მედიის როლი კონფლიქტის დინამიკაში

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აბსტრაქტი

წინამდებარე ნაშრომი იკვლევს მედიის როლს სირიის კონფლიქტში, რომელიც წარმოადგენს სოციალური საინფორმაციო წყაროებით წარმოებულ ერთ-ერთ ყველაზე თვალსაჩინო ომს საერთაშორისო პოლიტიკის ისტორიაში. საზოგადოებრივი აზრის ჩამოყალიბების, საკუთარი პოლიტიკური ინტერესების უზრუნველყოფისა და სასურველი რეალობის შექმნის მიზნით, მედია საშუალებები აქტიურად იყო გამოყენებული როგორც ოპოზიციის, ასევე, პრეზიდენტ ბაშარ ალ-ასადის მხარდამჭერების მიერ. ერთის მხრივ, სხვა არაბული ქვეყნების მსგავსად, მედიამ ხელი შეუწყო ავტორიტარიზმის, რეპრესიების, კორუფციისა და სიღარიბის წინააღმდეგ მიმართული ტალღის გავრცელებას სირიაში. თუმცა, ამავე დროს, მედია აღმოჩნდა მმართველი პოლიტიკური რეჟიმის ხელში არსებული მნიშვნელოვანი მექანიზმი, რომელიც დაეხმარა პრეზიდენტ ასადს ძალაუფლების შენარჩუნებასა და განმტკიცებაში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მედია, პოლიტიკის წარმოება, სირიის კონფლიქტი, სტრატეგიული ნარატივი, დღის წესრიგის დადგენისა და ფრეიმინგის თეორიები.

The Role of Media in Conflict Dynamics

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Abstract

The paper explores the media's role in the Syrian conflict known as one of the most 'socially mediated' wars in the history of international politics. Both, the opposition and President Bashar al Assad's supporters used the media networks to shape public opinion, promote their interests and draw the desired political reality. On the one hand, similar to the other Arab countries, the media inspired the wave of uprisings against authoritarianism, repression, corruption, and poverty in Syria. However, from another perspective, it has served as a critical tool in the hands of the ruling political regime that has helped President Assad to sustain and even strengthen his power.

Key words: Media, policy-making, Syrian conflict, strategic narrative, agenda-setting and framing theories.

Introduction

The media as a critical part of strategic communication represents an important mechanism supporting reproduction of regime powers and promoting their political, economic, military, and symbolic areas. The media can play a crucial role in the uprising of military escalations and the survival of existing regimes throughout conflicts.

Media and politics might be considered as co-constitutive elements in terms of consensus building, shaping public opinion, enhancing political affiliations, and supporting the longevity of ideological regimes that become 'real' when "inscribed in practices"[1]. To support the achievement of their political goals, governing elites often use public-oriented television shows, market-focused language, newspaper images, publications, and other methods promoting a personality cult.

Before 2011, only a few studies reflected critical cultural analysis related to the relationship of the Syria's President Bashar al Assad with ruling elites, media and other cultural producers, as well as employment of different mechanisms that helped him to maintain and communicate the power. Despite the complexity and inclusiveness of the Syrian conflict, the authors limit the analysis to address the importance of media as a crucial element that helped the President Assad to produce and sustain the power by mobilizing political language that largely reiterates the major tropes of the old Ba'athist culture of communication.[2]

Given the comprehensive evolving context of the media's role, the study explores it as a tool actively used to influence conflict dynamics in the Middle East. Namely, the research focuses on the case of Syrian conflict, known as the most 'socially mediated' war in the history of international politics. Therefore, the main purpose is to answer the following question: was the media a crucial mechanism during this conflict in terms of recruiting the anti-government activists, shifting the conflict dynamics, and consequently, helping the ruling elite to retain the power?

The role of media can be discussed from the distinctive perspectives: on the one hand, it inspired the Arab world for the wave of uprisings against authoritarianism, repression, harassment, corruption and poverty and concurrently, in the case of Syria, it served as a tool in the hands of ruling political elites to enhance ideological regime. Taking into the account that the media throughout the war was acting as an instrument for governing as well as contending powers to achieve their own goals rather than as an independent actor, the hypothesis of the given work can be formulated as follows: the media is an effective mechanism influencing conflict dynamics by shaping the desired political reality.

The research was conducted through the qualitative methodology, based on the analysis of the secondary data from the books, academic research, journal articles and online sources. Furthermore, the research phenomenon is examined through the case study exploring the media's key role that influenced conflict development, which allows in-depth analysis of complex issues presented in the given work.

Theoretical Framework

The central issue of this research is studied through the agenda-setting and framing theories of mass communication, which explain the correlation between the media and policy-making process. As American journalist and social commentator Walter Lippmann outlined in his work Public Opinion, "the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind"[3]. According to the agenda-setting and framing theories, the impact of media is revealed throughout its ability to shape a public agenda and appropriate understanding, perceptions and opinions by focusing their attention on a specific set of issues that should be perceived as the most important.

The idea of agenda-setting theory, floated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Show is based on a notion that the media sets the agenda for what people should think and be concerned about by filtering and emphasizing the information it is covering.[4] There are two main levels of the theory. On the first level, media determines

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1   Dina Matar, The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology, International Journal of Communication 13, p. 2399, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31108/1/Syrian%20regime%27s%20strategic%20communication.pdf
2   Ibid, p.p. 2400-2401
3   Walter Lippman, Public Opinion, (1992), p.29.
4   Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, The Agenda-Setting, Function of Mass Media, (2015) https://fbaum.unc.edu/teaching/articles/POQ-1972-McCOMBS-176-87.pdf

how much importance should be attached to concrete issues, problems, persons and etc. through the emphasis placed on it in the news. This does not mean that the media exactly tells people what to think; however, it sets what is on the public agenda, what people think and talk about and what they find important. Therefore, it makes visible the causal link between media coverage, its priorities and the changes in public perceptions, beliefs and opinions. On the second level, the understanding of the political, social and cultural media effects is deepened throughout framing theory, which concentrates on the essence of the issues rather than covering specific events. [5]

Robert Mathew Entman defines framing as the process of assembling a concrete narrative to promote the particular interpretation of events. It involves four main functions such as problem definition (the part of agenda-setting), causal analysis, moral judgment and favored policies promotion, that aims to encourage target audiences to think, feel and make decisions in particular way through underlying the salience and importance of specific set of issues.[6] Considering that political elites care about what people think in terms of gaining and/or maintaining the power, these approaches are often used to get them to think and behave in certain ways. It is worth to mention the definition of power proposed by Nagel, according to which, "a power is the ability to get others to do what one wants"[7] and one of the effective means to achieve that is telling people what and how to think about.

Therefore, the analysis of Syrian conflict within the agenda-setting and framing theories enable to examine the influence of political elites on information flow that creates desired political context eventually serving the advancement of their interests. The impact of the media on public and interest group leaders as well as policy-makers' views and their decisions is obvious. Moreover, the events developed in Syria have shown the vulnerability of the population to messages imposed by the media that consequently, had significant influence on the uprising and further conflict development.[8]

Media and Policy-Making

Modern empirical study on the media's role in policy-making takes its roots from the 1930s when Adolf Hitler effectively used media propaganda to exploit the multiple miseries of the depression without which he could never have been able to gain widespread support in Germany. Once in power, Hitler continued active employment of propaganda mainly through the new media of radio and cinema aimed at full control of people's minds.[9]

Today, an effective political communication is nearly impossible without the active role of the media. Media and politics have become so intertwined that the scholar Brian McNair argues, "now to a greater extent than ever before, the media are politics, and politics are the media".[10] Often, it is not even clear whether it is politics that employs the media or whether it is used and consumed itself by the media.

Despite this close connection and concurrently, media's international role to inform population and policy-makers about the critical activities as well as integrate different societies around the world to war and peace processes, the existing relevant academic studies still struggle to holistically assess its effect on politics. Challenges related to better understanding this issue can be partly explained by the dominance of realism theory in international studies, meaning that the state is the major actor and it cannot be influenced by any domestic factors, including the media. Critics of the media's role in politics argue that it only can be successful under circumstances when the political environment is uncertain and easily manipulated. [11]

About four decades ago, during the First Gulf War, so-called "CNN Effect" became an academic paradigm explaining the vital importance of television networks in Western military responses to existing humanitarian crises around the world. The CNN Effect clearly demonstrated an increasingly catalyst role of the media in policy-making through its potential to shape, modify, and even change current attitudes of interested parties.

5   Dietram A. Scheufele, Framing as a Theory of Media Effects, Journal of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/209409815
6   Robert M. Entman, Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power, School of Media and Public Affairs, The Georg Washington University, Washington, (2007)
7   Nagel, J. The Descriptive Analysis of Power, New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, (1975)
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9   Piers Brendon, Death of truth: when propaganda and 'alternative facts' first gripped the world, (2017), https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/mar/11/death-truth-propaganda-alternative-facts-gripped-world
10   Gjylije Rexha, The role of media in political communication: the case of Kosovo, (2014)
11   FilizCoban, The Role of the Media in International Relations: From the CNN Effect to the Al –Jazeere Effect, Journal of International Relations and Foreign Policy December 2016, Vol. 4, No. 2, p.45, http://jirfp.com/journals/jirfp/Vol_4_No_2_December_2016/3.pdf

Since then, significant alterations in the media landscape have facilitated the creation of other concepts such as the "Al Jazeera Effect" and "YouTube Effect". [12]

These paradigms can be well supplemented by the media theory - "agenda setting", which defines media as a key player in policy-making that has an enormous potential to impose certain political mindset through biased selection of events to be highlighted. Similar to the press 'effect', the media is less successful in telling people what to think, while it is more effective in telling them what to 'think about'[13]. The more promoted an issue is in the media, the greater is its influence on people's judgment. Media 'framing', so called "the second level of agenda setting" represents a critical mechanism in terms of which information derived from political motives of interested parties can design, select and structure a particular desired reality. [14]

The 2010-2011 years famous as the golden years for the social media including mass media, became transitional period during which the media has shifted its role from simply spreading information around the world to acting critical role in the political life of the Arab countries[15]. Conflict in Syria represents one of the first social and political media wars, where during battles over the 'truth', the parties actively used different media networks to fuel their political ambitions[16].

The Role of Media in Syrian Conflict
Syrian Uprising

The Arab Spring has revealed the strategic role of the media in terms of spreading information, mobilizing society around common goals and organizing an unprecedented wave of demonstrations against governments in the Arab world. Despite Syria's President Bashar al-Assad's belief that Syria would not be affected by the processes developed in neighbor countries based on the assumption that his government was "strongly linked to the beliefs of the people"[17], claimed in the interview given to the Wall Street Journal, the common problems and challenges of these states still triggered the Syrian uprising. This uprising has shown a critical role of the media widely contributing to the escalation of protest movements and polarizing society against President Assad's regime.

Prior to the revolt, Syrian media was nearly fully censored and controlled by individuals closely tied to the government. Their main goal was to strengthen the legitimacy of Assad's regime that was supported by considerably limited access to the internet. The messages were heavily controlled by the state media, including journalists, editors and bloggers, who were even repressed and arrested for criticism of the regime. [18]

The Arab Spring has led to the creation of 'New Media'. During the first years of the Syrian uprising, an unregulated media landscape emerged in the country, including the alternative and protest media spaces, followed by greater Facebook access within the population. Consequently, alike to the mass media, social media played the significant role in spreading revolution in Syria triggered by high unemployment, lack of political freedom, corruption, and other social problems. The first protest waves in the Southern city – Deraa, were inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other neighboring countries aimed at the overthrow and replacement of the repressive rulers. The Syrian uprising has lately turned into the full-scale civil war and humanitarian crisis during which media news became one of the major acts of resistance for protesters in the revolt against Assad's regime. [19]

The activists employed media platforms to expose the regime's tyranny, disseminate the information, mo-

12   Lyse Doucet, Syria& the CNN Effect: What Role Does the Media Play in Policy-Making?, (2018), Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, p.142, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/13_Doucet.pdf
13   Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, The Agenda-Setting, Function of Mass Media, (2015) https://fbaum.unc.edu/teaching/articles/POQ-1972-McCOMBS-176-87.pdf
14   Dr. Amy E. Jasperson & Dr. Mansour El-Kikhia, "U.S. and Middle Eastern Media Perspectives on the Aftermath of the Sept. 11 Terrorist Attacks", (2002), p.2, https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.625.1141&rep=rep1&type=pdf
15   Araz Ramazan Ahmad, The Role of Social Media in the "Syrian Uprising", (2015), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Araz-Ramazan-Ahmad/publication/282353816_The_Role_of_Social_Media_in_the_Syrian_Uprising/links/560d8b0908ae6cf68153fa52/The-Role-of-Social-Media-in-the-Syrian-Uprising.pdf?origin=publication_detail
16   Lyse Doucet, Syria & the CNN Effect: What Role Does the Media Play in Policy-Making?, (2018), Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, p.142, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/13_Doucet.pdf
17   Godefroidt A., Berbers A., d'Haenens L., What's in a frame? A comparative content analysis of American, British, French, and Russian news articles, (2016), International Communication Gazette, p. 778, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301308400
18   Daher J., Syria, the uprising and the media scene, openDemocracy, (2017) https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/syria-uprising-and-media-scene/
19   Daher J., Syria, the uprising and the media scene, openDemocracy, (2017) https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/syria-uprising-and-media-scene/

bilize support through shaping the relevant affective content, focus the public attention on problematic issues through spreading the sensitive images, movies and coordinate the activities against the government.[20]

Despite the different views on the media's role in Syrian uprising, it can be said that the mass media together with other social tools, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter has supported demonstrators to spread and exchange information as well as to inspire and provoke citizens to join the revolutionary movements against the ruling regime. Concurrently, 'New Media' ensured delivery of key messages to the West that led to accumulation of significant international support.

Shortly after uprising, the government censorship and limited access on media platforms has intensified[21] while, the state-controlled media became more active in mobilizing population's support through strategic communication and narrative promotion that significantly altered the existing status quo in favor of the Assad's supporters.

Assad's Regime and Implications of Media

After the eruption of the Arab Spring, the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime has become more dependent on his ability to 'own the crisis' and not to be owned by it[22]. Despite the decade-long civil war known as the bloodiest war of the 21st century with more than 500 000 deaths, Assad's government has not collapsed as it was widely expected. Furthermore, the regime sustained and even strengthened its domination within the country. The Syrian case has shown the authoritarian regime's ability to increase the number of its supporters, manage the crisis and maintain the power through employment of media and other strategic communication tools despite the accusations related to the repression and harassment against the population.

The challenge to the Assad's regime caused by free media networks was outlined in his speech given to the Syrian National Assembly in few weeks after the uprising had started: "Syria had been subjected to a virtual war in the media and the Internet…"[23] and therefore, he stressed the importance of strengthening the national patriotic awareness to protect the country. Consequently, the regime mobilized the state-controlled and 'private' media, including television, newspapers, radio, and social media platforms, to spread its strategic narrative and shape the desired 'reality'. One of the widely employed approach during the civil war was an active use of the misinformation campaign, such as the chemical attack of Eastern Ghouta which according to the regime's media, was fabricated, and the victims shown in the videos circulating on YouTube were the actors.[24]

The media also helped Assad to consistently mobilize political language dominated by the agenda-setting and framing theoretical narratives: the Arab nationalism and Syrian national unity; discourse based on 'us and them', 'local enemies' involved in a foreign-aided conspiracy against the nation and its unity; and finally, focus on vital necessity of reforms and 'good citizenship' which were prevalent in much of the regime's media content. He was constantly trying to frame the radical protest movements as foreign-funded terrorist activities and label the opponents to 'terrorists taking cover under Islam'[25]. Additionally, Assad was permanently attempting to draw the reality that reforms could not be implemented without war against opponents or the support of loyal and 'mindful' citizens. [26]

The factors discussed above clearly shows the effectiveness of the media as a political tool in the hands of the ruling political elite that can shape the public opinion during conflicts along with nationalization, morality and responsibility framing, intended to recruit the citizens through a wide range of social or digital media contents in order to maintain the power and ensure the regime's longevity.

Conclusion

20   Dina Matar, The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology, International Journal of Communication 13, p. 2399, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31108/1/Syrian%20regime%27s%20strategic%20communication.pdf
21   Freedom House, Freedon on the Net, Syria (2015), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202015_Syria.pdf
22   Cezare M. Scartozzi, Assad's Strategic Narrative: The Role of Communication in the Syrian Civil War, Contemporary Review of the Middle East, the University of Tokyo, (2015), p.315 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292188753_Assads_Strategic_Narrative_The_Role_of_Communication_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War
23   Dina Matar, The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology, International Journal of Communication 13, p. 2404, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31108/1/Syrian%20regime%27s%20strategic%20communication.pdf
24   Cezare M. Scartozzi, Assad's Strategic Narrative: The Role of Communication in the Syrian Civil War, Contemporary Review of the Middle East, the University of Tokyo, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292188753_Assads_Strategic_Narrative_The_Role_of_Communication_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War
25   Dina Matar, The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology, International Journal of Communication 13, p. 2410 https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31108/1/Syrian%20regime%27s%20strategic%20communication.pdf
26   Ibid, p.p.2406-2413.

The media represents a significant part of social and political processes due to its ability to impose certain political mindsets through biased selection of events to be underlined. The analysis of the Syrian case has revealed key media effects influencing conflict dynamics. On the one hand, the media, along with other social networks, considerably contributed to the escalation of protest movements, mobilizing society around common goals, polarizing them against the existing regime, and consequently, erupting the uprising. Furthermore, the media was the main platform delivering the key messages to the West that facilitated the accumulation of significant international support for opposition. Concurrently, from another perspective, media served as an effective political tool in the hands of the Assad's government, by which the rulers shaped the social and political context through strategic communication and narrative promotion to recruit the society and mobilize their support in order to maintain the power and sustain the regime's longevity.

This research clearly demonstrated the great influence of media content on policy-making process that significantly altered the conflict dynamic in Syria. The media's potential to form, modify and even change current reality was effectively used by conflicting parties to transform the existing status quo in their favor. Therefore, the Syrian case strengthens the hypothesis presented in the given work, that the media is indeed an effective mechanism influencing conflict dynamics by shaping the desired political reality.

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