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| Tallwood High SChool: Global Studies and World Langauges Academy |
| The Impact of Political Systems on the Global Media |
| Senior Project: Research Paper |
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| **12/20/2011** |

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Abstract

In a world that is constantly changing, there is always some form of media watching over how it changes. However, political systems around the world reflect in their media their own interests and not what is truly happening. In three countries, China, Iran, and the United States, these impacts are very visible. Through the examination of research, primary sources, and available forms of media, impacts based on government desires should be imminent and will be examined. In China, the government controls the media to maintain a clean Chinese society. In Iran, the political system maintains control to keep western values and society from permeating fundamentalist Islamic views. In the United States, the government does not control the media due to freedom of the press guaranteed by the first amendment. Control comes more from political parties using bias and spin as well as big businesses that own these media outlets. In all three countries, media is controlled by some aspect of the political system in an attempt to influence the way people think. The impact of these findings is that people need to be cognizant of what they see in media and always look at all sides of a story to discover what really happened.

Introduction

What is the media? Is the media what people see on television? Is the media what people read in newspapers or magazines? Is the media what people read on the Internet? Actually, media is all of those combined. Media is defined as, “the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines that reach or influence people widely.”[[1]](#endnote-1) The media’s role in society is growing almost every day. Media is the means by which people get their news; media is the means by which people get their entertainment; media is the way that people in a sense get their sustenance of daily news and gossip. Edmund Burke once said, “there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important far than they all.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Here he references the journalists in parliament and these journalists have changed very much the scope of government.

The topic of the global media is one of great interest in the modern world. As technology continues to develop, the media will develop along with it. With more issues becoming of utmost importance in today’s society, the media will begin to have a larger influence over what it reported, and how the story is told. But what influences media in the modern world? Certainly one of the major influences on the media is the political system of a country.

Today, the world has many different political systems that range anywhere from anarchy to totalitarian regimes on the political spectrum. An example of anarchy in the world today would be in Somalia where no government is in place which allows chaos to ensue, such as piracy of its coast. On the other end of the spectrum, totalitarian dictatorships exist in countries such as North Korea and Venezuela. This poses the question, “in what ways do the political systems of a country influence the media?” For the purposes of this explanation, this paper will focus on three specific countries. The first country of interest is The People’s Republic of China. China is a communist country where there is certainly not freedom of the press. The Chinese political system has a vast influence over the media and uses that influence to control what the people read in newspapers, view on television, and see on the Internet.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The second country of interest is The Islamic Federation of Iran. Iran has a theocratic form of government which means that its political system is run by members of the Islamic clergy.[[4]](#endnote-4) As with China, Iran’s political system also heavily censors its media, however for different reasons. The Iranian government is trying to protect its citizens from, “the evils of western society.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Contrary to popular belief, not all media in Iran touts death to Americans as their political system might Americans to believe.

The third and final country is the United States of America where there is freedom of press. In its truest form, the government allows members of the media to publish whatever they want, even if it reflects negatively on the government.

It is important to note that these differences in media exist because people need to know the influences behind the media and how it affects what is presented to them. For example if an event such as a jail break of political prisoners occurred at a prison in Cuba, the Cuban people might not be told what exactly happened. The media will try to dance around the truth, because Cuban government will have something to do with the end product that people read in the newspaper or see on television. People need to know if their political system influences the media and how the “invisible hand of government” plays a role in the media. Lastly, people need to know how this is carried over to what we see on television or in the newspaper, and even on social media and networking sites.

The People’s Republic of China

China is one of the world’s leading countries today in business, manufacturing and technology growth. With almost one point three billion people living within its borders, China is the world’s most populous country. China is on the forefront of technological development. Businesses from all over the world use China as a major hub for outsourcing because labor is cheap and plentiful. One part of China’s political system that makes it unique from other communist countries is that the Chinese government has allowed a capitalist economy in a communist political system. This is what is keeping China’s economy one of the biggest in the world.

In “Understanding China’s Political System”, Michael F. Martin summarizes the key components of China’s political system. The underlying concept of the article is that ever since the victory of Mao Tse Tung in 1949, “the Chinese mainland has been a communist state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party”. In China, other smaller political parties exist but they are authorized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and are essentially powerless. In regards to policy making, the CCP has power over governing bodies, such as the Peoples’ Congress, and other bureaucratic, non-government officials. The other key part of Chinese politics is the Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA). In regards to policy making, the Chinese political bureau (politburo) makes all policy decisions. This bureau is divided into many smaller branches, each with at least three full party members. These branches are the branches that make and enforce policies in China, including control over the media.[[6]](#endnote-6)

China is a closed society and media censorship runs rampant. The group “Reporters without Borders” recently ranked China as number 171 out 178 on the index of press freedom.[[7]](#endnote-7) Even though China is advancing more and more into world society as well the global market place, it still uses its power to control the daily lives of its citizens.

Whether it is radio, television, newspaper, or the Internet, censorship is evident in China, however, China is beginning to allow some forms of less restricted Internet use to permeate its borders. In, “After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society”, Johan Lagerkvist discusses the decisions that China has made in allowing Internet within its border and how the CCP has tried to control it. In 1978, the Chinese began a “technocratic” state when they allowed Internet in China. The CCP wants to protect cultural norms and is using their power to not only stay in power, but also to protect the Chinese culture and not allow too much of worldwide popular cultures to infuse itself into daily life. These new forms of media bring hope that maybe a change from an autocratic to a democratic state may occur. However, the political system of China currently has enough control over the media that this might not happen.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As the Internet has become a main source of unfiltered news within China and outside of its borders the government does its best to censor what its people has access to. When examining media, one should not discount the impact other news sources such as radio, television, and yes even newspapers have on people. It is interesting to note that China is modifying how it controls the media. In one case, the government appears to be shifting away from outright propaganda to a more soft power or control over the media. In, “China Radio International in the Digital Age: Propagating China on the Global Scenario”, Cinzia Colapinto explains recent trends in China’s media. Her main point is that China’s media is shifting from a purely propaganda approach which was essentially trying to brainwash the people to one that focuses on the realm of global popular culture. China is using its “soft power” with its Chinese Radio International (CRI) in order to help provide a more mainstream media to its people as a result of the 2008 Olympics which forced China to relax its rules a little bit. Colapinto stated that China is attempting to make its media more visible internationally as well as the language and culture. Another interesting point of this article is that China is trying to employ social media networks within its media in order to increase its rate of development in the modern world. The article reports that China, unlike other Western counterparts, uses many different national languages in its broadcasts in order to help bring local cultures to light that help build the national Chinese culture.[[9]](#endnote-9)

A further example of how the Chinese government is controlling the Internet is in public areas. The Chinese government recently mandated that all cyber cafes, hotels, and business in central Beijing to install Internet surveillance software for all Wi-Fi users. If these places of business to not comply with regulations, they face heavy fines or even closure. Most people directly affected by this new act believe it is unfair. ““From the point of view of the common people, this policy is unfair,” said Wang Bo, a café owner affected by the new policy. “It’s just an effort to control the flow of information.””[[10]](#endnote-10)

Even though China’s communist government still attempts to control most aspects of its citizen’s lives, change is coming. In “Digital Communication and Political Change in China”, Ashley Esary and Xiao Qiang explain a shift in China from an autocratically controlled media to a more liberal one. One key point of the article is that China is experiencing a, “rapid proliferation of information and communications technology (ICT) that has given rise to new social networks.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Previous literature has stated that China is seeing a rise in the media, in particularly the liberal media while this particular article discusses the rise in social media. With the control that the Chinese government has over its media, one would not expect that the use of any form of social media would be on such a dramatic rise. Although this dramatic rise in ICT is necessary for economic development, a country steeped in Marxist and Leninist tradition that would normally exert full control over a country’s media now finds itself at a crossroad. China, unlike other communist countries, has created e–business and e–commerce programs that will not only promote economic development, but will also enable the government to regulate control.[[12]](#endnote-12) By allowing electronic or Internet businesses communist China has opened the doors for personal social media use.

As China progresses forward into modern society, it is anticipated that media will change with it. But despite all of these changes, China still manages to censor all of the media. In “All news must be good news, says Chinese government”, Jonathan Watts explains one of the restraints that the Chinese government is putting on its media during a meeting of the 17th Party Congress. He writes that all of the news that is reported from this meeting must be good news. News reporters are forbidden from publishing anything that shines light on this event in a negative way. The article states that one man, in the course of this meeting of the Congress, was found guilty of, “inciting people to overthrow the government.” This is a major example of how the current political regime in China is using its power to control the media to do what it wants.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The primary means that the Chinese government uses to exert its influence over the media is force. If the media does not follow established principles set by the government, then more often than not, the journalist or whoever published the piece will usually end up in jail. In fact, Reporters without Borders estimates that at least thirty four journalists are currently in jail for reporting news that has been labeled illegal. In the Internet world, approximately 77 cyber dissidents are in jail for web based journalism crimes.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Even with intense censorship, journalists still try to circumvent the rules. Bob Dietz, a coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists says that press freedom in China, “will expand to meet the needs and demands not just of the government but of the society.” [[15]](#endnote-15) This protests the common stereotype represents China as a closed society. People believe that the Chinese government will never allow any sort of freedom of the press. Chinese society is in fact closed but as China moves further and further on to the world stage, it will need to be able to open up its society to the outside world. Doing so will allow China to continue to expand to in order to keep up its current position as an expanding super power. If China opens its borders to outside influences, it can use these influences to takes as criticisms to expand even further.

The Islamic Federation of Iran

The system of law that governs Iran is called, Sharia Law. Sharia means path in Arabic and Sharia Law guides all aspects of Iranian daily life. Sharia Law is law that is derived from Islamic teachings in both the Koran and the Sunna, both sacred Islamic texts. Sharia Law was also modeled after the life of the prophet Muhammad and that is the portion that is used to govern daily life in Iran.[[16]](#endnote-16) The portion of the political system that Sharia Law has the heaviest influence on is the country’s national court.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In *Who’s Who in Iran’s Political System*, Scott Macleod gives a brief overview of the current political structure of Iran. The primary factor in Iran’s political system is that after the Islamic revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini, it came under the control of a hybrid government system. The result of the revolution was, “a regime comprising competing factions and personalities, achieving its own version of checks and balances by distributing power across a variety of different institutions, from structures of government to unelected councils of clerics.” This combination resulted in the power of electing democratic officials being taken away from the people and put in the hands of the clergy. In the current regime, all elected officials in Iran’s theocratic government are either elected or appointed by the fundamentalist Islamic clergy. In this system, the clergy that appoints or elects these officials also has the power to remove them if they are unsatisfied with what they have done.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Because Iran’s political system is run by Islamic clerics who use a strict interpretation of the Koran, there is strict media censorship. In fact, “[Internet censorship](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/internet+world/censorship) is both routine and highly developed in the Islamic Republic”[[19]](#endnote-19) Whether online or print, the Iranian leaders are primarily concerned with keeping Western influences out. They want their country to be a pure Islamic republic and they want their people to see the West as evil.

To give some statistics on media outlets in Iran, there are currently, “252 radios, 158 television sets, 219 telephone lines, and 110 personal computers for every 1,000 residents.” These statistics were taken from 2000 so even though these numbers have grown since this sampling, this shows just how much the Iranian government is dealing with in keeping the media clean. In 1998, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications began selling Internet access in Iran making Iran only the second country in the Middle East to allow Internet access.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In, *Iran and the Political Clout of Social Media*, Behzad Khoshondam discusses the implications of the new introductions of social media into Iran. Iran has been a society that has traditionally outlawed sites such as Facebook for being too Western. There is also much speculation that these social media sites might continue the Arab Spring as being the forerunners of conspiracies within the country and out of the country. Because Iran is a traditional society, the new social media could bring a force or medium that the government might not be able to control. Current leaders fear that social media sites could inspire fundamental and social change.[[21]](#endnote-21)

In Iran, the political system has such tight control of their media that it must go through its own firewalls and detection programs before the citizens of Iran are allowed to access any website on online. The Iranian political system has its own company, the Telecommunications Company of Iran. All of the information that goes online must pass through this company to make sure that the information is safe enough to go online. Censorship starts here.

"The authorities are aware that almost every Internet user knows how to get around the filtering and they don't care much about it," said Mehrdad, a student. "But once there is a danger the Internet may undermine the political system, they intensify censorship so it gets very difficult to get access to blocked websites even with anti-filter software."[[22]](#endnote-22)

In “Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Tale of Two Medias”, Anne Hagood discusses the influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia’s political system on the media. Hagood writes that the two countries (primarily Iran), “use the media to portray their own distorted reality through the prism of their own agendas; and to compete with each other, they exaggerate this distortion.” Hagood states that these countries’ governments have also been using media to stir up and exaggerate troubles and discord between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Both of these countries are fighting for power in the Middle East and are using their media as tools in order to spread propaganda in their never ending vie for power in this extremely volatile region. These countries are using them not only a way to win over the minds of their people, but also to legitimize their actions to the world.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Recently, the Iranian government has taken further steps in advancing their Internet censorship. What the Iranian political system is trying to do is establish a new national Internet that would engulf all of Iran making it easier to censor the media. One driving factor in this is the recent Arab Spring throughout the Middle East. The Iranian government is trying to stop a spring similar to what has happened in Egypt and Libya from happening in Iran. This initiative by the government is in a sense in response to, “an online invasion of Western ideas, culture and influence, primarily originating from the U.S.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

Despite the fact that most if not all media in Iran is under extreme censorship, one medium of Iranian media that continues to thrive is film. Iranian films have won many awards at international film festivals such as the Tribeca Film Festival. Also, women in Iran have also won acclaim for films on the subject of the woman’s role in Iran. However, one obstacle that the film industry faces within Iran is Iran itself. Many of the censorship laws prevent these filmmakers from distributing award winning material within Iran’s borders. Some films, such as the film *Offside* had to be shot in secret in order to evade law enforcement during production. In 2005 at the KaraFilm Festival in Karachi, Pakistan, Motamed-Arya told the press, “Iran is a magical country and you can’t say what is coming next, and I can’t say whether change will come in cinema in the near future or not. But I have not lost the hope for better Iranian cinema.”[[25]](#endnote-25) This is a very powerful statement about Iranian cinema, especially in a country of this much censorship.

The United States of America

The United States is a Federal Republic ruled by three branches of the federal government. They are the the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches of government. In “A Short Guide to the American Political System”, Roger Darlington briefly outlines the political system currently in place in America. He explains that the US political system is different from others because of its basic documents, including the Constitution, which gives us basic freedoms such as press, religion, and speech. These rights are what make America’s political system unique. The US also has the principle of checks and balances which allows each of the three branches of government to enforce acts that they make but also to check and balance the other two branches in order to ensure that personal liberties are maintained.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The United States is viewed by many as the land of the free. Well, technically we are in that we have many freedoms that allow us to be free. “The First Amendment: An Overview” is a perfect explanation of freedom of the press in the United States. People in media in the United States, particularly print media such as newspapers and magazines, are free to publish any viewpoint that they wish.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Although the media is nowhere near as censored as in China and Iran, the media is still censored to some degree in the United States. Disregarding print journalism, all of the media in the United States is reviewed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC regulates interstate and international communication on almost all other mediums of media.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The United States that is different from Iran and China in that the FCC encourages stations to self-regulate viewing and listening material. In Iran and China, the only television one might view is the television that comes from the government. The FCC only regulates public television, which back in the days before the converter box for a television, referred to channels that one could view for free, including major networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC. Private channels, private stations, and cable channels have their own rules for self-censorship. So long as these rules are enforced, the FCC stays out. Leslie Allman, a former writer for *The Virginian Pilot* and current teacher of Media Studies, says that the FCC tries to stay out of the business of public television. She says that when the FCC interferes too much, that could be misconstrued as a violation of first amendment rights. However, once one crosses into the domain of cable television and when a viewer is paying for services such as Cox or Verizon FIOS, the FCC has no power as one gets what one paid for, caveat emptor. The primary point that Ms. Allman was making was that, the airwaves belong to the people. Companies buy time on the peoples’ airwaves and that is where the government can or cannot step in.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Despite the fact that media in the United States is censored by the FCC, the media is still relatively free of restrictions. The free press portion of the First Amendment means that citizens of the United States are free to publish whatever they want in the media without fear of the government will put them in jail.

Unlike many other democracies around the world, the United States has only two major political parties and many different interest groups. The two political parties in place today are the Republicans and the Democrats. These two political parties are vastly different in their ideologies and their purposes. The Democrats are liberal and favor social programs, a broader role for government, and other liberal policies. The Republicans are more conservative in nature and are against social programs, a much smaller role for government, and other conservative policies.[[30]](#endnote-30)

These two political parties both exert their control over the political system in the United States, but what does that have to do with bias in the media? These two political parties both want to seem good in the public eye so they use their influence on journalists to put their own spin on the news that is being reported. Because of this, reporters give up their freedom of the press in order to please the political parties to which they supposedly owe their allegiance.

In the United States today, the mainstream news media on television is dominated by major networks such as FOX, CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, and others. Each of these networks has bias in their news.Most news stations tend to veer left of center on the political spectrum. These networks include CNN and MSNBC. One exception to this “rule” is FOX News which tends to veer right of center. According to Seth Ackerman, “Since its 1996 launch, FOX has become a central hub of the conservative movement's well-oiled media machine.”[[31]](#endnote-31)

The media source, FAIR magazine, which stands for Fairness in Accuracy in Reporting, claims that it is unbiased. However, how does one really tell whether or not a news source is unbiased? The answer to this lies essentially with the person that is interpreting the media. Most people in America have their own political views and it is in those views where people derive their own interpretation of bias in the media. If someone is a conservative Republican, they might not think that FOX news is very biased. If someone is a liberal Democrat, they might not think that networks like CNN and MSNBC are not biased. A true independent who has either no party loyalty or merely mixed political views on issues may think that all news networks are bias. These people tend to get their news from multiple networks based on how the networks are reporting the issues and who is reporting their views on the particular issue. However, most Americans fail to recognize the connection.

Another part of the media in the United States that exhibits large amounts of bias is print media. The major national newspapers in the United States are *The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and The New York Times*. All of these newspapers listed are corporations with interlocking board members with other corporate entities. For example, *The New York Times* has interlocking board members with PepsiCo Inc, Texaco Inc, Campbell’s Soup Co, Lehman Brothers Holding Inc, and others. Where there are interlocking ties with big businesses there is the other form of media bias in the United States. Big Business uses the media to sway public opinion, just like the two political parties.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Media bias in the United States does not only extend to issues such as elections and lawmaking. This bias also extends to international incidents. Recently, a United States airstrike near the Pakistan border killed almost twenty five Pakistani troops that were mistaken for Taliban soldiers.[[33]](#endnote-33) When the United States media presented this story, they only presented their side of the story. Most media outlets covering this event failed to mention the Pakistani side of the story. Coverage like this makes people think that the Pakistani government as a whole supports terrorism, when the reality is that not all of the Pakistani government supports terrorism.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Mass Media in the United States, as well as almost all countries around the world, is an avenue, by which people can gain support, and also criticism. Medias are often regulated in the United States by the agendas of business and of course, government. The government and businesses use the media to put spin on issues to make them look good or bad. Many times the public becomes susceptible to propaganda and lets it go to their heads. Noam Chomsky offers this,

“A principle familiar to propagandists is that the doctrine to be instilled in the target audience should not be articulated: that would only expose them to reflection, inquiry, and, very likely, ridicule. The proper procedure is to drill them home by constantly presupposing them, so that they become the very condition for discourse.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Often times, government in the United States is guilty of using propaganda to attempt to influence our thoughts. This could mean anything from garnering support for a new bill in the Legislature, supporting a candidate whether he or she is incumbent or challenger, or just putting different spin on a possible scandal. The Unites States the government is only trying to influence our thoughts, not completely control them.

Conclusion

The media is constantly changing in our ever growing world. As media continues to expand, citizens must know what how and why governments control the media. All three of the countries in this paper have shown some form of control over the media in their country. Reasons for controlling the media include staying in power, as witnessed in China, protecting its citizens from, “the evils of western society” as witnessed in Iran, or simply just trying to keep words and content that are inappropriate for certain age groups off the airwaves, as witnessed in the United States. There is always some form of censorship.

The primary point of this paper is that media is a vehicle of public opinion. In each of the three countries examined, there are individuals and groups of people that are working to control the media in order to sway the thoughts of the people. In China, the CCP exercised its control to keep elements of foreign popular culture from permeating its borders. In Iran, the Islamic Council exercised its power over the media to keep out any western elements and attempt to make its people think the west is evil. However in the United States, the situation is different.

Just as with Iran and China, media in the United States is used by the government to sway public opinion. However, because of the first amendment of the Constitution, the people have freedom of the press so the government cannot exercise as much control as it could. The true points of control in the media in the United States in order to sway public opinion are political parties, political interest groups, and big business.

Most of the major newspaper entities maintain ties with many other corporations. Most of the major television networks are owned by other corporations. Because of these ties, the businesses that own these entities are able to use the media that they control in order to sway the opinion of the people. Whether it is to get customers to buy products, or get people to vote a certain way, the control of these major entities, some related to government, are the source of media control in United States.

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