatekeeping roles and two-tiered agenda setting relationships involving internal and external content control, and a socialization process that produces a consensual definition of news (See Infante, Rancer, & Womak, 1990; Breed, 1955).

The external locus of control resides with the social, political, and economic power centers and their individual and institutional spokespersons, who exercise primary-level gatekeeping influence in determining the media agenda. This group includes what McChesney has referred to as homogenized ownership (2004, p. 47). There is a vested interest in making available to the media and, ultimately, the public only information supportive of the status quo, and, in both topical and ideological content, not inimical to corporate well being (See Gans, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Paul and Elder, 2006). Secondary-level gatekeeping is an internal function involving publishers and senior editors, whose content decisions reflect the priorities of primary-level gatekeepers, and the dominate cultural viewpoint (see Paul and Elder, 2006; Gans, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Bagdikian, 2004 & 2000).

Tertiary-level gatekeeping involves reporters and low-level editors. Their contribution to homogenization is a consequence of top-down pressure. As a matter of survival, they are compliant with dictates of superiors. One indicator of complicity at this level in the construction of a homogenized news product is the reliance upon sources who function as conduits for views espoused by elites. What follows for audiences is elimination of exposure to divergent perspectives that would provide useful grist for a dialectical mill (see Schudson, 2005; Jensen, 2003; Gans, 1980). As Gans has noted, media, structurally and socially, are embedded in a political establishment populated largely by and functioning on behalf of the rich (Gans, 2003, p. 82).

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is a product of gatekeeping. Traditionally, theorizing and empirical work have focused on what has been labeled the public agenda. The content of the public agenda consists of those events made salient as a consequence of media treatment. Treatments are taken to have priming effects, prioritizing in the public consciousness the events and activities featured in news accounts. Operationalization of the public agenda has been preoccupied with counting the frequency with which certain matters are reported, biases implied by framing, and the presumptive influence of priming on the salience of those matters in the public mind (McCombs, 2004, p. 87). As with

gatekeeping, however, there is a hierarchical relationship between the media and public agendas. The media agenda, set by representatives of economic, social, and political elites, and the elites themselves, who exercise control over information made available to media, dictates the public agenda. The homogenizing influence of the collusion between media executives and practitioners and primary-level gatekeepers has been generally ignored, or, where recognized, treated antiseptically.

Moreover, with both public and media agenda setting, the conventional focus has been on first-level agenda setting, which is assumed to make salient an attitude object (Griffin, 2006, p. 401). The conceptual extension of agenda setting to accommodate second-level effects has not adequately accounted for a multidimensional gatekeeping hierarchy. Second-level agenda setting suggests a covert transmission of ideology, conceding the possibility that media content may not only determine what is thought about, but also *how* salient issues are thought about (Ibid, p. 402). The concession, coupled with implications of primary-level agenda setting, raises critical concerns. Where both the salience of environmental phenomena and the ideological evaluation of those phenomena are consequences of encounters with homogenized media news, the potential for rational public dialogue and decision making grounded in a free marketplace of ideas becomes increasingly remote.

Information Deprivation

Clarifying the relationships involving the various levels of gatekeepers, levels of agenda setting, agenda types, and the interaction with priming and framing is critical to an improved understanding of constraints on the right to communicate that are consequences information deprivation. It is clear that primary-level gatekeepers have a vested interest in framing a media agenda that produces secondary-level effects consistent with the dominate ideology. The news production process involves secondary and tertiary-level gatekeepers in development of a public agenda, the primary-level effects of which implicate through content choices and treatments the objectives of primary-level gatekeepers and the media agenda. The oppressive effects are particularly pernicious in that they occur without conscious recognition by consumers, and, consequently, evade redress (Noelle-Neumann, 1991 & 1984).

Ultimately, both public and media agendas reflect a hegemonic confluence of external and internal interests, driven by free market, profit imperatives, typified by the conservative positions of those occupying senior status in the gatekeeping hierarchy and subscribed to as a matter of both organizational efficacy and self preservation by subordinates (see Tunstall, 1987 &, 2008; Gans, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). The resulting insular and parochial news product, characterized by a mendacious topical, thematic, and ideological sterility, imposes on consumers a restricted set of perceptual and cognitive filters. The outcome of the consequent information deprivation suggests media-imposed social control consistent with notions of pluralistic ignorance, a spiral of silence, and a desiccated public discourse. Where a point of view goes unexpressed by media, would-be adherents are rendered mute (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, 1991 & Gans, 1980). Examples abound. Over the past several decades, ersatz debates featuring

mainstream US presidential candidates have become a staple of election year television programming. Participants selected by media, with rare exceptions, articulate center-right views on the political spectrum, elaborating policies advantageous to middle and upper classes. Starkly absent are dissident voices, in particular those left of center, acting as advocates for the underclasses, and potentially galvanizing that oppositional segment of the electorate.

Historically, US media have waxed rhapsodic over installation in developing nations of free enterprise market economies, celebrating the emergence of new millionaires and the occasional billionaire. Funds supporting transitions to free-market, capitalist economies generally come largely from the United States Treasury, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Largely ignored in US media accounts is that support is conditioned upon the removal of trade barriers, allowing predatory and highly profitable access to indigenous markets by the United States and others (Klein, 2007). Ignored also are the frequent overthrow of democratically-elected, but uncooperative governments, and erosive repercussions, including massive unemployment, inflation, and draconian retrenchment in social services. Examples can be found in, among other places, Argentina and Chile (p. 11), Indonesia (p. 83), Bolivia (pp. 177-193), Poland (215), South Africa (p. 245), Russia (p. 275), and Iraq (pp. 456-484). Domestically, analogous conditions can be located in post-Katrina New Orleans (pp. 513-534).

In 2007, the infant mortality rate in the United States was 6.4 per thousand, and life expectancy 78. In Sweden, it was 2.8, life expectancy 80.6; in Spain 4.3 and 79.8; in Japan 3.2 and 81.4; and in Norway 3.6 and 79.7 (<http://www.infoplance.com>). The list could be extended. Such comparisons do not often appear – and certainly not prominently – in US news agendas, suggesting, as they do, some level of societal failure, inviting public activism challenging the status quo.

Consequences

Among the perquisites of power is control over the construction of social reality, and the capacity to eliminate conflicting perspectives (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, pp. 123-128). The structural and derivative social relationships illustrated here produce a news product that is conservative (Gans, 2003, p. 47), and homogenized, depicting in choice and treatment of events cast as news the ideological commitments of a controlling elite whose continued political and social prosperity is predicated upon economic dominance, and contingent upon maintaining the status quo (Curran, 2005). The objective and the consequences of news produced under such conditions ensure the absence of disparate voices. While preferred meanings imposed by mass media are occasionally contested in the public sphere, it is generally accepted that the contest is waged between grossly unequal opponents, and any shifts in a socially constructed reality evanescent (see Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Ryan, 1991; Hallin, 1987). Potential alternative realities, in particular those reflecting liberal perspectives, are left unexamined. They are consequently absent from civil discourse, and cannot influence how or what publics think nor how they behave (Curran, 2005). What emerge are narrowly circumscribed media and public agendas that, at both primary and secondary

levels, are antithetical to democratic process. Robust public debate, and what is implied with regard to the right to communicate, is stultified by unrevealed and unexamined alternatives.

Conclusion

The conceptual elaboration of gatekeeping and agenda setting suggests several theoretically useful propositions in considering ways in which realization of the right to communicate is proscribed by conditions unrelated to technological access to mass media.

- 1) Media content is a product of economic, social, and political power exerted through primary-level gatekeeping.
- 2) Primary-level gatekeeping is committed to maintenance of the status quo.
- 3) Protecting the status quo is linked to news content reflecting the dominate ideology.
- 4) The application of power produces among secondary and tertiary-level gatekeepers a consensual definition of news consistent with that of primary-level gatekeepers.
- 5) The influence of the dominate ideological perspective is primarily attributable to a second-level media agenda, and secondarily attributable to a primary-level media agenda.
- 6) Secondary and tertiary-level gatekeepers produce a public agenda supportive of the media agenda through primary-level effects associated with content selection.
- 7) The public agenda is formulated as a homogenized news product consistent with a dominate ideology.
- 8) The homogenization of the news product is dictated primarily by the ideological mandates of a market economy.
- 9) Where the mandates of a market economy are the driving ideological force in news production, the press cannot be expected to make unfettered contributions to a free marketplace of ideas.
- 10) An impoverished free marketplace of ideas constrains the ability of a population to make informed decisions required for responsible self governance in a democracy.

Where information parameters are defined by the self interest of a very few securely lodged among a national and global elite there can be no reasonable expectation of a healthy discourse informed by the mass media's contribution to a free marketplace of ideas. What is cast as news becomes the most pernicious sort of propaganda (see Paul & Elder, 2006; Chomsky, 2002; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The publics' ability to fully exercise a right to communicate unrestricted by information shortfalls falls victim less to

limited access to communication technologies than to a purposeful exclusion of alternative perspectives on social, economic, and political possibilities.

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