

Belief Systems

To what extent are people's political beliefs
affected by the media?

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Introduction

In this report, I will be investigating the extent to which people's political beliefs are affected by the media. It is essential that we explore this issue in more depth for a number of reasons. Primarily because if the media does have a significant impact on people's political beliefs, this means it can be manipulated- either by the government or external organisations- and this influence can lead to a bias in the belief systems of a country's citizens. In order to fully understand the extent of this issue, we will be exploring case studies both globally and nationally. These include the USA, the UK, China and Hong Kong. However, within the context of the issue globally we will also be examining the issue from a variety of viewpoints such as the government, citizens, and corporations within the country in question.

Global Perspective

It has been suggested that the media had a significant influence on the results of the UK's European Union membership referendum in 2016. A study has shown that 'National newspapers saw a boost in both print and online readership last month before and after the 23 June EU referendum'¹. The majority of the media coverage reflected negatively on the consequences of people migrating to the UK², and this could certainly be seen to have influenced the results of the referendum. Moreover, the UK's two most sold papers- The Sun and The Daily Mail- are known as particularly anti-EU³. According to a study conducted by researchers from the University of Oxford's department of sociology, The Sun most certainly has an influence on the beliefs of its readers⁴. The 'right-leaning UK tabloid shifted its support to the Labour party in 1997 and back to the Conservative party in 2010'⁴. The study found that both switches were associated with significant increase in

¹ "ABC figures: National press sees June Brexit vote boost in print and" 21 Jul. 2016, <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/abc-figures-national-press-sees-june-brexit-vote-boost-in-print-and-online/>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2018.

² "Media painted bleak picture of immigration before Brexit vote, study" 10 May. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/10/brexit-eu-referendum-campaign-media-coverage-immigration>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2018.

³ "Ethics in the News - Media Lies and Brexit - Ethical Journalism and the" <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/ethics-in-the-news/media-lies-and-brexit>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁴ "It's The Sun Wot Won It!: Evidence of media ... - Semantic Scholar." <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8338/f9d2bbde9a0c298f73f9299efb68b52c41df.pdf>. Accessed 7 Apr. 2018.

readers' support for the endorsed party, leading to 525,000 extra votes for the Labour Party in 1997, and 550,000 more for the Conservatives in 2010. This proves that the media in the UK, particularly tabloids like The Sun, do in fact influence people's political beliefs to the extent of having an effect on the political party they vote for. Given this information, it hardly seems surprising that the UK's citizens voted to leave the EU.

It has been publicized that as a result of this decision, Britain can now monitor and prevent the people coming into the country. This is the main reason people voted to leave the EU; they were concerned about an 'increase in refugees from the Middle East'⁵. They felt that the migration of people from other countries was changing the country's 'national identity'. Furthermore, Brexit means that the UK no longer have to follow the EU's tax guidelines or pay their membership fee⁵. All of these benefits were heavily publicised by the UK's top newspapers and played a huge part in the country's ultimate decision to leave the EU. However, this decision brings with it a number of disadvantages too. It has been predicted that the cost of exports will be raised, as the UK may no longer have a tariff-free trade status with the rest of the EU⁵. In addition to this, it has been predicted by the Treasury Chief of the UK that as a result of Brexit the country's growth will slow drastically; from 2.4% in 2018 to 1.6% in 2020⁵. He has said that EU exit fees alone will cost the UK £3 million in the next 2 years. From this, we can conclude that had the media had a bias towards the Remain campaign, or even no bias at all, British citizens will likely have had a very different outlook. This would lead to a very different future for the UK, the EU, and in fact the rest of the world. This says a huge amount about the importance of the media in politics and how much of an impact it can have.

Another perspective to consider is that of the United States of America. A study in 2006 investigated the effects of the media on political beliefs in the US, and the impact of receiving either a primarily conservative or liberal newspaper on a person's political knowledge and beliefs. This study had very interesting results, stating that a subscription to either newspaper made the recipient more in favour of the current democratic candidate⁶. However, the researchers stated that the popularity of the Republican candidate at the

⁵ "Brexit Consequences: for UK, EU, and US - The Balance." 29 Nov. 2017, <https://www.thebalance.com/brexit-consequences-4062999>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁶ "Effect of Media on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions in the United" <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/effect-media-voting-behavior-and-political-opinions-united-states>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

time was rapidly decreasing, so it could be suggested that political reading in any sense simply lead to a better understanding of the politics of the time and resulted in increased votes for the democratic candidate.

Despite this, any change whatsoever in political belief due to the participants' receiving this newspaper does prove that the media has an impact on people's political beliefs, whether liberal or conservative. It shows that engaging with these kinds of topics better one's political understanding, and with this understanding comes more unified decisions from the nation's citizens. These results could be interpreted to mean that perhaps one of the reasons why there are such varied political beliefs in one country is simply people not doing enough research, and not being informed enough on the topics of the time. This leads to misinformed decisions and possible regrets post-election. Indeed, with regard to the recent election of President Trump, a poll found that most of the Americans surveyed believe Trump is not keeping his promises and is unfit to be president⁷. The media can be used as a tool to educate oneself on the current political situation and enable better decisions when voting or discussing political matters.

National Perspective

As a communist country, China's government censor the news and internet within their borders. The most significant example of this is their banning of Google. It is believed that this is because- as an international company- Google has the ability to collect data from the citizens of China and possibly share it with third parties; something the Chinese government is strongly against⁸. However, this in no way limits the number of Chinese citizens on the web. On the contrary, a quarter of the world's online population comes from Chinese citizens who are 'behind the firewall', or have internet censored by the Chinese government⁹.

⁷ "100 Ways, in 100 Days, that Trump Has Hurt Americans - Center for"
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/general/news/2017/04/26/431299/100-ways-100-days-trump-hurt-americans/>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁸ "Why are Google and Facebook banned in China? If Google is banned"
<https://www.quora.com/Why-are-Google-and-Facebook-banned-in-China-If-Google-is-banned-then-how-do-Chinese-phones-have-Android-1>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁹ "China's scary lesson to the world: Censoring the Internet works - The" 23 May. 2016,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

Due to this censorship, the online experience of those in China is exceedingly different to that of somewhere like the United States. In fact, the difference only grows as the Chinese government makes net security stronger and stronger. Just last year, Beijing declared that they intend to eliminate the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) within the country¹⁰. This would prevent the citizens of China having any engagement with foreign media or internet, and only increase the 'climate of fear' already present within the country¹⁰.

According to Jasmine Bernstein Yin, a student at the University of Colombia who was born in China, her "middle-school classmates who remained in China think very different from the study abroad groups,"¹⁰. The mentality and belief systems of young people in China are being shaped by this internet regime, increasingly different to the rest of the world's.

The individual citizens are not the only ones affected by this censorship. China has a large number of companies with significant online presence, and the restriction of access to foreign internet makes it much more difficult for these corporations to expand outside of China¹⁰. It interferes with global advertising, recruitment, and foreign business transactions. That being said, the Chinese government have not revealed too much about the VPN ban, and it is believed that some wiggle-room may be left for circumstances such as these. It seems that the VPN ban is going to affect the individual more than companies and businesses, but this does not mean that it won't significantly change the political beliefs of Chinese citizens. On the contrary, the founder of GreatFire.org (a website that monitors Chinese censorship) has said that banning VPNs will make Chinese citizens more wary than they already are of speaking their minds and prevent them from seeing that there are people out there with similar opinions to themselves¹⁰. This prohibition of access to foreign internet prevents citizens from seeing a broader range of political opinions, which severely limits the individual's own ability to make informed decisions about their own views and beliefs.

Local Perspective

In September 2014, protests broke out in Hong Kong against a new ruling from Beijing stating that citizens would only be able to elect their new chief executive from a list of

¹⁰ "'The long-term effects will be devastating': China prepares to harden" 11 Jul. 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/the-long-term-effects-will-be-devastating-china-prepares-to-harden-great-firewall-censorship/article35653319/>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

candidates already approved by the Chinese government. This led to a movement referred to as 'Occupy Central', or 'The Umbrella Movement'. According to an analysis from the University of Stockholm's Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Hong Kong and Mainland China's press coverage was predominantly critical of the protests, while media in Taiwan tended to be more analytical¹¹. In response to the Occupy movement the president of Taiwan stated that they 'urge mainland authorities to listen to the voices of the people of Hong Kong and deal with the matter in a peaceful and cautious manner'¹². However, many representatives from Hong Kong government released pro-Beijing statements, including Legislative Council Chairman Jasper Tsang Yok-sing, Former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, and Former Legco president Rita Fan¹³.

This could be interpreted to support the idea that the anti-protest press coverage in Hong Kong led people to form similar beliefs, while the more objective media in Taiwan seemed to create a much more pro-democracy standpoint. However, the media may not be the sole purpose for this, as Taiwan would likely be against the ruling due to China's aim to reunify the island by implementing a 'one country, two systems' policy similar to that in Hong Kong¹³.

Courses of Action

Media Bias can be put down to a number of causes, but overall- just like any other industry- the media's main goal is to turn a profit. This leads to much of their coverage being from big corporations or businesses; 'whoever has the most money will be the loudest voice in the public debate'¹⁴. One example of this is that General Electric (GE) owns the United States news service NBC. The impact of their influence can be most clearly seen when one looks at how NBC was so against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's proposal to clean up the Hudson River¹⁵. According to Jeff Cohen of

¹¹ "Perspectives on the Occupy Central Demonstrations in ... - DiVA portal."

<http://su.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:907318/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Accessed 23 May. 2018.

¹² "Wikipedia:WikiProject Spam/LinkReports/7thspace.com Wikipedia."

http://en.wikipedia.ru/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Spam/LinkReports/7thspace.com. Accessed 23 May. 2018.

¹³ "Reactions to the 2014 Hong Kong protests - Wikipedia."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactions_to_the_2014_Hong_Kong_protests. Accessed 23 May. 2018.

¹⁴ "On Media Bias - Center for American Progress." 15 Jun. 2005,

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/general/news/2005/06/15/1514/on-media-bias/>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

¹⁵ "Some Examples of Corporate Influence in the Media — Global Issues."

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/162/some-examples>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

Unfair Access, 'When your boss is lobbying personally on one side of a controversy, the message is that these hundreds of journalists should avoid independent or balanced coverage of that issue'¹⁵. This statement really shows the extent to which businesses' ownership of media companies influences the opinion of the whole country, to the point where huge environmental motions may even be voted against due to biased coverage from the press.

One proposed solution is to completely reform the US public news service, in a way that ensures it cannot be impacted by any kind of partisan or corporate pressure¹⁴. Mark Lloyd, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, has suggested that we make it a requirement that commercial media pay in full for any public resources they have access to. The money gained from this could be invested in this reformation of the news system in the US- into the kind of unbiased system referred to earlier.

This would, of course, lead to a few complications. For example, if commercial media did not have as easy access to the resources they have now- they may find other ways to collect this information that is less reliable, leading to an even worse issue in the media. Furthermore, a complete reformation of the US news system will take a great deal of time, negotiation and effort on the government's part, and some would argue that they have more important things that need to be prioritised. There would also likely be protests from those multinational companies affected, as they would be losing a significant source of income and public influence; greatly affecting their company's success as a whole.

With regard to media censorship in China, a possible future scenario is that scholars' innovation is stifled so severely that it becomes exceedingly difficult to develop new scientific research within the country¹⁶. An academic from China recently said that "it is very difficult to achieve world-leading results or to be a frontrunner in global scientific research without any knowledge of [other countries' achievements] and without comparison"¹⁰. This problem increases when one considers that the Chinese government is pushing very hard for them to become one of the world's innovative frontrunners¹⁶.

¹⁶ "China: Great Firewall is Stifling Innovation Say Scholars | Time." 2 Jun. 2016, <http://time.com/4354665/china-great-firewall-innovation-online-censorship/>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

A possible solution to this is to have VPN permits for academic purposes, only granted to a small percentage of the population and provided with the understanding that they will only be used for research within their field. This solution, while significantly improving the innovation issue, does have a few downfalls. Firstly, the obvious problem that these VPNs may not be used for strictly academic purposes, and defeat the purpose of the firewall itself. It would be only too easy for people to claim to have academic reasons for needing to access foreign websites and proceed to use them for completely unrelated things. Furthermore, it would allow more people access to political ideas contrary to those held by the Chinese government, the very thing trying to be stopped by the firewall in the first place. Finally, it is possible that many people with genuine academic purposes for wanting access to foreign websites will not be granted them, so will not even fully solve the innovation problem.

Conclusion

Personally, I now realise that reports from news companies can often be biased or contain misinformation for any number of reasons. With this new knowledge I will be able to look at news and the media with a much more open mind, always taking into account that external parties may have influenced what is being written/reported. It has also struck me how significant the influence of media is on things like elections or referendums, and the importance of balanced and unbiased news coverage both locally and globally. I believe that the media has a huge impact on people's political beliefs, and for this reason, we as a society must strive to keep it untainted, regardless of the implications for larger corporations.