



"Influencing Change: The Role of Media in Social Movements"

Dr. Pramiti Roy^{1*}

^{1*}Head, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication and School of Management Studies , Director, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Email:- pramitroy@gmail.com/pramitir@svu.ac.in, Ph:-9903868582/8961007405

Citation: Dr.Pramiti Roy, (2023) "Influencing Change: The Role of Media in Social Movements" , *Educational Administration: Theory And Practice*, 29(4), 2960-2968
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i4.7660

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the influential role of the media in the shaping and supporting of social movements—one traceable right from early print media to the modern digital age. Entailed historical cases for study, among others, are the Civil Rights Movement, the Fall of Apartheid, and the Arab Spring, which have put forward the very important role of different forms of media in mobilizing public opinion toward social change. This would also include how media works—from agenda-setting to framing and the agency of storytelling in creating affective resonance and moving collective action. Furthermore, problems associated with ethical dilemmas within media reporting are very well documented, from bias to sensationalism and infringements on ethics. Drawing from actual case studies and real theoretical frameworks, the paper argues in a disposition that shows intricate ways in which the media can be related to social movements. Thus it makes a compelling case for ethical journalism in facilitating democratic processes and social justice.

Keywords: Media influence, social movements, agenda-setting, framing, digital activism, ethical journalism, storytelling, public opinion, collective action, case studies.

Introduction

There is the strength of media to reach out many people, convince them through stories and present issues in such a way that they relate to most people. This ability has been used by social movements throughout history to expose injustices, gain support and exert pressure for change. The US Civil Rights Movement, for instance, employed television in order to broadcast segregation violence which secured national attention leading civil rights legislation.

Digital media and social networking sites have drastically changed how activism takes place. Such movements as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Arab spring have used platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organize demonstrations as well as instantly sharing updates thus creating global solidarity. These channels enable common activists bypass traditional media outlets and communicate directly with their target audiences.

At the same time however, these inventions come with their own problems. Misinformation can spread very quickly on the web; governments can spy on citizens through social networks while online activism is potentially temporary.

This chapter discusses utilizing media for movement purposes on one end and using it as an arena of control on the other. It will look at strategies of public relations as well as narrative techniques while examining the role played by traditional media along side digital forms in shaping modern protests. Using real life case studies and theories, we shall explore how media shapes movement

Literature Review

Media and social movements are powerful agents of change for collective action, inspiration, and mobilization of people towards social issues. It has now become a trend on social media platforms where storytelling allows people to share their experiences and create awareness about social problems [1]. In a very profound way, media content and messages affect people, shape their outlook, and bring about a change in society [2]. Social

movements, such as the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, use discourses to denounce injustices and mark self-mediation strategies, which are further directed through activism and social change strategies at both the national and international levels [3]. In general, media and social movements have played quite crucial roles in ensuring positive change in society.

Historical Context: Media and Social Movements

The Role of Print Media in Early Social Movements

Print media has thus been vital to early social movements, functioning through the major means of information and communication, rallying support, and articulating demands for change. The introduction of the printing press in the 15th century led to the major revolution of communication because, from here, pamphlets, books, and newspapers could be mass-produced. In a period when printed matter, such as the 95 Theses of Martin Luther and the widespread pamphlet "Common Sense" by Thomas Paine, helped to mobilize public opinion, in particular, it became crucial to the movements of the Protestant Reformation and the American Revolution.

Radio and Television: Broadcasting Change

The 20th century saw the invention of radio and television—two contraptions which would have a lasting impact on social movements and mass communication. What made radio so important was the fact that it really made it possible to distribute information in real time, thus it reached audiences which otherwise would not have been reached due to distance. In the 1930s and 1940s, radio was a significant factor in determining public opinion and political debate, as shown by Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats".



Source: The Nixon/Kennedy Presidential debates (JFK Presidential Library) (Screenshot)

Television was the leader of the latter half of the 20th century and created a new paradigm in political debate. The 1960 U.S. Presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon saw a new turn of events. This marked the first time a Presidential debate had been televised. Nearly 70 million Americans tuned in and watched as Kennedy looked cool and composed while Nixon looked very worried and visibly agitated. This visual aspect determined the debate. Television viewers had decided that Kennedy had won, while radio listeners favored Nixon. Kennedy himself knew that, had it not been for television, he would have come in second. This proved how powerful a medium television is in the alteration of political debates (Pieces of History).

The Emergence of Digital Media: A New Era for Activism

A new form of social movement developed in the late 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries because digital media and the internet had provided new means. Through such social networking sites as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, activists could use powerful instruments to network and communicate globally. Digital media had democratized information transmission, which provided an ability for grassroots movements to surpass traditional gatekeepers.



Source: Britanica

The protests of the Arab Spring, an anti-government protest movement across the Middle East in 2010-2011, set in motion ways digital media could impact social movements: it used social media to coordinate protests, share real-time updates, and solicit international support.

The Mechanics of Media Influence

Impact of News Media on Public Expression

News media help activate public expression and influence national agenda. As Gary King et al. (2017) state in their article 'How the news media activate public expression and influence national agendas,' consumption of news media motivates Americans to participate in public debates regarding some issues. It is an engine for democratic politics. Such collective public expression can influence the behavior of the government and policy development immensely, showing the power of citizen participation in the establishment of governance systems. This ability of media to influence public expression is vital for representative democracies since it bolsters the incentive for governments to include public sentiment in the policymaking process. Through news coverage, the media shape public opinion, policy debates, and social attitudes about critical issues.

Agenda Setting and Framing in Media

Agenda-setting and framing are key concepts that detail how media works in shaping the audience's perception in viewing what is important and how to interpret these issues. Agenda-setting refers to the ability of the media to alter the salience of issues in people's minds. This is the ability of the media to spotlight issues over other issues by volume of coverage and salience. An example is how widespread media coverage of an issue like climate change would heighten its salience in public minds, in policy, and public debates.

Framing, on the other hand, refers to the presentation of issues by the media in such a way as to affect audience interpretation. Media frames present certain aspects of an issue and make others salient. Media frames dictate how audiences understand issues. For example, framing of immigration using economic benefits versus the threat to security will influence different public attitudes and policy preferences.

Media as a Mobilization Tool and Organization

Different media platforms are utilized to mobilize and organize using either social media, blogs, or the traditional media to push people to act and work towards a common goal. To mobilize and organize, these platforms circulate the information to have the widest reach that gets support and actions of participants. The use of respective platforms allows the mass dissemination of information, rallying of support, and creating means of communication among participants. The Facebooks or Twitters of this world create spreading of messages, making events known, and networking with other users of the medium. Blogs have now created avenues for indepth discussion, analysis, and opinion-sharing, and in the same light, for mobilization purposes. Traditional media holds the messages to the next stage, and campaigns get a much larger reach, hence more credibility, when more people are mobilized. With such a multilayered system, therefore, one and organizations are bound to easily mobilize and organize people around shared causes, events, or movements.

The use of media for mobilization and organization is apparent in history from numerous instances, including the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, with social media coordinating the protests and ensuring appropriate information distribution. Similarly, political blogs have expanded the traditional process of agenda setting by redistributing content from mainstream media and, therefore, have consequential effects on public communication and news. The ability of digital technologies to produce interactivity has empowered users to actively participate in the communication process, thereby allowing them to create and share media content, challenge the popular media agenda, and influence social change. In essence, the media is a tool for mobilization and organization by way of communication, an amplifier of voices, and a way to take collective action in an interconnected world.

The Power of Storytelling: Personal Narratives and Public Impact

Media storytelling can humanize abstract issues in ways that create emotional connection among public audiences. Personal stories are a tool through which public opinion and social action can be transformed. For example, the **#MeToo** movement took personal stories of sexual harassment and assault that were shared widely on social media to spread the word and highlight the prevalence of the incidents, which led to a conversation on gender violence across the globe. It not only raised a collective voice for survivors but also pressurized institutions to deal with the matter and bring reforms.

Case Studies of Media-Driven Social Movements **The Civil Rights Movement and Television**



Source: NBC News, Screenshot from a video titled “Civil rights movement gets a boost from TV news”

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s made use of television to dramatize the brutal facts of racial segregation and discrimination. One pivotal event was the Birmingham Campaign in 1963 when police used fire hoses and dogs against peaceful protesters—including children. A year later, in 1965, the Selma to Montgomery marches— especially "Bloody Sunday," in which state troopers violently attacked marchers— were televised as well. Such broadcasts influenced public opinion and also held the government responsible for the formation of meaningful legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Fall of Apartheid: International Media and South African Struggles

What made Apartheid in South Africa, the system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination, gain so much international censure, was largely because of the exposure it received in the mass media. There have been incidents such as the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, where 69 protesters were killed by the police, and the Soweto Uprising in 1976, where hundreds of protesting students were killed by the apartheid regime against education policies it enforced, which received wide reporting in the media.

The media quite prominently portrayed the brutality of the apartheid regime, and therefore acted as a spark that caused global activism against apartheid, in the form of economic sanctions and political pressure. The international media exposure, coupled with internal resistance forces like Nelson Mandela, finally led to the dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s and the establishment of a democratic government in 1994.

The Arab Spring: Social Media as a Catalyst for Revolution



Source: In a photograph dated December 28, 2010, then-President of Tunisia, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (second from the left), is seen visiting street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in the hospital after Bouazizi set himself on fire. This image was provided by the Tunisian Presidency and distributed via Reuters.

The Arab Spring started with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in December 2010, as he protested police corruption and ill treatment. That case of desperation, widely shared over social media, ignited protests in Tunisia that toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. It spread the momentum to other countries—Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Social media then was used to orchestrate, inform, and mobilize support in those countries. In Egypt, the hashtag #Jan25 was instrumental in organizing those hundreds of thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square, which later brought down President Hosni Mubarak. The Arab Spring proved the power of social media, circumventing state-controlled media, in consolidating solidarity and magnifying calls for democracy.

#MeToo Movement: Viral Hashtags and Global Awareness



Source: X handle of Alyssa Milano @Alyssa_Milano (then Twitter)

The #MeToo movement went viral in October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano prompted survivors of sexual harassment and assault to use the hashtag #MeToo to share their experiences. This call to action happened after the public accusation that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was facing. It had been taken up by millions worldwide within a few days. The movement not only brought the prevalence of sexual misconduct into the limelight but also heralded significant social and institutional change that included the resignation of powerful individuals, the introduction of new workplace policies, and legislative reforms aimed at the prevention of harassment and at the protection of the survivors. Social media, which has made collective action possible, contributed significantly to a global conversation on violence against women (Pieces of History).

Black Lives Matter: From Social Media to Streets



Source: <https://www.newyorker.com/>

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement originated in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The movement picked up traction in the cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City; both were African Americans killed by police. Social media, particularly Twitter, worked to spread the hashtag **#BlackLivesMatter** and coordinate protests. The global protests over police violence and systemic racism were reignited after the video of George Floyd's murder circulated widely in 2020. The influence of BLM has gone far beyond the streets, informing public discourse, policy changes, and even corporate practices surrounding racial justice and equality.

These case studies have shown the deep impact that media has made on the mobilization of public opinion, social movements, and political and social change. From traditional television broadcasts to the all-pervasive reach of social media, the role of media in giving volume to such voices and fostering collective action toward justice has been most pivotal.

The Ethical Landscape of Media Coverage Bias and Representation in Media

Media bias and representation issues occur when news stations report with a slant that often portrays their political or ideological biases. One of the salient instances is in the reportage concerning the U.S. presidential elections of 2016. There were studies that indicated that some networks, such as Fox News, were seen to have been biased in favor of Republican candidates, and other networks, like MSNBC, were seen as being biased in favor of Democrats. This sort of reporting is what creates public skewed understanding and serves to defeat the purpose of the media in presenting unbiased information.

Ethical Reporting and the Role of Journalists

Serious ethical violations in journalism can spell disaster for the credibility and trust of a media house. The trust in media is so important that without it media cannot sustain for long. A notorious one is that of Jayson Blair in 2003 at The New York Times. He totally made up stories, lifted pieces from other papers, and plunged the newspaper into a major crisis. This case goes to prove how much careful fact-checking and editorial control are necessary to safeguard journalism.

Navigating Sensationalism and Responsible Storytelling

Media sensationalism usually involves providing sensationalistic content rather than factual information. There was a sensationalistic trend during the mid-1990s coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial; here, the hoopla obscured substantive legal proceedings. Media sensationalism tends to misinform the public and not give due seriousness to the covered issues. On the contrary, responsible storytelling involves context, not unnecessary dramatics, and truth. Therefore, any media house should be responsible while forming its narrative. It should not mislead or misinterpret anything at all.

Examples of Ethical Violations

- **The News of the World Phone Hacking Scandal:** One of the biggest scandals of 2011 was that of the British tabloid News of the World, in which it was discovered that the newspaper's journalists were involved in a variety of scandals related to phone hacking. The lid really blew off when it was found out that the reporters were illegally breaking into the voicemails of celebrities, politicians, and even crime victims. Some of the worst cases include the phone hacking of missing schoolgirl Milly Dowler, who was later found murdered. Journalists deleted some of her messages, raising false hopes for her family and potentially hampering the police investigation. This was followed by widespread public outrage against such unethical practices, a police investigation of the same and a series of high-profile arrests, including the editor of the newspaper – Andy Coulson – and a few other senior staff members. The entire saga also involved Rebekah Brooks, a former editor, and senior executive with News International – the parent company of News of the World. The fallouts from the scandal were overwhelming. Rupert Murdoch, the proprietor of News Corporation under News of the World, axed the 168-year-old tabloid in July 2011. It snowballed into the Leveson Inquiry: a far-reaching investigation into the ethics of the British press, after which stricter media regulations and ways to better protect individual privacy were called for. It has since been a reminder of the need for moral journalism and the ills of crossing legal and moral boundaries in the quest for stories.
- **CNN and the False Iraq War Report:** In 1998, CNN broadcast an explosive report alleging that, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. military had deployed sarin nerve gas in an operation called "Operation Tailwind," aiming to assassinate American defectors in Laos. This report, part of the "NewsStand: CNN & Time" series, said that a batch of U.S. defectors was attacked in 1970, in a clandestine attack. The story was a co-production with Time magazine, for which it had an earlier airing, and it sent shock waves through people and communities. After the airing, military officials, veterans who were part of the operation, and other experts strongly refuted the allegations. The Pentagon held an internal investigation and determined that there was no basis for the reports from CNN. With pressure increasing, CNN conducted an independent review by journalist Floyd Abrams, which finally found that the reporting lacked evidence and poor journalism practices. As a result, CNN pulled the story back, made apologies to the public, and fired two senior producers and a correspondent associated with the report. This incident has shown how serious can be the consequences of poor fact-checking and how important rigorous journalistic standards are. It has emphasized the importance of verification and ethical duties of news organizations in ensuring accuracy before dissemination of sensitive and potentially damaging information.
- **Cobrapost's Operation 136:** In 2018, Cobrapost, an investigative journalism website, published a sting operation called "Operation 136" to bust corruption in the Indian media industry. Journalist Pushp Sharma posed as a representative of a fictitious organization that had a political agenda and offered huge sums of money to several houses of the media for publication of news skewed for the target of the political agenda. In a series of investigations, he has revealed that a lot of established media houses, such as India Today, Zee News, Times of India, Network18, and Hindustan Times, compromised their editorial integrity by promoting content that would promote the agenda of one political party while running stories and discredit its opponents. The sting operation further exposed a willingness to publish communal and divisive material, cloaked as news, to manage public opinion. The implications of Operation 136 are immense. The operation pointed out the vulnerability of media houses to money interests, biased reporting, and, in the process, undermined public confidence in the media. This deters democratic processes highly dependent on information that is impartial and accurate, thereby facilitating informed decisions by the electorate. This propensity of the media to distort news in accordance with political and monetary interests calls for stronger regulations, transparency, and respect for ethical standards of journalism.

The importance of Operation 136 extends toward the role of media in social movements. Media plays a critical role in the formulation of public discourse and opinion, especially in the context of social and political movements. If media houses do biased reporting, it will tilt the public perception and will act as a deterrent to the advancement of real social movements by creating a totally different narrative. Yet, ethical journalism upholds the principles of objectivity and truthfulness has the strength to reinforce social movements. And this is achieved by truthfully narrating the facts and events. Operation 136 stands as a reminder of the role and ethics of the media, but more than that, as a reminder of the desperate necessity of ethical and responsible journalism in the fight to form an informed and democratic society.

The Future of Media and Social Movements

The future of media and social movements emerges at the crossroads of newly emerging technologies, the development of social media platforms, and the forces of globalization. These are the elements that are going to redefine the ways in which activism is going to be organized, communicated, and understood in the future in new and challenging ways.

These include the rise of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and blockchain as tools for innovation within activism. AI is leveraged to perform analyses of big datasets, which are useful in recognizing the trends that could work to help advance support or actions. For instance, machine-learning-driven platforms are able to watch fake news and advise strategic communications. VR can build immersive experiences that create empathy and awareness of social issues, as those in projects where you can place the user virtually in ugly realities to feel life in a conflict zone. Blockchain technology can ensure there are secure and transparent transactions and records, which will build trust and accountability among movements. Enabled by blockchain, decentralized platforms can secure communication and fundraising for activists in highly repressive environments.

Social media platforms continue to grow and evolve with the addition of features that activists can take advantage of to make a bigger impact. Live streaming, by making full use of Facebook Live, Instagram Live, and the now-banned-in-India TikTok, brings the power of real-time events across the world into the hands of the activists, therefore mobilizing support in an instance. The use of hashtags, exemplified by the **#BlackLivesMatter** movement, helps in organizing and amplifying messages across the globe. Yet, the algorithms determining visibility can amplify and suppress movements, pointing to the powerful role tech companies play in shaping public debates.



Source: On Saturday, May 30, 2020, protesters marched along Dearborn Street, holding a sign in honor of George Floyd. (Photo by Evan Garcia / WTTW News)

For example, during the **2020 protests following George Floyd's death**, social media played a critical role in spreading information and organizing demonstrations, with some controversial instances in content moderation.

Globalization is key to the emergence of transnational movements, allowing activists from different parts of the world to connect, share strategies, and support each other. **The Friday for Future** movement, inspired by **Greta Thunberg**, is a very good example of how environmental activism works with global connectivity. The students from all over the world strike in coordination to demand action against climate change, clearly showing the force multiplier of togetherness across borders. The **#MeToo movement**, which originated in the United States, spread across the world as women across different cultures and industries began to open up about sexual harassment and assault, leading to dramatic changes in social behavior and institutions around the world.

The **2012 Delhi gang rape** case, also known as the Nirbhaya case, is a perfect example of how media and social media can drive social movements and, at the same time, raise ethical concerns. The brutality of the gang rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi led to countrywide protests and eventually brought about major

legal reforms in the country. Extensive reportage in the media not only mobilized a great surge of public outrage but also made sure public pressure was kept on the legal machinery for any positive developments toward this. In this regard, technology development, evolution of social media, and globalization will play huge roles in the future of media in relation to social movements. Powerful tools for activism, these developments also require the careful consideration of ethics in order to ensure that responsible and effective advocacy is achieved. The challenge is how to harness these tools to amplify voices and drive change without compromise of integrity and respect for those involved.

Conclusion

The complex interplay between media, social movements, and ethical considerations has deeply impacted the development of societies and will continue to do so. Media, from traditional television to the latest in social media, has a catalytic effect in raising the voices of stakeholders, changing societal attitudes, and transforming the world. Historical examples include the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter protests. They show the salient and deliberate ability of media to both change public sentiment and usher in policy reform. It is emerging technologies in the forms of AI, VR, and blockchain that will soon take activism to the next level, furnishing it with new ways for organization, communication, and transparency. Social media will continue to be relevant in spreading information and mobilizing, with their new features updated constantly, and their outreach maximized. Ethical concerns are being raised about their influence in relation to content moderation and potential bias.

Globalization has become an enabler of transnational movements, illustrating how social justice issues on one side of the world can be related to those on the other. Movements like Fridays for Future and #MeToo show that this global connectivity can be a driver for collective action across borders toward a shared commitment to the solution of urgent global challenges.

However, with great power, there also comes great responsibility. With the many incidents of sensationalism, bias, and misleading media, there is a great need for responsible journalism and ethical reporting. A classic example of responsible journalism is the 2012 Delhi gang rape case.

Looking ahead, it is important to embrace technological and global developments while adhering to the highest levels of ethics. This means that media will remain a key driver for positive change in empowering voices toward a society that is fairer and more just. By guiding these intricacies with integrity, media can effectively support and enhance social movements and drive effective progress in today's world.

References:

1. Hparkins. (2016, January 5). Does television affect how we elect Presidents? Pieces of History. <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2010/11/15/does-television-affect-how-we-elect-presidents/>
2. Earl, J., & Rohlinger, D. A. (2017). Social movements and media. In *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Vol. 14). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2050-2060201714>
3. Reddy, A. (2019). Storytelling – A catalyst for social change through social media. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*.
4. Alonso-Muñoz, L. (2016). La influencia del discurso sobre cambio social en la agenda de los medios: El caso de la plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca [The influence of the discourse on social change in the media agenda: The case of the platform of people affected by mortgages].
5. Sulton, A. (2022). Media of literary works and symbolic social movements of Mas Marco Kartodikromo. *Philosophica*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.35473/po.v5i1.1231>
6. Krishnamurthi, L. (2023). Role of media in social change. <https://doi.org/10.33774/coe-2023-88p04>
7. Luo, Y., Burley, H., Moe, A., & Sui, M. (2018). A Meta-Analysis of News Media's Public Agenda-Setting Effects, 1972-2015. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(1), 150–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018804500>
8. Naser, M. A. (2020). Relevance and Challenges of the Agenda-Setting Theory in the Changed Media Landscape. *American Communication Journal*, 22(1), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.ac-journal.org/>
9. Agenda setting. (2016). In Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315538389>
10. OnlineMind. (2024, March 27). The role of the television in the 1960s US civil rights movement. The Online Mind. <https://onlinemind.org/2015/12/02/the-role-of-the-television-in-the-1960s-us-civil-rights-movement/>
11. Pruitt, S., & Pruitt, S. (2024, January 30). The Civil Rights Movement: 7 Key Moments that led to Change. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/news/civil-rights-movement-key-events>
12. Kumar, A., & Kumar, A. (2018, February 2). RaDIa Tapes: How one woman's influence peddling led to a snake pit. TheQuint. <https://www.thequint.com/explainers/what-are-niira-radia-tapes-explained>