

## Amartya Sen and the media

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### Abstract

Amartya Sen has correctly sought to correct some shortcomings within neoclassical economic theory. Nonetheless, there still exists a tension in his work. His overall frame of analysis is still congruent with much of the neoclassical tradition. However, his critiques seem to imply that a sharp break with neoclassical theory is necessary. This conflict is examined in light of the connections between the press and the media, its impact on capabilities and functionings in Sen's framework, politics, and basic ideas about justice. Sen's individualist focus on capabilities and functionings seems to reflect the individualist orientation derived from neoclassical theory, but his use of other categories calls for a new kind of analysis that better examines the connections that enable people to shape and be shaped by their institutional environment.

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### Section I: Introduction

Almost everyone recognizes that the media plays a crucial role in real democracies. One must examine the media to understand its role in how democracies work, including how it both enhances and detracts from how well any democratic society works. Amartya Sen recognizes this basic truth in the realms of capabilities, functionings, economics, and freedom. However, there is a tension between this recognition and the fact that Sen does not deeply develop the structural and institutional aspects of the role of the media and of democratic society.

In many of his works, Amartya Sen has correctly pointed out the links that exist between many kinds of freedom. One of the most important is the connection between democratic participation, political freedom, and the structure of the media. This is important because Sen argues that direct or representative democracy prevents catastrophic famine. (Sen 1999, 2009) He has also forcefully argued that political participation is important in its own right.

In order to reap the full benefits of democracy, Sen has argued that it is crucial have a free press that allows for the free flow of ideas. The free press helps a society decide which policies to pursue, since these discussions lead to the direct consideration of the goals that society thinks are worthwhile. These discussions also shape a society, because they inform citizens how it might be best to pursue goals that are already settled on. On this point, I agree with Sen.

However, there is a problem. Authors like Robert McChesney have argued that the ownership structure of media companies limits debate over economic and political policy. In the U.S., the primary concern seems to be the potential for corporate censorship, while in other parts of the world the main problem appears to be government censorship.

For the U.S., the argument goes like this. Media companies such as Disney, Fox, and Turner have direct economic interests. Large media companies are large corporations, and they sell

advertising to other large corporations. Management of these large corporations has the responsibility to run the firms as profitably as they can. This is both a competitive requirement, and in some ways a legal one. One could argue that these firms have to please two masters, their shareholders and their audience. Management is often legally bound to serve shareholders first in case of a conflict between shareholder interests and other competing interests, such as those of employees or the audience. The corporate structure of these firms gives them an economic incentive to consider the financial consequences to the corporation of any particular story, regardless of its truth or potential social importance even if they maintain a strict separation between the news division and other divisions. Important aspects of any debate over social, political, and economic policy may be sidestepped because of corporate organization and the accompanying incentives. For example, Stromberg (2004) developed a model that describes the links between the mass media, political competition, and the resulting public policy. The emergence of the mass media “may introduce a bias in favor of groups that are valuable to advertisers, which might introduce a bias against the poor and the old.” (Stromberg 2004, 281)

This may limit the range of acceptable discourse and debate in major media outlets. The internet could be a different story, but the evolving debate and actions of the government regarding ‘net neutrality’ is a debate about who controls this important information gateway, and how that control will be used. It would also be important to consider the worldwide aspects of this debate. While Sen has placed many of his arguments within the context of a national debate over some policy, many of today’s media companies have a worldwide reach. Policies that affect a media outlet in one country often require the company to make adjustments in other areas, thus influencing a wide area of activity. Benjamin Compaine (1999) believed that the internet could broaden the discussion. In a way it has made a much more diverse views available to just about anyone, but the problem remains that it is very expensive to provide content. Easy duplication and dissemination of content has reinforced the market power of the big players. (Foster and McChesney 2011, Hindman 2009, McChesney 2001, 2004, McChesney and Nichols 2010) So while there are many more voices available, they continue to be drowned out by the large established players.

If policy makers uncritically accept constraints on which views are deemed acceptable, they could limit the discussion to alternatives that are pre-approved. This preapproval is implicit, and understood by all players in the game except for “fringe” elements. This needs only to become widely accepted in policy circles, not throughout the society. This has happened in the United States, and the result is a lack of information for people causing a poor political culture and a lack of civic engagement.

## **Section II: Sen and Democracy**

Sen directly discusses the importance of democracy in such works as *Hunger and Public Action* (co-authored with Jean Drèze), *Development as Freedom*, and *Inequality Reexamined*. Sen’s emphasis of personal differences in *Inequality Reexamined* points to the importance of democratic discussion. Democratic discussion is important *because* people differ in many ways. Thus, Sen writes “If every person were much the same as every other, a major cause of these disharmonies would disappear” (Sen 1992, 2). He points out that equality in one area does not automatically correspond to equality in another area. Differences in wealth can be associated with equal incomes. Equal incomes can be associated with unequal happiness, and equal opportunities can lead to unequal incomes (Sen 1992). Sen has forcefully argued

that there are direct causal links between different freedoms, such as between political participation and famine prevention (Sen 1983, 1999, Drèze and Sen 1989).

In order to address these differences, Sen argues that “. . . the intensity of economic needs adds to—rather than subtracts from—the urgency of political freedoms” (Sen 1999, 148). He feels that this is important for three reasons. Basic political and liberal rights are intrinsically important, because they enable people to lead more fulfilling lives. Sen believes that political and social participation are important parts of a truly fulfilling life. Second, these political rights and freedoms are instrumentally important, because they empower people to tell others about problems that need attention. Third, these freedoms play a constructive role in the discussion and formation of the ideas of “economic need” within a society. In other words, the fact that there is discussion influences or alters the conceptions of needs that arise within a particular society.

So far so good, but how does democracy actually work? Does it work well, poorly, or not at all, and why? Obviously, this is a question that would require a book length treatment, and probably more than one! To his credit, Sen is aware of this problem, so he supplements his discussion of the importance of political rights and democracy with the admission that the effectiveness of such political rights depends crucially on how they are used. He writes:

“However, in presenting these arguments on the advantages if democracies, there is a danger of overselling their effectiveness. As was mentioned earlier, political freedoms and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness would depend on the how they are exercised” (Sen 1999, 154).

Sen steps directly into the discussion of how political rights are used and what influences the use of those rights.

This is a crucial point. Taking India as an example of a functioning democracy, Sen points out that democracy in India has been able to prevent catastrophic famine since independence in 1947. At the same time, it has been much less successful in eliminating chronic hunger, gender inequalities, or widespread and persistent illiteracy (Sen 1999). He also points out that there are similar failings in more well developed democracies, such as the United States. He cites the deprivation of African Americans in the United States in areas such as social environment, education, and health care. A symptom of this is the mortality rates for African Americans, which are much higher than the average for the rest of the population. He writes:

“Democracy has to be seen as creating a set of opportunities and the use of these opportunities calls for an analysis of a different kind, dealing with the *practice* of democratic and political rights. In this respect, the low percentage of voting in American elections, especially by African Americans, and other signs of apathy and alienation, cannot be ignored. Democracy does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria. The opportunity it opens up has to be positively grabbed in order to achieve the desired effects” (Sen 1999, 155 – emphasis in original).

Sen is aware of the difficulties that this involves, and the examples of hunger in India and mortality of African Americans are prime examples. But there are additional problems. First there are problems recognizing patent injustices, aside from the obvious catastrophes such as famines and disease. Sen notes that:

“. . .no matter how inescapable it may look in terms of foundational ethical arguments, the emergence of a shared recognition of that “injustice” may be dependent in practice on open discussion of issues and feasibilities. Extreme inequalities in matters of race, gender and class often survive on the implicit understanding . . . that there is no alternative” (Sen 1999, 287).

It will be difficult to remove discrimination against women and girls in societies that have a long history of sex discrimination against women and girls. Getting these societies to recognize that sexism is not inevitable will be a long struggle. People may not believe that non-sexist arrangements are possible, even when they believe that they are desirable.

This discussion is pitched at the national level. Aiming this discussion at the national level makes sense for several reasons. Many discussions of democracy have implied that the national government should be a democratic government. National governments have the most resources and are more able to prevent catastrophes such as famines. They are also the most influential when it comes to enacting policies that affect everyone, such as health care and education. State and local governments act within that context. They may not be allowed to have their own policies in some areas. They also will not have the resources to respond to some problems.

Even though it makes sense to have this discussion at the national level, there is an international dimension to consider. The practice of democracy in the United States has worldwide implications. For example, U.S. trade policy affects virtually every other nation and their citizens. From the point of view of democracy most writers consider it desirable for people to have a voice in those affairs that affect them most. If the policies of the United States affect the citizens of Gambia to a great degree, how are government, businesses, and other institutions in the U.S. supposed to take into account the views of Gambians? Gambians do not vote in U.S. elections. Democracy can work to unite a nation behind a set of policies that benefits its citizens at the expense of the citizens of another nation. Dissident citizens can try to make other people aware of this, with varying degrees of success. Often these implications are brought to light only after the fact.

Sen is also aware of the problems of the reach and effectiveness of public discussion. Open public discussion has played a key role in reducing fertility rates in some areas of the world, but a proper understanding of economic and other needs depends crucially heavily on public discussion and debate:

“Public debates and discussions, permitted by political freedoms and civil rights can also play a major part in the formation of values. Indeed, even the identification of needs cannot but be influenced by the nature of public participation and dialogue” (Sen 1999, 158).

Public discussion helps society determine what a need is and what is not. The cultivation of this kind of public discussion helps democracy work well. According to Sen, a “more informed and less marginalized” public discussion of environmental issues would help both the planet and democratic practice.

Sen captures some of this international concern in a recent article on John Rawls. Rawls aimed his idea of the original position and the construction of a just society at the national

level. When Rawls first proposed the idea of the original position, the veil of ignorance was supposed to remove individual bias from the contractual exercise of setting up a just society. In the original position, people would not know what positions they would hold in the society they constructed. They would also be ignorant of the 'comprehensive doctrine' or 'ideology' they would hold in the society they constructed. Rawls defines a 'comprehensive doctrine' as a religious, moral, or philosophical outlook that generates a particular conception of the good, which is expressed by the people who believe in it. Rawls argues that the fact that one person occupies a certain social position is not a good reason for others to accept a conception of justice that favors those that occupy that position. If one person holds a particular comprehensive doctrine, this is not a good reason to propose a social structure that favors that doctrine, nor is it a good reason to get others to accept a social structure that favors that doctrine (Rawls 1993, 24). Rawls 'original position' is pitched at the national level, a 'closed society' having no relations with other societies (Rawls 1993, 12). Rawls justifies this on grounds that it enables us to examine important questions free from distracting details. Rawls says that a political conception of justice will need to address the just relations between the peoples of different societies. He terms this the "law of peoples" (Rawls 1993). However, he sticks to the national level in *Political Liberalism*.

Sen brings in the problem of international relations, or the relations between societies in his paper "Open and Closed Impartiality" which appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 2002. Sen asks whether the impartial assessment of a state of affairs or a proposed state of affairs, is limited to a fixed group. Rawls clearly answers yes it is, and the fixed group is a group of national citizens. Rawls recognizes the importance of international relations but leaves it aside until problems at the national level can be worked out. Sen points out that limiting the group in this way is not always successful. Thus when the group is limited, this reflects closed impartiality. Sen shows that for closed impartiality, "the procedure of making impartial judgments invokes only the members of the focal group itself" (Sen 2002, 445). Rawls' original position is one example of closed impartiality. No outsider is involved in deliberations or construction of the just society. While Sen admits that this is useful for eliminating individual biases within the focal group, he points out:

"But even under the veil of ignorance, a person does not know that she belongs to the focal group (and is not someone outside it), and there is no insistence at all that perspectives from outside the focal group be invoked. As a device of structured political analysis, the procedure is not geared to addressing the need to overcome group prejudices.

In contrast, the case of *open impartiality*, the procedure for making impartial judgments can (and in some cases must) invoke judgments inter alia from outside the focal group" (Sen 2002, 445-446).

According to Sen, a new device is needed, and for this Sen turns to Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" who is not necessarily part of the focal group. Open impartiality requires that the views of others receive adequate consideration whether or not they are members of the focal group. The advantage of this is that it can take into account views that reveal group prejudice and bias (Sen 2002, 446).

Sen strengthens his case by arguing that there are three basic weaknesses of closed impartiality. These are *procedural parochialism*, *inclusionary incoherence*, and *exclusionary neglect*. Procedural parochialism is the idea that closed impartiality can eliminate individual

biases within the group itself, but does not address “the limitations of partiality toward the shared prejudices or biases of the group itself” (Sen 2002, 447). Inclusionary incoherence is the idea that decision by the focal group in the original position under closed impartiality can influence the size or composition of the group. Sen sees the choice of population policy in the original position as an example. Finally, there is also exclusionary neglect, where people whose lives are affected by the decisions of the focal group are not included in the focal group. Sen believes that this problem is not adequately addressed through multistage procedures such as Rawls’ “law of peoples.” In other words, this would not be a problem if the decision of the focal group affected only those within the focal group.

This discussion begs the question, “What does the group consist of?” If it consists only of individuals behind the veil of ignorance, and you take the methodological stance that the group consists only of the people or individuals within it, then by implication if you eliminate all individual bias behind the veil of ignorance, then you must also eliminate group bias behind the veil of ignorance. Put another way, can the group be prejudiced without prejudice on the part of each member? In other words, if the veil of ignorance prevents people from knowing anything about their personal characteristics and social and historical circumstances, presumably this would include personal biases and prejudice. There is an emergent properties problem here, for if Sen wants to advocate open impartiality as a remedy for exclusionary neglect, we are left wondering where group biases would come from. Is this something out of nothing? This distinction may be untenable; you are either impartial or not. Sen seems to be suggesting an incomplete impartiality in this argument.

There is another problem. The discussion of inclusionary incoherence breaks down as well. As I understand it, the membership of the group placed in the original position is fixed. They debate and decide the form of society they would like to have, come to some form of agreement (through some unspecified procedure such as majority rule or consensus), then the veil of ignorance is lifted and they proceed to live their lives in accordance with the agreement. It seems to me that by construction, the group behind the veil of ignorance is fixed, so that decisions by the group will not affect the size of the group. This can’t hold in real societies, since government policy affects economic and population growth through areas such as health care and immigration policy.

These contractual exercises rest on the ability to justify decisions to other people. The focal group accepts or rejects proposals made by its members. Sen sums it up by writing:

“Judgments of justice cannot be an entirely private affair – unfathomable to others – and the Rawlsian invoking of “a public framework of thought” which does not in itself demand a “contract” is a critically important move” (Sen 2002, 456).

There is a great deal of openness left here. Agreements may not cover all situations, and certain principles can be accepted in such a public framework if these are judged to be “plausibly just” or “at least not manifestly unjust.”

The question is whether an agreement that arises from a “public framework of thought” can cross national or political boundaries. Sen believed that it can, and argues that there is no reason that communication and public engagement can be sought and found only inside these boundaries. The impartial spectator may draw on any perspective. This is critically important for Sen especially in light of terrorism. It becomes imperative that nations strive to

understand one another in order to address this international problem. This requires communication and public engagement which highlights the role of the media and the press. These are the institutions that present information to the citizens, so the structure of these institutions plays a key role in decisions about the amount and kind of information that is presented to citizens, and then used to make decisions.

If these difficulties beset idealized exercises, imagine the same problems in democratic practice in the real world. Procedural parochialism and exclusionary neglect will be hard to separate. Inclusionary incoherence will affect population and its composition directly, and through the structure of the media. It will shape the structure of the media, which will in turn shape the structure of the discussion of any problem, including media structure.

### **Section III: Methodology**

As admirable as Sen is for broadening the discussion of economics to include ethics and a more realistic conception of the person, something is still a bit off. His focus on individuals prevents him from paying adequate attention to other forces at work. As shown above, he does not ignore many of these issues. There is a question of whether Sen can really be classified as a methodological individualist. It certainly seems that way given his focus on capabilities and functionings. However, it could be argued that Sen uses capabilities and functionings as the most important *evaluative space* to measure how well policies and decisions work. This is conceptually distinct from using methodological individualism as a *basis for investigating* society and economics. If this is true, it seems that Sen himself has not been all that clear about issue himself, which has led to some confusion for his readers, including me.

Nonetheless looking at other forces is warranted and useful. According to Nuno Martins (2006; 2007) Sen has engaged in explicitly ontological theorizing, with his main focus on the nature of capabilities and functionings themselves and their usefulness as an evaluative space. People exercise these capabilities and functionings with varying degrees of success. This success depends on many factors which Sen has described, particularly in *Development as Freedom* (1999).

These capabilities and functionings take the role of causal powers, according to Martins (2006). Martins argues that the capabilities approach uses an open system characterization of the social world, so that these causal powers do not have direct and obvious links with observed outcomes. Capabilities are potential causal powers that may or may not be realized or achieved. If achieved, they become functionings. These functionings arise as a result of underlying biological, psychological, or social structures. Specifically, Martins writes:

“Capabilities, like causal powers in general, are not actualities – they are potentials that may or may not be exercised and / or actualized. And similarly to causal powers, capabilities arise by virtue of underlying biological, psychological, or social structures which facilitate or constrain a particular achievement or functioning” (Martins 2006, 678).

This is a specific instance of invoking a structure to explain an outcome. The structure facilitates a person’s ability to learn to read, so over time we observe that Jim is literate. The

structure may affect people differently because of their location within it. Positions on the ladder of the distribution of wealth and income come to mind.

What seems to be missing from Sen is a specific description of the influence of structures of any kind on capabilities and functionings, with two huge exceptions: famines and the treatment of women. But with respect to democracy we have generalities. We are given warnings that democracy is effective only insofar as people make good use of it. The ability to make good use of democracy depends in turn on the *institution* of the press and the media and its position between the people and the government. What might lead people to make better use of democracy, assuming its existence? This is a specific question that might be answerable using Sen's methods.

However, Sen may be under elaborated here. According to Martins, Sen uses several ontological categories. These are freedom as measured by capabilities and functionings, structure, process, interconnectedness and diversity (Martins 2007). However, Martins argues that people do not exist in a steady state. People grow, develop, and change. This process cannot be explained in terms of static categories like capabilities and functionings. We need institutions to help explain process. Most people do not learn to read on their own. That takes schools, which themselves evolve over time as people act on and within them, which in turn affects how well people can make use of democracy.

Sen has stressed the intrinsic and instrumental importance of democracy. He views democracy as absolutely essential for maintaining personal freedom. He has also stressed that political freedom is important once it has been achieved, since it contributes directly to freedom and indirectly to the achievement of other goals. The effective use of political freedom can vary. How does democracy actually work, and what is the role of the press and free expression in how democracy works? These concrete questions demand concrete answers. These answers will differ over time because societies change.

What are the issues that confront a democratic government? Start with the idea that democracy is the idea that the power of the government flows from the people. According to Steven J. Wayne, there are three criteria used to measure how well democracy works. First is the problem of how the government represents and responds to the public. Second is the problem of the rules of how the government operates and makes policy decisions. Third is the problem of actual policy and its impact on society (Wayne 2004, 3). A government is considered to be more effective if it is more representative of the population, and if social needs, public inputs, and policy responses mesh together well (Ibid.)

Wayne also points out that democratic governments exist to protect certain core, basic values. The first set of values is life, liberty, and self-fulfillment. The second core value is political equality. This includes equal treatment under the law and equal opportunity to express their view through words, actions and votes. Wayne recognizes a practical problem here, writing:

“Citizens with greater resources have a better chance of being heard and getting their way. The freedom to spend one's resources to influence who is elected to government and the policy decisions made by that government run counter to the principle that everyone should exercise equal influence because everyone is of equal worth” (Ibid., 4).



Thus tension exists between liberty and equality, and Wayne argues that it should be resolved in a way that benefits society as a whole. Wayne terms this the 'collective good' and for him it represents the third pillar of democratic government.

In light of these concerns, Sen discusses the role of the press and media in his 2009 work, *The Idea of Justice*. He candidly acknowledges that for democracy to work, a free and independent press is crucial for several different reasons. These are not necessarily unique to Sen, but they are important. Sen notes that free speech in general and a free press in particular directly improves the quality of life. Primarily this involves the exchange of information. Sen is concerned with government suppression of information here. He argues that diminished press and media freedom directly erodes the quality of life even if

“. . . the authoritarian country that imposes such suppression happens to be very rich in terms of gross national product” (Sen 2009, 336).

He further acknowledges the informational role played by the press through specialized reporting such as on cultural or business affairs. It is important because it keeps people informed about what is happening in their communities and around the world. He says:

“... investigative journalism can unearth information that would have otherwise gone unnoticed or even unknown” (Ibid.).

Sen also values the “protective function” of the press. He lists the ability to give voice to “the neglected and disadvantaged”. “The rulers of a country” he writes, “are often insulated, in their own lives from the misery of the common people. They can live through a national calamity, such as a famine or some other disaster, without sharing the fate of its victims” (Ibid.). Yet if they have to face public scrutiny through the combination of valid elections with a free and uncensored press, the rulers can be held accountable, or be forced to ‘pay a price too’ in Sen’s words. The idea is to subject the government to some kind of accountability to either prevent such things or to insure a more adequate response.

Sen’s discussion of the actions of Ian Stephens in October of 1943, editor of the then British owned *Statesman* of Calcutta is revealing here. It shows both the limits and the promise of a journalism structured in a particular way. According to Sen, during the famine of 1943:

“The Bengali Newspapers in Calcutta protested as loudly as government censorship permitted – it could not be very loud, allegedly, for reasons of the war and ‘fighting morale’. Certainly there was little echo of these native criticisms in London. Responsible public discussion on what to do began in the circles that mattered, in London, only in October 1943, after Ian Stephens, the courageous editor of the *Statesman* of Calcutta (then British owned) decided to break ranks by departing from the voluntary policy of ‘silence’ and publishing graphic accounts and stinging editorials on 14 and 16 October” (Sen 2009, 341).

Public relief began in Bengal in November of that same year and the famine officially ended in December, both because of a new crop and the relief that was now more widely available (Sen 2009, 341). The press is often not as free as we might like to think even if official government restraints do not exist. In this instance, Mr Stephens was under intense pressure not to publish. That pressure may have prevented Mr Stephens from acting before he actually

did. Had those pressures not existed, such as NOT being in the midst of WWII, Mr Stephens (and other journalists) would have been freer to publish those accounts sooner than they did, and saved more lives.

Fourth, open discussion leads to the formation, acceptance, and possible change of values. He writes:

“New standards and priorities (such as the norm of smaller families with less frequent child bearing, or greater recognition of the need for gender equity) emerge through public discourse and it is public discussion, again, that spreads new norms across different regions” (Sen 2009, 336).

The give and take between majority and minority rights in this context is correctly highlighted by Sen, reflecting the emergence of relatively tolerant values and practices (Sen 2009, 337). The formation and acceptance of values will depend crucially on the structure of the press and the media itself. This is tremendously important, and I will return to this idea below.

The fifth reason is the general idea that the press and media have an important role to play in facilitating public reasoning in general. Many scholars view the pursuit and assessment of justice as involving discussion among different people, with different interest and points of view. Though Sen views individual capabilities and functionings as the proper space for evaluation, Sen acknowledges the importance of institutions in a sense, writing:

“The many sided relevance of the media connection also brings out the way institutional modifications can change the practice of public reason. The immediacy and strength of public reasoning depends not only on historically inherited traditions and beliefs, but also on the opportunities for discussion and interaction that the institutions and public practice provide” (Sen 2009, 337).

Such traditions and beliefs are often invoked to explain the poor quality of public discussion and press freedom in some areas, but Sen argues that authoritarian censorship of the press, suppression of dissent, and banning and jailing opposition parties and candidates provides a better explanation (Sen 2009, 337). Not surprisingly, Sen thinks that removing these barriers is a crucial contribution of democracy to the attainment and assessment of justice.

The press and the media can fulfill its important role with respect to Wayne’s three aims and Sen’s five reasons supporting a free press to a greater or lesser extent. Consider the first, the way the government responds to and represents the public. Obviously the press plays a key role here. The press and the broader media are institutions that occupy a place between the people and the government. The government itself is obviously an institution. Hamilton writes:

“The social framework, within which economic activity takes place, shapes and molds economic activity. In other words, economic behavior is looked upon as institutionally conditioned behavior. But the most important common point of agreement of all these intuitionists is that institutions are modes of social organization. They represent a way of order. These models of organization are subject to change as man faces new problems and new needs” (Hamilton, 2004 [1970], 76).

What becomes obvious is that we now have a society in which people organize their affairs and develop institutions to help them. These institutions both shape what people think and how they act, and this in turn can lead people to make changes in these institutions. This of course depends on the values that a society and its people hold, and press and media discussions can shape and change those values.

#### **Section IV: Media ownership**

In the previous section, I have summarized the three basic core functions of government according to Wayne, and the five important reasons to support a free and independent press according to Sen. It is possible to categorize both as being in “the public interest” in some sense. However, the difficulty is that the press and the media in general can play a key role in actually defining “the public interest”. since this falls under the ability to formulate and advocate for the acceptance of values. The public interest is likely to be multidimensional. Lawyer and Economist Howard Shelanski divides the public interest into two possible aspects. The first is a so called “efficiency model”. Here the media is structured so that the media can better satisfy consumer (reader?) preferences. However, the ‘democracy model’ of the public interest implies that the media should be structured so as to allow the public access to diverse points of view and to allow informed discussion of public issues.

We already run into problems here. One, these goals are not always mutually compatible. Two, if the press and the media have a role in the formation of the preferences and the values of people and a society, then preferences and values can change so that efficiency in the “efficiency model” becomes a moving target. Three, the ownership structure of the media and the press becomes a vital public issue about which the public ought to be informed under the “protective function” and “open discussion” function. Robert McChesney writes that the ‘problem’ of the media is really two problems. One is the content of the media itself. The second is the policies, structures, subsidies, and regulations that are responsible for the nature of the media system as it exists today (McChesney 2004, p. 16). He points out that the media in the U.S. today is the result of an evolutionary process, which narrowly resulted in the media’s current commercial structure (McChesney 2004, Chapter 1).

The possible influence of the ownership structure at this point is best illustrated by example. Legal scholar Edwin Baker argues that the press clause of the Constitution is vital to maintaining democratic discourse in the U.S. He remarks that a theory of democracy will be needed, and that this will entail a corresponding structure for the media and the press, which has implications for the “freedom of the press”. If there are failures, are these caused by inadequate training of journalists and editors, or are there deeper structural problems that have to be addressed at a different level? Which means, according to Baker:

“These questions implicate central issues of First Amendment theory. Agreement on two abstractions—that democracy requires a free press and that the First Amendment protects a free press—is relatively easy. But what constitutes ‘freedom of the press’? That question cannot be answered without understanding the role or purpose of the constitutional guarantee” (Baker 1998, 318).

Baker goes on to outline four theories of democracy. These are elitist democracy, liberal pluralism or interest group democracy, republican democracy, and complex democracy. In the elitist model, government tackles complex problems that require expert guidance. Most

people have neither the time nor the talent to be involved in every aspect of governmental decision making, so electing representatives to do this for them seems to be a practical solution (Baker 1998, 320-322).

Baker views liberal pluralism or interest group democracy as one version of popular participation. Here, theorists view politics largely as conflict and partial resolution between different groups that have different interests. There needs to be a way for government to respond fairly to the different concerns of each group. Institutions should be designed to help create fair bargains or compromises between each group (Baker 1998, 323-331).

Republican ideas of democracy accept some of the premises and concepts of the liberal pluralist theorists, but differ in important respects. For one, where liberal pluralists seem to be arguing from the premise that interest groups cannot put aside their differences and act for the common good, republican theorists argue that they can. People and groups can have a conception of the common good and be concerned with the welfare of others. Second, group and individual interests emerge from their own efforts to formulate values and act on them. People and groups have to gather information to be able to do this, so that their political concerns and actions are or believed to be much more public spirited and community oriented than in the liberal pluralist view.

Baker's idea of "complex democracy" incorporates ideas from each of the other three theories. Baker agrees with the elitist tradition in that government often addresses very complex problems that require expert guidance to address properly. Problems and their potential solutions will be advocated by different groups, which will make bargaining and compromise necessary – a liberal pluralist idea. Each person and group gathers information and acts on the values they form and embrace, but they can set these aside in the public interest if this if they choose, which reflects the republican idea of a public realm that is used for the formulation and pursuit of the common good (Baker 1998, 325-339).

Clearly, the protective function of the press is key to all of these theories of democracy. Each one has particular implication for media regulation by the government. Note the feedback loop here. Government has some responsibility for media regulation, which can enhance or impair the flow of information which can enhance or impair the protective function of the press, which can enhance or impair the responsiveness of government to political pressure on issues like – wait for it - media reform. Adherents of complex democracy fear that the watchdog/protective function could be undermined by either government or private power. (For fears about government power, see Compaine 2002, and Djankov, McLeish, Nenova, and Schleifer 2003. For fears about private power, see McChesney 2004, Clark, Thrift, and Tickell 2004, and Miller 2002. For an article that incorporates both fears, see Motta, Polo, Rey, and Roller 1997). People fear that market segmentation or monopolization will undercut effective discussion. People also fear that a pluralist media will be strongly biased toward propaganda and mobilization, so much so that it will not add to the thoughtful discussion and informed debate about the issues.

All of this implies a particular structure for the media and the press. Policy in the media realm will have several functions for adherents of complex democracy. One, the strongest media order will not depend only on a single form of organization. Two, the media will perform different functions so it cannot possibly be organized in a uniform way. Think about the difference between the broadcast, cable news, and major daily newspapers on the one hand, and newsletters for particular groups like the National Rifle Association or the Union for

Radical Political Economists on the other. Three, government policy should seek to support other types of media organization that would operate alongside the private, market oriented sector. Four, the amount of government support, if any, should depend on how distorted or underdeveloped a particular sector is. Five, the nature of government support should depend on the function of the media type being subsidized. All of this with a view toward establishing a mixed media that is partially market driven, partially not, so that the media will be able to better perform the watchdog function better than a purely market oriented structure (Baker 1998, 386).

Baker's discussion of market failure through public externalities in the provision of information makes this kind of reform all the more important. It is a remedy to the under-provision of information that the media would provide in a purely private market setting. He cites the presence of advertising as a potential corruptor of public discourse. This is not a universally held belief, and Daniel Sutter 2002 provides a fairly well thought out contrasting view. Second, Baker argues that the public discourse or common discourse products will have a competitive advantage over smaller, pluralistic outlets mainly because of high initial costs of production, and relative ease of duplication. The implication is that:

“Both economic and democratic theory however, predict that pluralistic media, especially those designed for comparatively impoverished groups, are likely to be especially underdeveloped and ought to receive special public support. Still, as a practical matter, the key principle for complex democracy is to pursue an opportunity to further government support for new, non-commercial forms of media discourse. Secondly, it should support policies that reduce advertising's ‘corrupting’ effects” (Baker 1998, 387).

One need only note the tension between this view as described by Baker, Rawls' original position and Sen's identification of group bias in that context as detailed in a previous section.

Another illustrative example is provided by the American Journalism Review that highlights the possibility of “advertising's ‘corrupting’ effects.” Shepard 1994 details an instance of the influence of advertising on the news. According to Shepard, in May of 1993, the San Jose Mercury news printed a guide showing how to read an auto dealer's invoice and negotiation. Local car dealers were not happy and about 40 dealers pulled their display ads, costing the newspaper about \$1 million in revenue (Shepard 1994). The reporter, Mark Schwanhausser offered tips such as relying on the dealers invoice and not just what the salesperson said, and he quoted the author of a book on negotiating who “suggested that one reason God gave you feet was so you could use them to walk away from car salesmen” (Shepard 1994). The paper issued an apology, but the ad. boycott continued and did not end until the paper began running a full page house ad. that described “10 reasons why you should buy or lease your nest new car from a factory authorized dealer.” That soothed many, but a few did not return (Shepard 1994).

However, the problem may be deeper, and this points to the structural issues that Baker alludes to above. Shepard talked to Ronald Collins, a George Washington university professor of law who studied advertiser attempts to shape media coverage, who said he was surprised the story ran in the first place: “Usually, the editor will kill that kind of story or the reporter knows certain areas are no nos.” Schwanhausser highlights the same idea from the reporter's point of view, saying:

“The publisher has ideas about how he would have done the story differently, and I have ideas about how I would respond to this boycott differently. But the boycott isn’t really over my story. That’s tunnel vision. *Larger financial and journalistic issue are at the heart of this*” (Shepard, 1994, my italics).

Miller 2002 adds some additional insight. He notes that there will be ethical dilemmas in journalism as the media concentrates. Miller contends that ethics must be modeled and practiced by those at the top of media conglomerates. Miller acknowledges that the process of conglomeration can have either positive or negative impacts on the ethical practice of these new media giants and other corporations. As a result, practicing journalists increasingly find that they occupy the bottom rung of the corporate hierarchy, and increasingly have to balance the ethics of journalism with the pressures that arise when news organizations are part of a media or other conglomerate.

Benjamin Compaine 2002 makes some further points that need to be considered. One is that many current media critics and reformers are wedded to an ideal vision of the media and the press that never has existed and never will. With respect to the idea that corporate ownership is killing, or has killed, hard hitting journalism, Compaine writes:

“A bright red herring. When exactly was this golden age of hard-hitting journalism? One might call to mind brief periods: the muckrakers in the early 20th century or Watergate reporting in the 1970s. But across countries and centuries, journalism typically has not been ‘hard-hitting’” (Compaine 2002, 22).

Compaine further argues that ownership may not matter now the way it once did, such as in the case of William Randolph Hearst, William Loeb, and Robert McCormick, each of whom had political agendas that then permeated their papers (Compaine 2002, 22). Corporate ownership may have driven out family or personal partisanship in the U.S. a while ago, and Compaine claims that that shift is doing so now in Latin America, at least as of 2002. Again, Compaine:

“As Latin American media shift from family owned, partisan media to corporations, observes Latin America Media Scholar Silvio Waisbord, the media become less the ‘public avenues for the many ambitions of their owners,’ and their coverage of government corruption ‘is more likely to be informed by marketing calculations and the professional aspirations of reporters’. This trade-off may not be bad” (Compaine 2002, 22).

And it may not change anything. A shift from family ownership to corporate ownership would likely still largely reflect the concerns of the upper classes of that society. Think “marketing calculations” and “professional aspirations of reporters”. Since Compaine mentions Brazil, we could look at what Reporters Without Borders has to say about that country with respect to their index of press freedom. In 2002, Reporters Without Borders ranked Brazil at #54 out of 154 countries. It fell to 84<sup>th</sup> of 164 countries by 2007, but this was not a steady decline. Brazil jumped to 82<sup>nd</sup> of 168 countries in 2008, then climbed steadily to #58 of 173. There was a large fall to 108<sup>th</sup> of 178 countries by 2012, a fall to #111 of 180 countries by 2014, and a climb to 99<sup>th</sup> of 180 countries in 2015. But media ownership and legal protections of journalists continue to be a problem, despite the enactment of an “Internet Civil Framework Law”:

“The safety of journalists and the concentration of media ownership in few hands nonetheless continue to be major problems. Many acts of violence against journalists occurred during a wave of protests in Brazil. A human rights secretariat report in March 2014 on violence against journalists emphasized the involvement of local authorities and condemned the role of impunity in its constant recurrence” (Reporters Without Borders, <https://index.rsf.org/#!/index-details/BRA>).

Media ownership and structure is a vital concern for a free press and media. Reporters Without Borders is correct to be concerned with government ownership and interference with the press and the media overall, as are most scholars. Overt censorship becomes a paramount concern in these cases. However, the ownership structure matters for privately oriented and commercial media structures as well. If advertising continues to be a big source of revenue for press and media outlets, there will be continuing tensions like that faced by the *San Jose Mercury News* in the early 1990s. This tension is well captured by McChesney and Nichols, who write in the preface of *The Death and Life of American Journalism*:

“We demonstrate in this book that the entire press system of the United States was built on a foundation of massive federal postal and printing subsidies that were provided to newspapers during the many decades that forged the American experiment. The first generations of Americans understood that that it was entirely unrealistic to expect the profit-motive to provide for anywhere near the level of journalism necessary for an informed citizenry, and by extension self-government, to survive” (McChesney and Nichols 2010, xiii).

Media and press ownership matter. Private ownership and the organization of the press as a for-profit business will shape the news in an indirect manner, through ethics (as highlighted by Miller 2002), and framing.

## **Section V: Frames**

“Framing” is at best a difficult idea to pin down. Obviously that presents a problem if it is going to be used as an analytical category. That said, the use of the terms “frame” and framing have found wide use in the social sciences literature. Entman 1993 offers a very useful synthesis of the term. He starts with a basic definition:

“Whatever its specific use, the concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness” (Entman 1993, 51-2).

If it is not already apparent, people need to be aware that a frame in this sense can exist in the mind of the author of the text and can be reflected or captured in that text, and a frame will also exist in the mind of the receiver of the information. These do not necessarily have to be

consistent with one another. Entman identifies a fourth location for a frame – the culture, from which the communicator, the receiver and the text may draw. More specifically:

“Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality, and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation* for the item described” (Entman 1993, 52, emphasis in original).

Entman further notes that frames perform four functions. They define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. He uses the “Cold war” as an example of a frame used by the press in foreign policy reporting up until around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. For a “cold war” frame the press highlights certain events as problems, like civil wars, then identified the source as communist rebels. Further, the press made moral judgments – that rebels are “atheist aggressors” and a threat to the “American way of life,” for which the solution is American intervention in support of the other side (Entman 1993, 52).

Entman is using culture in a unique way. It is the stock of commonly invoked frames, which for him leads to the definition of culture as “the empirically demonstrable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping” (Entman 1993, 53). After having defined culture thusly, one can ask the obvious question about how those frames come to be, come to be shared, and how they come to be accepted. Communication conveys information, but usually the communicator and receiver have some form of common referent – starting with language. Since humans also have tendency to understand things through the use of narrative, people need to make choices about how to present the information they wish to convey. Less obvious are the choices they make when they receive information. The importance of the media and press grows once we recognize the ability of the press and media to both present information and select the frame in which it is conveyed to citizens, and the ability of citizens to interpret this information in light of their own frames.

“Frames” may operate on at least two different levels. One is captured by Entman. The other is captured by the idea that question wording changes survey responses. A recent work that examines the impact of money on politics by Martin Gilens reveals both. He makes two points with respect to surveys. First it is possible that different wordings do not really capture identical concepts, so that the people in the survey cannot be said to have changed their mind only based on the way the questions are phrased. Gilens points out that in numerous surveys of U.S. citizens the phrase “assistance to the poor” elicits responses much more sympathetic to the poor than does the phrase “welfare”. Gilens raises the idea that respondents typically understand “welfare” as cash assistance to the able bodied working adult. By contrast, “assistance to the poor” can include subsidized medical care, housing subsidies legal aid, job training and a number of other programs. If this is the case, the negative impact of “welfare” as opposed to “assistance to the poor” should be understood as:

“. . . not as a superficial response to an emotionally laden term, but as a sophisticated differentiation between kinds of government antipoverty programs” (Gilens 2012, 33).



Different wordings for a question at the specific level may reveal different understandings at the contextual or cultural level.

As Entman points out, “frames” affect the salience of information presented in any piece of communication. But:

“The word *salience* itself needs to be defined: It means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory” (Entman 1993, 53).

Since we are talking about interactions here, a choice to highlight certain information by repetition or placement may not make this information salient to the reader, if it seems to conflict with the reader’s own frame(s). Conversely, an idea that is buried in part of a text or other communication can be received as highly salient if it happens to be consistent with the frame(s) used by the audience.

There are very important implications for political reporting:

“Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions. Politicians seeking support are thus compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames” (Entman 1989, 55).

Entman describes four implications for both political reporting and wider communications issues. One is audience autonomy and dominant meaning. By ‘dominant meaning’ Entman means that it comprises the problem, the cause(s), the ethical judgment or evaluation, and solutions that are the most likely to be noticed and accepted by the most people. In other words, if a text or piece includes mutually reinforcing elements that suggest that a glass is half full, it is very unlikely that the audience will reframe the information to construct for themselves the message that the glass is half empty (Entman 1989, 56). Two, even though working journalists may follow the established rules to maintain objectivity, they may still convey a dominant framing of the news or information that prevents most of the audience from assessing a situation in a balanced way. Because reporters have no common knowledge of framing, they are susceptible to very skillful media manipulators who impose their dominant frames on the news (Entman 1989, 56-57). Reporters would need to be educated on the existence and effects of framing to enable them to report and construct news that makes two or more interpretations salient to the audience. This is much more than reporters are now called on to do, but according to Entman it would result in a far more balanced reporting than the current norm of “objectivity”. Three, content analysis would become focused on identifying frames, which would then avoid treating all positive or negative messages as equally important. Without framing, Entman reasons that analysts won’t pick up on the differences between the audience frames and the author’s. Four, political elites may control the framing of issues, in which case the ability to frame and have that frame accepted would become a central power in a democratic country. The implication is that if the frame can be manipulated, true public opinion could be impossible to find. At the very least, Entman contends that considering the idea of framing allows a critical examination of the frames used by politicians, audiences, and reporters. Thus, frames are an avenue by which the public can influence the government, BUT the government could also influence the public. It is this

symbiotic relationship between the media, the government, and the public that Sen does not consider as much as he should.

The link between ownership structure and framing now begins to emerge. A government owned or dominant media would frame issues differently from a private one. So much so that Djankov et. al (2003) argue that a purely government owned media will not frame issues so as to fulfill a “public choice” framework that cures market failure. Instead, they find that government ownership tends to undermine political and economic freedom. This suggests that the “frame” for government owned media might be “The government is good, and anything the opposition does to hinder the government is bad.” However, the San Jose Mercury News example discussed above suggests that there are market failures in the provision of information, which Djankov et.al. acknowledge, but which neither a government owned nor privately owned media might cure. The San Jose example is suggestive – both the newspaper and the dealerships were operating as businesses, and both accept the overall idea that business is a morally laudable institution. At the risk of reading too much into the example, the fact that the paper published a guide on negotiating with dealerships implies a judgment about both the audience and the dealerships. The dealers picked up on the idea that when the paper did this, it was implicitly endorsing the idea that car dealerships were untrustworthy (Shepard, 1994). It also implies that the paper made a judgment that its readers could benefit from the guide.

Murray Edelman, in pieces spaced roughly thirty years apart, suggests an idea that could be used to explain the pattern of information in both a private and government system. Edelman in his book *The Symbolic uses of Politics* (1964), explores the idea of politics as a symbol that confers intangible benefits to groups of people as opposed to a rational exercise of resource allocation and problem solving. It is clear that governments do engage in resource allocation and problem solving, so that Edelman is not saying that the symbolic and the resource allocation functions are mutually exclusive. For his idea to be coherent, these ideas have to coexist. An important theme in this work is that there is a disconnect between what governments are reported to do both legislatively and administratively in the press, and what governments are actually doing.

Edelman’s conception stands in direct contrast to the idea that the press and the media adequately fulfill the informative and protective functions necessary for a working democracy. In this, Edelman highlights the crucial aspect of the audience of the press and media, and thus why ownership forms become a central consideration. In most ideal models, the press supplies information to a public that will analyze those ideas and make considered political judgments about the best policy to address some problem. But, Edelman writes:

“The mass public does not study and analyze detailed data about secondary boycotts, provision for stock ownership and control in a proposed space communications corporation, or missile installations in Cuba. It ignores these things until political actions and speeches make them symbolically threatening or reassuring, and then it responds to the cues furnished by the actions and the speeches, not to direct knowledge of the facts” (Edelman 1964, 172).

He concludes that widely reported government actions can often serve as a symbol that quiets a perceived threat, so that the public becomes quiescent even if the problem has not been addressed. The symbolic role of government action is to provide reassurance. This

occurs through several avenues. Edelman points out that what people actually get from the government is what administrators and legislators do, rather than the promises of the law, oratory, or constitutions. Further, people assume or believe that what administrators do is actually specified by laws reflecting “the public will” so that these actions are acceptable to the public. In addition, since people can’t really know what effect a law or policy will have in the future, they will substitute personal meaning for impersonal, or intersubjective, or objective meaning. They believe that officials have wider leeway to deal with problems than they actually have. People will ally themselves with those who symbolically show that they can deal with the problems, even apart from the actual result. Fourth, the achievement of a political goal by some group leads to demands for more of the same kinds of benefits, rather than contentment. Fifth, speeches gestures, and settings serve to limit people’s political claims and maintain public order (Edelman 1964, 193-194).

In 1993, Edelman follows up with his article “Contestable Categories and Public Opinion” which appeared in the journal *Political Communication*. Here he points out that the choice of analytical category by a news organization has far reaching consequences that are not often analyzed. Those categories become broad frames which highlight some information and exclude other information. Edelman analyzes several of these ‘contestable categories’ such as crime. He claims that most crime reporting is based on the prior belief or frame that crime is driven by evil people who thrive on murder, mugging, and robbery. Thus, widespread public support for tough ‘crime control’ measures is widely reported and helps candidates who are perceived to be ‘tough on crime’ win public office to enact these measures. But Edelman points out some problems with this. First:

“At the same time it helps office holders win reelection and helps conservatives defeat social programs. The facile evocation of inherently criminal types conceals the link between an economic and social system that denies large numbers of people the means to support themselves and their families and their resort to illegal action. To break the law is in part a way of surviving and in part a form of social protest, usually the only effective way for people who lack money and status to express their anger at a social and political system that keeps them poor and dependent” (Edelman 1993, 234).

Edelman then shows how this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Labeling large numbers of people as innate criminals ensures that breaking the law will remain almost the only viable option for survival. Further, this will remain the only avenue for political expression, “. . . reinforcing the controversial categorization and constructing an ever more vicious cycle of cause and effect” (Edelman 1993, 235). If reports of crime appeal to the audience and increase circulation, subscriptions or viewership, the media outlet becomes a more attractive place for advertising, based on the characteristics of the readers or viewers. Note also that the ‘innate criminal’ frame likely appeals to businesspeople who control advertising budgets. The existence of crime as the product of innately criminal people is very simple to understand and easy to use. It fits in one sentence that has direct emotional appeal to both audience and potential advertisers. The idea of crime arising from social, political and economic conditions is harder to convey and understand, especially if a sizable portion of the public think it excludes the possibility of the innately criminal or “evil”. Again, audience considerations play a role in “framing” considerations.

Finally, Edelman points out that the framing for a “contestable category” often serves to benefit the top layers of society at the expense of the bottom. If the press and media and the

advertisers are both classified as businesses, they will share a common outlook on a number of issues, though not all. I cannot summarize it any better than Edelman:

“Each such label highlights some immediate, surface aspect of a governmental policy while obscuring the close links among related policies and related categories. The classification therefore misleads opinion about the origins of problems, their effects, their scope, and effective remedies. At the same time the conventional categories are effective in winning and maintaining public support for established hierarchies and inequalities, as discussed below” (Edelman 1964, 233).

Gilens (1996) asks why the face of poverty in the U.S. is usually that of African Americans in urban areas. According to Gilens surveys show that that the American public largely overestimates the proportion African-Americans among the poor, and that these perceptions result in greater opposition to welfare programs among the general public (Gilens 1996, 537). The media routinely underrepresent segments of the poor, such as children and the elderly, that might engender more sympathy from the general public, whereas working age adults that happen to be unemployed are overrepresented. Gilens concludes:

“But current misunderstandings may pose a greater danger: that whites will continue to harbor negative stereotypes of blacks as mired in poverty and unwilling to make the effort needed to work their way out. By implicitly identifying poverty with race, the news media perpetuate stereotypes that work against the interests of both poor people and African Americans” (Gilens 1996, 538).

In another case, Ervand Abrahamian in 2003 sought to examine the way the U.S. news media reported on the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. His basic claim is that the media by and large accepted the framing put forth by Samuel Huntington in his book *Clash of Civilizations*. The result was that the media failed to discuss the political issues of Palestine and general Arab Nationalism. Huntington has been criticized for his idea of culture as a fixed rather than fluid concept by anthropologists and social historians, but this did not prevent the mainstream U.S. media from adopting a ‘clash of civilizations’ framing of the issues surrounding the September 11 attacks. Abrahamian writes that a cursory glance at the US media after September 11 leaves no doubt as to:

“Huntington's triumph. The media framed the whole crisis within the context of Islam, of cultural conflicts, and of Western civilisation threatened by the Other. Even the liberal New York Times adopted this framework, and then tried every so often to distinguish between good and bad Muslims, between the correct and incorrect interpretations of Islam, and between peaceful and violent understandings of the Koran. No doubt its editors would reassure us that some of their friends-nay, even some of their op-ed writers-are Muslim. Such nuances, however, are lost within the larger picture portraying the main threat as coming from the Muslim world” (Abrahamian 2003, 531).

In a later paragraph, Abrahamian details the fact that the political demands of Muhammad Atta and the other hijackers were not released by the FBI nor discussed in mainstream media outlets. This is important because, as Abrahamian explains, “...Al-Qaida had been incorporating into its recruitment tapes highly charged scenes from Palestine” (Abrahamian

2003, 536). Scholars and commentators who raised the issue of Palestine, as opposed to the Huntington frame, found that they were ridiculed and punished for raising the issue of Palestine. Abrahamian gives three examples – an unnamed Georgia congresswoman, an unnamed Saudi prince, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. By contrast, a number of British and European outlets made explicit reference to the Palestinian problem in their reporting regarding September 11 and its aftermath. Abrahamian quotes a few examples; here is a sample:

“David Hirst of the *Guardian* reported that Palestine was ‘central to the crisis’. He added that, by citing Palestine, bin Laden had struck a resonating chord with much of Arab opinion; and that even ‘the resolutely pro-American King Abdullah of Jordan had told the US he doubted New York would ever have happened had it addressed the Arab-Israel conflict in a more serious, less partisan, way’” (Abrahamian 2003, 537).

“Eric Rouleau, travelling through the Gulf, reported for *Le Monde* that the ‘consensus in the region was remarkable’, and that all, from head of state to the man in the street, insisted the issue of terrorism could not be addressed without first dealing with the ‘Palestinian-Israeli conflict’” (Abrahamian 2003, 537).

“Fred Halliday argued in the *Guardian* that the crisis could be explained by political tensions, especially over Palestine, rather than by ‘nonsense talk of clash of civilisations’” (Ibid., 538).

Abrahamian also raises the issue of conformity/acceptance of the views of the government. He points out that where the U.S. media diverged from the European, it conformed to the views of the U.S. administration. A number of scholars have decried the press’ reliance on “official sources” for news reporting. Among the most prominent have been Robert McChesney and Robert M. Entman (Entman 1989, McChesney 2004). The reliance on official sources can potentially undermine the protective function of the press and the media which almost everyone agrees is tremendously important.

Along these same lines, Herring and Robinson (2003) use Noam Chomsky as an example of a scholar whose work is routinely ignored by mainstream media outlets. Chomsky has argued that institutional filters exist both in the press and in academia to filter out ‘non-elite’ perspectives. Herring and Robinson conclude that Chomsky is largely ignored because the institutional filters screen out people who focus on corporate power, who have a principled opposition to U.S. foreign policy and the role of the academy in supporting corporate power (Herring and Robinson 2003 553, 568).

Stories and events that challenge the accepted classifications and narratives will receive little play in the mainstream press and media. They will instead be marginalized to ‘fringe’ outlets. Often, if these stories and issues and their authors do appear in mainstream outlets, it could be to give the appearance of balance, or to expose dissenting viewpoints to ridicule couched as “serious discussion of the issues”. If one accepts the idea made popular in the 1980s and continuing today by Reagan and Thatcher (among others) that “government is the problem” you now have a frame, or a prior belief, that since “too much government regulation hinders the operations of business and hinders economic growth” you then have a justification for deregulation in all policy areas. Proposals for government regulation in many areas will be

dismissed out of hand because of the presumed efficiency of business and ineptitude of government. Or because government is presumed to be inept, proposals to privatize many public services will get wider play.

## **Section VI: Conclusion**

For a functioning democracy people need transparent discussion of policies that affect them, such as labor and capital market policy and media regulation. This is what the press and the media is supposed to provide. But if the media is structured in such a way that certain discussions are “off-limits”, people can’t make informed judgments about the workings of the labor market, the capital market, or the structure of the media and the press. If such limits exist, then this conflicts with the ideal of democracy.

Policies that affect the labor and capital markets are critically important because these markets determine the distribution of income. Thus, they heavily influence the kinds of freedoms that people enjoy. Sen’s main focus has been on capabilities and functionings as a space for the evaluation of well-being. Sen admits that caste and class can influence a person’s capabilities and functionings, thus their well-being. Martins (2006) characterizes much of what Sen has done as a “philosophical under laboring exercise,” an ontological clearing of the decks, trying to find out what exists, what is important and why. Sen selects capabilities and functionings as the primary units of analysis. But the focus on capabilities and functionings as situated within the individual has diverted attention away from some of the “social” and irreducible, less individualistic, yet important aspects such as structure, process, interconnectedness, and diversity. All of these social aspects are important to Sen, but his discussion makes it easy to miss. They seem secondary to capabilities and functionings. Sen’s ontological structure may be insufficiently developed in this regard. It also means that Sen and many of his readers (including me) have failed to distinguish the evaluative space that Sen uses, individual capabilities and functionings, from a more methodological concern about the basis for investigating society and economics, which is where questions about methodological individualism reside. If Sen is a methodological individualist, writers will have to carefully distinguish the evaluative space from the methodological concerns. Sen argues that freedom is tremendously important, and that freedom should be measured in the space of capabilities and functionings. Process, diversity, structure, and interconnectedness emerge as secondary elements of analysis. Sen discusses them because they have important effects on the capabilities and functionings of individual people. This reflects a problem, in that while Sen can be seen in some ways as a methodological individualist given his focus on capabilities and functionings as part of a single person, Hodgson (2007) has pointed out that the definition of methodological individualism is not at all clear. Some writers have taken methodological individualism to mean that the proper focus of study is individuals and the relations among them. For Sen, the choice to focus on capabilities and functionings which enable individual people to live the lives they value, would seem to place Sen in the camp of methodological individualism. But there is a difference – methodological individualism is typically regarded by its defenders as a *scientific* method by which the phenomena of a society are explained in terms of the laws that govern the nature of an individual human being. There is a difference between taking people as a focus of study with respect to ethics and justice as Sen does, and taking them as the proper focus of study for a scientific inquiry regarding the laws that govern both individual behavior and outcomes, and social behavior and outcomes. At the very least, this ambiguity plays out in Sen since the ideas of process,

structure, interconnectedness, and diversity might fall under the idea of the relations among individuals.

A broader construction would allow capabilities and functionings to influence process, diversity, interconnectedness and structure, and vice versa. Sen seems to be trying to improve neoclassical analysis from within the tradition, since he still uses many of the same tools such as constrained optimization, an individualist orientation, and the use of a welfare framework that is largely inspired by classical and neoclassical economic doctrine. The tension between the individualism of neoclassical economics and the framework of process, diversity, interconnectedness, and structure still remains.

The *process* of the development of the media and the press in the United States reveals the *interconnectedness* between the audience and the media. Depending on the perceived success of the press and media in conveying the information necessary for citizens to have a functioning democracy or for the press and media to make a profit leads to attempts to change the *structure* of the media and the press. Often this involves government action, revealing yet another connection between the audience, the press and the media, and the government. Now the press and media convey ideas that affect the debate over the *structure* of the press and media, and other institutions, like banks and the financial industry. The idea of the *structure* of the media and the press has very important implications for *diversity* of points of view. Almost everyone rightly acknowledges the danger of a purely government owned press, but this is a tacit admission of the idea that the structure of the press and media influence the flow of information which can either enhance or subvert democratic governance.

In practice this means that having a media structured as a private business which can be very large presents its own dangers. For example, Robert McChesney writes:

“Most dominant media firms exist because of government granted and government enforced monopoly broadcasting licenses, telecommunications franchises, and rights to content (a.k.a. copyright). Competitive markets in the classic sense are rare; they were established or strongly shaped by the government. So the real struggle is over whose interests the regulation will represent” (McChesney 2004, p. 19).

Deregulation in this context will mean government regulation that often enhances the interests of dominant corporate players (McChesney 2004, 20). McChesney and other writers such as Isaacs (1986) detail the historical emergence of a professional journalism and the constant barrage of criticism that followed. The press and the media in the U.S. emerged through a process of historical struggle, the outcome of which was not certain at the time. However, McChesney notes that there are three planks that inform media debate to this day that emerged early on in this struggle in the United States. First, the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) took steps to ensure that coverage of the debates between the press and its often socialist and union based critics in the 1920s were either not reported, or slanted in such a way that it favorably portrayed the interests of the owners. Second, the owners used the First Amendment “freedom of speech” clause to blunt regulatory proposals that might interfere with commercial interests. Third, the ANPA called for self-regulation as the appropriate response to big, concentrated private control of communication (McChesney 2004, p. 63). The ultimate result of the struggle is ably summarized by Entman (1989) in the introduction to his book *Democracy without Citizens*:

"In essence, the dilemma is this. To become sophisticated citizens, Americans would need high quality, independent journalism; but news organizations, to stay in business while producing such journalism, would need an audience of sophisticated citizens. Understanding this vicious circle of interdependence reveals that the inadequacies of journalism and democracy are the 'fault' of neither the media nor of the public. Rather, they are the product of a process, of a close and indissoluble interrelationship among the media, their messages, their elite news sources, and the mass audience" (Entman 1989, p. 10).

We are confronted with a world that is in many ways open and complex. We build theories to describe and explain what we observe in that world that are closed, since our minds are finite, and we limit our theories and models to include only what we judge to be relevant information. I am not sure that questions of "open systems" have implications for ideas of justice, but it seems Sen may be sending out feelers in this direction. It is possible that ideas of justice have evolved as societies have evolved, while we typically think of justice as a fixed ideal.

Although Sen explicitly discusses democracy, he neglects process, structure, diversity, and interconnectedness when it comes to the media and the press. That means that there is also an ontological shortcoming in Sen. Sen does discuss interconnectedness, diversity, individuals, and process in some places, but do we have social class and institutions explicitly considered? Or time? These are important questions since social class and institutions both reflect and influence the ongoing interplay of people and their surroundings. It seems that Sen is trying to reconcile an equilibrium framework with an evolutionary process, and I do not think that this is possible. If complex systems have properties that can't be reduced to individual components, then Sen could further modify his own framework to engage in substantive theorizing along these lines.

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