**THE MEDIA AND ITS ROLE TODAY**

A reflection on the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Shalini Iyengar

“Journalism can never be silent: that is its greatest virtue and its greatest fault. It must speak, and speak immediately, while the echoes of wonder, the claims of triumph and the signs of horror are still in the air.” –

Henry Anatole Grunwald

“So have I heard, and do in part believe it” - Hamlet

The 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar raised several important issues concerning media law and policy. These issues ranged from the limits of internet freedom, to soft power and information sovereignty, to media and its contested influence on the democratization process, to the changing relationship between the state and the media. Taken together, these issues underscore that the media, broadly defined, can serve as both a meeting ground and a mouthpiece and function both as a tool and an actor. Against this backdrop, it would seem to me that, as Niklas Luhmann argued, “whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media.”

Media theorist Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, argued that Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* was a more accurate summation of our times than George Orwell’s *1984*. Orwell feared that those in power would streamline and control thought by restricting information. Huxley, on the other hand, depicted mind control occurring through a mechanism vastly more difficult to oppose—by conditioning people to want only certain types of information—creating a world where we wouldn’t know or care to seek the truth because we were too busy focusing elsewhere.

The Arab Spring and other recent upheavals illustrate the truth of Huxley’s argument. In Egypt, state-controlled media traditionally experienced privileged positions. Unsurprisingly, protestors targeted the state media offices during the early days of the revolution and have continued to organize sit-ins and other actions objecting to the lack of state media reform. On the other hand, American and Indian media, for example, usually play the instant gratification card, focusing on sensationalist news stories and advocacy journalism characterized by sound bites aimed at increasing ratings. These trends are particularly true for television, and increasingly so for print media. Frequently, the emphasis is on entertainment and sports sections with the actual news buried somewhere beneath. Given that the Egyptian protests sought the overthrow of the system at large and the Indian and the US governments still tout their democratic legitimacy, *res ipsa loquitur*. It is, of course, important to emphasize that the above observation does not necessarily

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speak of the legitimacy of the media itself; India and the United States demonstrate sharply
different public approval ratings about the media. What it does mean, however, is that
looking at the way the world works today, Huxley’s vision seems to have won out, which is
significant. In a world where we simply have access to too much information, one looks at
the supposedly legitimate media sources as being the best harbingers and guardians of the
truth. But who is it that watches the watchers?

Although advocacy journalism has become the order of the day, the conflation of factual
reporting and opinion remains controversial. With mushrooming internet access fueling
the decentralization of media, anyone can become a “journalist.” The term “media”
increasingly represents a gamut of possible actors. These range from massive media
conglomerates to citizen journalists with a camera phone. Indubitably, the marketplace of
ideas can become a bewildering cacophony if everyone seeks to put in their two cents
simultaneously. This is especially relevant since the media is as influential in shaping the
news as it is in relaying it, a trend amplified by modern forms of communication.
Organizational websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are among the many interfaces
that allow media actors to bypass traditional delivery platforms and bring their analyses
and reports directly to consumers. The internet’s ability to foster direct and instantaneous
communication without governmental filters and editorial pressures is undoubtedly an
important factor in increasing the media’s influence in our daily lives.

However, while media actors can offer valuable insights through investigative reporting
and in-depth analysis directed at discerning audiences, the issue of accountability remains.
Vested power interests finance most media actors, whether it be through direct financial
and regulatory support or through corporate advertising. Moreover, opacity surrounding
funding sources and a lack of regulatory oversight render them open to accusations of
lobbying and conflicts of interest. Questions about different media actor’s willingness and
ability to criticize their donors—including governments and special interest groups—are
inevitable. As more and more media actors expand their global operations, questions arise
about media accountability and the formal jurisdiction of legal and regulatory mechanisms.
For example, the Milton Wolf Seminar dedicated a whole morning to discussing the legality
of the 2010 Hungarian Press Freedom Act (which gave the Hungarian regulator the ability
to control print and internet media) in the context of European Union legislation. Another
case that has generated considerable coverage is the 2011 South African Protection of State
Information Bill, which made it a crime punishable by up to twenty-five years in jail to
publish information deemed as classified by the government.

As globalization scholar Manfred Steger argues, discussions about media today are
inextricably linked with discourses about globalization. One essential element of
globalization discourse is that it is instrumental in encouraging democracy. The strength of

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this claim about the link between globalization and democracy is rooted in the manner in which certain “facts” have been hardwired into the fundamentals of our understanding of the issue. These facts ensure that arguments about globalization and democracy only take place within certain limits and do not reach towards an a priori attack on the notion itself since we frequently debate the issue without challenging underlying assumptions. Steger’s demarcation of globalization as a “narrative, discourse and ideology” is certainly not far off the mark. Globalization rhetoric tends to persist even when its fundamental assumptions (the myth of efficient free markets being one) have been disproved, as the ongoing financial crisis would testify to. Arguably, in more than one instance, globalization has been the legitimating patina placed on inequity and power symmetries.

The role that the mass media plays in this process of globalization is multi-faceted. It creates new scales by which power is measured, impacts the relationship between these scales, reconfigures entities and builds, as the linguist Norman Fairclough argues, sustains “a new ‘fix’ between a regime of accumulation and a mode of social regulation.” The media is able to play these multiple roles because they are the primary vehicles for contemporary information dissemination. It is both interesting and apt that the etymology of the word media comes from the Latin word medium. Until the seventeenth century, medium meant “a middle ground, quality, or degree” when it became understood as an “intermediate agency, channel of communication.” This points to the inherent tensions within the media today since competing impulses jostle for supremacy; the holy grail of journalistic objectivity often runs aground when reporting is clearly predicated on beliefs that are far from neutral. The media, as primary information providers, help to formulate culture by affecting belief and praxis, which supports certain economic and political regimes.

According to German Sociologist, Niklas Luhmann the crucial aspect of contemporary mass media is that “no interaction among those co-present can take place between senders and receivers.” However, the proliferation of social media and mobile and internet technologies increasingly allows for a two-way exchange of ideas and culture. If there is one lesson that the many millennia of human civilization has taught us, it is that cultural boundaries are highly porous and permeable. For example, beginning from pre-historic times, art and culture have flowed between peoples, along trade routes and across borders. As mentioned at the Milton Wolf Seminar, the influence of popular culture on perceptions and ideas should never be underemphasized. However, when one views the facts of globalization and exchange, it is clear that the flows are more from the Global North to the Global South than vice versa. In my mind, one of the main reasons for this imbalance is simply that one of the two sides involved has made a better use of the medium. However,

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5 The word scale is defined as: “the arena and moment, both discursively and materially, where socio-spatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated. Scale, therefore, is both the result and the outcome of social struggle for power and control […] theoretical and political priority never resides in a particular geographical scale but rather in the process through which particular scales become re(constituted).” Eric Swyngedouw. (1997) “Neither Global nor Local: Glocalization and the Politics of Scale,” in Kevin R.Cox (Ed) Spaces of Globalization. New York: Longman: 137-66. In essence, a scale is “a space where diverse economic, political, social and cultural relations are articulated together as ‘some kind of structured coherence.” (Fairclough 2006: 65)
6 Fairclough (2006: 97)
7 Luhmann (2007: 2)
when "media savvy" coincides with the possession of more financial wherewithal, questions about the more insidious aspects of domination via the media arise. Media actors are the most responsive to those who have the power to lobby and engage.

It is perhaps ironic that social media now outmatch mass media in the very characteristics that made mass media such an effective tool for the power elite—its breadth, its responsiveness, and its ability to disseminate ideas. Unlike mass media, social media is more communicative in nature because it is generated by user engagement and multidirectional conversation. These characteristics of social media challenge Luhmann's critique that most of media platforms are unidirectional. As discussed during the Milton Wolf Seminar, social media played a variety of roles in the Arab Spring and its aftermath—as organizing and fundraising tools, as mass communication devices, and as mechanisms for freedom of expression—touching lives in disparate parts of the globe. Social media provides citizens around the world with spaces to make common cause with likeminded people and make their voices heard. As discussed during the Seminar, states like China and Iran have tried to control these spaces for discourse and debate. Indeed, if there is one defining hallmark of totalitarianism, it is that it does not allow for doubt or discussion. As optimistic as this might sound, the same media technologies that may render Huxley and Orwell's fictitious visions of mind control a reality, can also facilitate the emergence of alternative points of view. Which is not to say that it always will; this is certainly not an assertion that the alternate point of view will always win. I am simply saying that alternate points of view will continue to exist and, occasionally create common ground for people to rally around. What follows thus, is that few things are, in and of themselves, inherently good or evil. What gives them that character is the ways and means of their use. The media possesses the potential to be many things at many points in time and indeed, if there is a conclusion possible to an issue which is still very much an open debate, it is simply that the media remains as much an instrument as ever—it depends on the wielders.

About the Author

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Shalini Iyengar was selected as an Emerging Scholar Delegate to the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar. She is an LL.M. student studying Comparative Law, Economics and Finance at the International University College, Turin after having completed her degree in arts and law at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore. She's a keen observer of the transformative role that media can play in a democracy and the power it wields in both developed and developing countries. In her free time Shalini likes to travel, talk, read and amuse her friends by pursuing increasingly arcane hobbies like visiting old bookstores and collecting stamps.
About the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar

Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series aims to deal with developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. Using case studies such as Hungary, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011 explored the evolving relationship between media and democratic transition in light of rapid technological change and the shifting structure and dynamics of the international communication system. The seminar was jointly organized by the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA).

More information about this and previous seminars is available on the Milton Wolf Seminar website [http://global.asc.upenn.edu] and our Facebook Page [https://www.facebook.com/MiltonWolfSeminar].