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THE PROPAGANDA MODEL AND DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNET AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT WITH REFERENCE TO ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION, 2021

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Abstract

Media and politics share a close proximity and affect one another. The media being an objective disseminator of news and information assumed to be unbiased in its reporting and reflect the views of all the sections of society. The role of the media was challenged in the Propaganda Model and viewed as reflective of the agenda and interest of the dominant elites. This scenario has assumed to make a shift due to the development of technology that allows for user-generated content, constant online presence, and interactivity. The key mediums for Indian political actors to connect with the citizens were rallies and public meetings in the past. But this communication medium has been transformed with the visual media and more recently due to the advent of new media and digital platforms. Therefore, the objective of this paper has been to evaluate the Indian political scenario from the perspective of the propaganda model with changes in the new media context. It has also focused on the political scenario of Assam regarding the Assam Legislative Assembly Election, 2021.

Keywords: *News, New Media, Propaganda Model, Politics, Development*

Introduction

Media is one of the preferred vehicles for political communication and it is evident that more or less every media is influenced by its political environment. Likewise, the politics of a country is affected by the market forces in operation; thereby creating a nexus between market and politics where the goal is power and profit. But in this interrelation, the most affected one is the audience as the public makes most of their choices and decisions of everyday life by relying on the information of the media. In this regard, the most significant are political decisions. The electorate learns about politics and other government activities through the media and studies suggest there is a sizeable impact in shaping political knowledge, behaviour, and attitude of the voters. Therefore, whatever becomes the media agenda becomes the public agenda. This is explained in the Agenda-setting theory formulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory explains the relationships between the importance that mass media gives on issues and the significance that media audiences attribute to those issues. The media effects theories explain the influence of media content on the perceptions and decisions of the public. Therefore, it is proved through these theories that media can have effects on public decisions.

However, the news that media houses highlight has influences on both politics and market forces. This phenomenon is explained by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their 'Propaganda Model' in the book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* published in 1988. The propaganda model explains the production of news and how it is influenced by the market forces from ownership to the dominant 'ideology' of the government. It explains the five news filters that a particular content went through before being presented to the audience.

The first part of the paper explains the propaganda model in the context of new media. The second part has analysed the model in the Indian political context with examples of recent events and the third part evaluate the working of propaganda politics in Assam by focusing on certain key issues of the Assam

Legislative Assembly Election, 2021. The last part deals with the concluding remarks and prospects for future study.

Propaganda Model and New Media

The concept of the 'manufacturing consent' was derived from a statement put forward by Walter Lippmann about 'manufacture of consent' in relation to the formation of public opinion and for him, the consensus in a democracy is not natural but involves various parties who can carry out manipulation for the formation of public opinion in a democracy. For Herman and Chomsky, in this process of opinion formation of the public media has an important part and the media position does not however accommodate the interest of all in the society but only a few dominant elites. The five news filters (ownership, advertising, source, flaks, and anti-communism) involved in the Propaganda Model are linked together and reflect a multi-level potentiality of the government bodies and dominant business entities to exert power over the flow of news content to the public. The five filters of the propaganda model are in brief discussed below:

- *Size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms*: The media houses are owned and controlled by powerful and dominant few business elites that have a strong connection with the political actors and have a common interest of power and profit. The few elites controlled the entire news production and even if they face any challenge from the radical media, they are imposed with heavy taxes so that they cannot make their voices heard by the audience. They maintain a close relation with the government bodies for licensing and other permissions.Therefore, the government has control over the production of news content according to the propaganda model.

- *Advertising as the primary income source of the mass media*: Advertising is one of the key factors that shape news content as the media houses rely on advertisements for revenue. Herman and Chomsky (2002) note that advertisers do not like controversial content and prefer to have light entertainment. The propaganda model argues that advertisers have a huge

impact on the content of news and they can remove their advertising from the media whose political views are contrary to them (Macleod, 2019, p. 52).

- *Sources of news information*: Due to the constant demand for news content, the government and corporate sector act as the most reliable source for the media houses. Herman and Chomsky (2008) argue that the source of news from them helps to maintain the image of an objective media on one hand and also protects them from government action and criticism. Therefore, the dominant elites exert their influence on the news content and the media did not oppose their 'agenda and framework' and helps to maintain it so that their relationship with them is not disturbed (p.94).

- *Flaks*: Herman and Chomsky (2008) describe flaks as 'negative responses to a media statement or program' (p.99). The flaks can be individual or collective and in the form of letters, petitions, lawsuits, etc. The flaks are problematic for media houses if produced in a large quantity. The corporate also sponsors flaks against the media houses that have views contradictory to their interest. Herman and Chomsky (2008) note that the biggest flak producer is the government that can impose any law, rule, or tax on the media houses opposite to their interest to maintain their status quo of power.

- *Ideology*: The propaganda model describes ideology as a tool in the hands of the political power that can be used to justify every action. Through the ideology of 'anti-communism,' the United States had control of every event in the country according to Herman and Chomsky. The main purpose of an ideology was to portray oneself as good and right and the others as evil and illegitimate so that their decisions received wide support from the public.

However, the advent of new media technologies and digital platforms has questioned the applicability and worthiness of the propaganda model in the internet age. The propaganda model was put forward when the internet has not developed yet. In the revised edition of their book in 2002, Herman and Chomsky mentioned

that the advent of the internet and other emerging technologies in communication have been able to take off the various barriers in communication and has made possible interactive communication that was initially not attainable. They also acknowledge the fact that the internet has strengthened and intensified the breadth of the individual as well as group activities through a networked society.

The Internet has changed one-way communication to a two-way mode and the new digital platforms such as Google Meet, Facebook, Zoom Meetings, etc. have led to multidirectional communication. However, they note that the internet as a tool of communication has limitations. Regarding the possible sources of information that the internet has opened up, a question was asked in 2009 to Herman and Chomsky by Andrew Mullen that whether 'the internet renders the Propaganda Model "increasingly marginal in its applicability".' They answered that traditional media have a growing place and there is an increase in the importance of advertisement on the Web; however, they said, 'It is possible that this might happen' (Mullen, 2009, p.20). They stressed that the internet can be utilized by commercial entities only as of the internet is a communication instrument by those having a popular name. Therefore, the internet as an information access tool was unable to meet the public needs (Lukmantoro et. al, 2019, p. 424). They further viewed 'media is nothing more than an instrument that works in compliance' with the political elites and economic elites. Media involves structuring the agenda and interests of those who control the state and business entities. According to Lukmantoro et. al (2019), the internet is used to integrate the different types of media platforms and to keep them under its control. Therefore, it is only a tool that extends the power of media corporate.

The new media has resulted in interactivity and user-generated content that transforms the whole communication scenario. Moreover, the new media and digital platforms that followed can be analysed from the lens of the Propaganda Model. Regarding the ownership of the new media platforms, one of the dominant digital platforms, i.e., Google founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin owns 42.4% and 41.3% of Alphabet's class B common stock respectively. Google is one of the significant sources of news in the present context. According to Fuchs (2018), as the algorithms determined the ranking of Google's search results, therefore, the

centralized ownership of the company together with the huge market share it holds and as an important news source it results in the circumstance that 'ownership also means control over algorithms that determine news sources for a significant part of the population.' (p. 73). The private owner debars the users from the control of algorithms that determine the priorities of how search results and news are presented. The second filter of the Propaganda model seems to be flourishing in the new media era as online advertising has become one of the significant forms after television advertising. A digital platform such as Google or Facebook does not only function as a source of news but also among the largest advertising agencies. Multiple audiences in a huge number can be targeted at once and therefore the logic of advertising is different in social media from the traditional ones. Fuchs (2018) mentioned that 'the overall effect is an online advertising-user-spiral, in which more and more advertising revenue shifts from print to digital due to the targeting possibilities.' (p. 76).

The third filter in the new media context does not change as due to the constant online presence the demands for news and information have also increased. Therefore, the government remains the most reliable and authentic source of information to them. Although there is a rise in user-generated content, online attention and visibility requires time, money, and labour force. Therefore, everyone can produce user-generated content but only a few attract online visibility and attention. It is also because traditional media have occupied the dominance on Internet through their web news channels and dominant news providers as 'they have the resources and pre-existing audiences to give them a huge advantage over alternative media potential rivals' (Mullen, 2009, p. 20).

'Flak' in simple terms means 'mediated lobbying attempts' (Fuchs, 2018, p. 80). In the digital era, lobbying is not restricted to centralized media organizations but extends to social networking sites. Fuchs (2018) cited that ring-wing lobbying is extended to social movements and is not confined to politicians only. The lobbying is done in digital platforms through the groups and pages that support or oppose any issue through the use of hash-tags and makes the issue trending to capture or divert the attention of the public towards it. The last filter 'anti-communism' can be seen in the neoliberal ideologies of the online world. According to Fuchs (2018),

the ring-wing ideologies are shared in online mode through the use of visual means and tabloidization and it is further enhanced by user-generated content where production of ideology is not confined to an organization but can be produced by individuals.

Therefore, from the theoretical perspective, the propaganda model is well applicable in the new media context.

Propaganda, Politics and Indian Media

The politics and media relationship in India has changed drastically over the last decade due to the increasing influence of media in the political sphere. The advances in technology have resulted in market growth as the media industry is expanding its reach and also the number of outlets increased. But this has resulted in the influence of powerful and dominant corporate elites having a political background or party affiliation in the dissemination of information to the public. In this regard, renowned sociologist Sanjay Srivastava in an interview with DW News said that this trend is 'disturbing' in nature as the large media entities being owned and controlled by political actors, used it as a medium to undermine and attack their opponents and the elite-controlled media only disseminate that information that is favourable for the political actors.

The Indian political scenario shows to a large extent the existence of the news filters proposed in the Propaganda model. The thorough scrutiny of Indian media and political landscape shows the presence right from the ownership of large media houses by corporate having a political background to the existence of ideologies shaping the public discourse. The media outlet owners share direct or indirect links to political parties; while some of them are members of the Indian Parliament, many associates with the local politics. Concerning the national political scenario, the name of Rajya Sabha members, Dr. Subhash Chandra and Rajeev Chandra Shekhar can be cited in terms of national news channel ownership. While Dr. Chandra is a co-owner of Zee News, one of the top Hindi news channels in the country; Member of Parliament Chandra Shekhar was a former member of the board of broadcasters in Republic TV and directly owns two south Indian news channels namely, Suvarna News in Kannada and Asian News in Malayalam.

It can be advanced that the media houses owned by a politician may have an impact on the public opinion or in influencing the general public by dissemination of information that is a part of the political agenda of their respective parties. Krishna Kaushik (2016) mentioned that the five Indian news media companies namely, News24, Network18, India TV, News Nation, and NDTV are indebted to Mukesh Ambani, owner of Reliance Industries, Mahendra Nahata, and Abhey Oswal, industrialist. It is predicted that due to large investments the three businessmen may have control over 20 to 70 % of the media content. This shows the presence of the first filter of the propaganda model in the Indian scenario.

Although there are private entities, for advertising as well as for news, the media looks for the government. The government is a good source of advertising revenue as they spend huge sums of money for the promotion of the various programs and decisions taken from time to time. For example, the decision of demonetization in 2016 was followed by several advertisements endorsing e-payments as an alternative to cash. These kinds of advertisements try to promote a positive environment towards the policies and decisions so that the citizens cannot fully being able to scrutinize the government policies and criticize the government decisions. The government spent a hefty sum of money during elections. According to the Election Commission of India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spent Rs. 714.28 crores during the 2014 General Elections and a huge sum of it has been spent on advertising that is a source of revenue to the media houses. The parties have also spent a huge amount on digital media platforms such as Facebook, Google, etc. since the last two General Elections in the country. Since February 2019, the BJP has spent over Rs. 4.61 crore and Indian National Congress (INC) spent Rs. 1.84 crore according to Facebook's spending tracker (Outlook, 2020). In regard to the private entities, the media houses often try to cover up the issues to not lose their revenues. In 2015, the Nestle 2 minute Maggi was found to have high levels of monosodium glutamate (MSG) apart from high lead content above the permissible level and was banned for some time in the country. It was reported in various newspapers and news channel and had an extensive debate over the issue. Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera analysed the government advertisements during the 2004 General Elections and concluded that the media campaign 'lay

bare the intimate nexus that has developed between the state, the ruling party and the business world...brazen use of taxpayer money for party propaganda purposes is one symptom of this nexus.' (Somanchi, 2020)

The Press Information Bureau of India is the nodal agency of the Indian government that provides data and information related to government schemes, plans, policies, achievements, etc. to the media outlets across the country. It is often assumed that being a government body the news disseminated through this agency is pro-government in nature. Since most of the news is available through news agencies such as Press Trust of India or Asian News International and the same is distributed everywhere and the audience found similar content in every newspaper, news channel, and even in digital platforms that results in accepting the viewpoints depicted in the news. In some cases, even the news cannot be examined or checked by the news outlets because of limited sources or the government being the only source of news. In this regard, Rajgarhia (2020) gave the example of pro-government propaganda citing the criticism faced by Union Home Minister, Amit Shah and his response to it. The Union Home Minister on 20 November 2019 made statements in the Lok Sabha that 'the situation in Kashmir is completely normal'. However, the author claimed it as propaganda because it cannot be verified and there is limited access to an alternative source of information because of travel restrictions and also because of censorship on the local news sources. Therefore, the public is left with no choice but to believe whatever is said by the government agencies.

As mentioned earlier the media outlets try to avoid flaks as much as possible and also try to provide information that is suitable to the majority of the population to avoid the risk of revenue loss. In 2013, actor and former Member of Parliament Divya Spandana filed a defamation case against Suvarna News 24X7, a Kannada news channel and Asianet News Network Private Limited over two reports aired on the channel about her being involved in Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket betting and sought damages of Rs. 10 crores. Due to user-generated content, the presence of flaks is easier to observe in social media sites that generate criticism against the media houses to function as a lobbyist and partial in their news reporting and are often criticized for being a pro-government channel. A study of all prime-

time debates of Republic TV from May 2017 to April 2020 found that the debates are consistently are in favour of the BJP government and its policies and most important issues such as economy, health, education were not the prominent one and mostly consist of attacks on the opposition parties or groups or individuals that oppose the government decisions and featured hash-tags such as #ModiStrikesBack, #NPRForINDIA, #TheResetBudget, #CABPassed, etc. (Jaffrelot & Jumle, 2020).

Several real or imagined enemies are created in the media to generate fear among the public and to justify the actions of the government and gain support and suppress the criticizers of the government. In recent years, the government has become intolerant to criticism and there is a shift from 'anti-government' perspective to one where anybody criticizing the government is termed as 'anti-national' where not just the activists or rationalists but even comedians, farmers, journalists, anyone critical of the government has become 'anti-national'. The government in November 2020 passed three farm laws in the country and faced resentment from various quarters. The farm laws were criticized by several prominent personalities and they supported the farmer's movement against this. This has resulted in the slapping of notices from the National Investigation Agency and the government branded the protesters as 'Khalistani', a Sikh separatist group, and over 20 criminal cases were filed against them. It was alleged that the protesters through the help of Khalistani groups banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act plot against the Indian government to create a fearful and lawless state to cause animosity among the public and rouse them to rebel against the government. The protest was supported by international personalities such as environmentalist Greta Thunberg and pop superstar, Rihanna but they were criticized and trolled online.

Therefore, it can be deduced that the Indian media and politics work in close proximity and the government agenda is widely sprea d and blended with public thought through the media and this has been all the more possible because of the new media and its features of interactivity and user-generated content that allows for a constant free flow of thoughts and spread of the agenda faster than ever.

Propaganda, Assam Politics and Legislative Assembly Election 2021

It is evident from the above discussion that there is a nexus between media and political actors in the Indian political scenario and it holds in the case of the state of Assam. The media-politics nexus in visual communication assumes to be started with the launch of the first satellite channel NE TV by the Congress leader, Matang Singh who was a member of Rajya Sabha and Union Minister of State of Parliamentary Affairs from 1994 to 1998. In the current Assam scenario, the wife of the present Chief Minister of Assam, Riniki Bhuyan Sarma is associated with the news channel, News LIVE having a majority of its shares. It may therefore be assumed that through this ownership they may avail scope for considerable influence on the public opinion as according to the Propaganda model, whatever that is profitable for the government and its associated private partners is shown in the media and depicted to the public as true and significant.

With the advent of the new media platforms the Propaganda model although has reduced in its effectiveness because of possible two-way communication and user-generated content but its influence is eminent in politics even today. This has made possible a 24x7 political presence of the politicians online and to spread their agenda with every status and tweet. The importance accorded to digital media presence can be cited to the fact that in the Assam Legislative Election of 2021, the Indian National Congress (INC) has issued a notice on August 2020 for seeking application from eligible party members who intend to contest the election from their party and has sought Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and number of followers as one of the sought points among 18 points in the application form (The Sentinel, 2021).

From time to time, several issues are highlighted in the media, especially during the times of elections to capture the attention of the public and to have a significant influence on their voting preference. In the 2021 Assam Legislative Assembly Elections, the political parties tried to push agendas into public minds and some such agendas were such as 'CAA and NRC', 'unemployment', 'microfinance loan waiver', 'Ajmal the next Chief Minister' etc. find place in the election debate. Out of these the issue of microfinance along with 'Ajmal the next Chief Minister' found prominence in public discussion. The Assam Micro Finance Institutions (Regulation of Money Lending) Bill passed in December 2020 intended

to protect the borrowers from the harassment of agents and the dues could be collected only at gram panchayats or local offices. The present Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma during the election rallies assured the women borrowers of loan waiver and addressed that "I would advise you not to take microfinance loans henceforth. We will take measures such that you take loans from banks directly. It is difficult to repay microfinance loans with such high interest. If you have already taken microfinance loans and do not have the ability to return them, we will take care of it" (East Mojo, 2021). Even he tweeted on 29 March 2021 that "OUR PROMISE: Bandhan Bank & Micro Finance loans to people will be returned by Govt. SHGs, who are left out of grants of Rs 25K &50K, would get Rs 1L & 2L by next govt."It was widely covered by the media and soon became one of the burning election issues and received support from the public. Although the then Minister of Finance and Health announced it but it was circulated well in the television debates and on digital media platforms by the news media. This issue was one of the prominent factors for the huge victory of the BJP in the state as loan waivers came as a relief to the huge loan burdens. Another issue that was well circulated in the media and assumed to influence the public to a great extent was the statement made by the then Finance and Health Minister of the state while addressing a BJP peace march in Biswanath Chariali in support of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019,"If Assamese people today cannot identify the enemy and a friend, then in 10 years Ajmal will become the CM and we will just watch." (Saha, 2020) This can be well related to the fifth filter of the Propaganda model, where the government along with the media inculcates a sense of fear against a potential enemy or create some imagined situation to counter the influence of the other side and maintain the status quo. The same was done in Assam by instilling a possible outcome if the other party came to power in the state. Although it was just a political statement many assume it to have a considerable influence on the voting preference in the election.

The issue of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 was one of the prominent topics, and based on its new political parties such as Assam Jatiya Parishad fought the 2021 election in the state. However, the government through its political propaganda diverts the issue with the creation of several cash benefit schemes in the last few months of the government. The list comprises of schemes such as

'Arunodoi', 'SVAYEM', 'Kanaklata Women Empowerment', 'JiwikaSakhi Express', 'Indira Miri Sarbajanin Bidhwa Pension', 'Divyangajan Atmanirbhat Scheme', 'Aideu Handique Mahila Sanman' etc. covering every section of the population and alongside these schemes, the government has provided free ration to around 58 lakh beneficiaries since April 2019. In addition, the government also had announced providing free electricity up to 30 units for two months till January 2021. "The trends and leads are not unexpected. BJP's policy of beneficiary politics, as well as the clash of civilization strategy adopted for this election, seems to have resonated with voters." (Hindustan Times, 2021) It is assumed that it has led to the diversion of the public mind and the opposition and resistance that it faced during the CAA movement in the state. In the national political context, CAA is assumed to be a plan of the central government to divert the real issues such as unemployment, economic slowdown, rising infiltration, agrarian crisis, etc. According to Nationalist Congress Party President, Sharad Pawar, "CAA and NRC are ploys to divert people's attention from serious issues that the country is facing." (Firstpost, 2019) But in Assam, the beneficiary schemes were the plan of action for the diversion of the issue of CAA from the public minds in the state.

Due to the development of digital platforms, the government agendas are well circulated on social networking sites through the supporters of the political parties. The political agenda is spread through several groups and pages supporting a particular candidate or political party. For example, although BJP had an official Facebook page named, 'BJP Assam Pradesh'. There are several private groups and pages formed by party supporters such as All Assam BJP Supporters, Assam BJP, Vision & Mission Assam BJP, BJP Assam, etc. and there a number of pages and groups supporting a particular candidate such as the present Chief Minister of Assam has several fan pages and groups supporting his leadership such as Himanta Biswa Sarma Fan [CM Assam 2021], Himanta Biswa Sarma as Chief Minister, HIMANTHA BISWA SHARMA CM ASSAM, etc. in the Assembly Elections in 2021. These pages continuously spread the agenda of the political actors which was done in the past by the newspapers and television channels.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the politics in Assam can be well related to the propaganda model. There is politics and media nexus in the state; that is relevant from the ownership of media outlets by persons having a political

background and also the existence of some issues used by particular political parties as their election agenda and to set an imagined environment to influence the decisions of the voters and due to growing influence of the new media, it is all the more shaping the public opinions in the state.

Concluding Remarks

The propaganda model was proposed at a time when there was not much development of the Internet. However, the new media today have considerable influence on politics and that is evident from the growing importance credited to it in the political scenario of every country. The theories of media effects together with the propaganda model prove that there is an impact of media to an extent on the decisions of the public and explain how political actors used the media along with market forces for their benefit and to maintain the status quo in the society. Therefore, the need of the hour is to evaluate how these media effects together with propaganda influence the behaviour of the people, i.e., how the people make their choices and whether this media effects along with the propaganda influence their voting decisions and whether they had an impact on the political participation of the people. People's consciousness will ultimately make great sense.

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