

"Media, Politics, and Public Perception: Theoretical Insights into the Fourth Estate, Public Sphere, and Agenda-Setting"

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Abstract

The media plays a vital role in democracy, shaping public discourse, influencing policy, and ensuring accountability. This paper examines three key theories—the Fourth Estate, the Public Sphere, and Agenda-Setting Theory—to analyze media's impact on Indian democracy. The Fourth Estate functions as a watchdog, ensuring transparency, while the Public Sphere facilitates public deliberation and rational debate. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how media prioritizes and frames issues, shaping public perception.

Through case studies including the Bofors scandal, Nirbhaya case, Anna Hazare movement, Farmers' Protest, Kathua rape case, and Rafale deal controversy, this research illustrates media's influence on legal reforms, policy decisions, and electoral outcomes. However, challenges such as media polarization, misinformation, and corporate influence threaten its democratic role. The rise of social media has enhanced public engagement but also deepened ideological divides.

This study highlights the need for independent journalism, media literacy, and regulatory safeguards to uphold media's democratic function and prevent manipulation by political or corporate interests.

KEYWORDS: 1. Media and Democracy, 2. Fourth Estate Theory, 3. Public Sphere and Deliberation, 4. Agenda-Setting Theory, 5. Indian Case Studies on Media Influence

Introduction: The media serves as a cornerstone of democracy, providing citizens with information, fostering public debate, and ensuring accountability. The relationship between media and democracy has been widely theorized, with scholars exploring its role in governance, political communication, and public engagement. This paper draws on three major theoretical frameworks—the Fourth Estate, the Public Sphere, and Agenda-Setting Theory—to analyze how media influences democratic processes in India.

The **Fourth Estate** theory conceptualizes the media as an informal check on government power, ensuring transparency and public accountability. Originating from Edmund Burke and later expanded by Thomas Carlyle, this theory asserts that media functions as an

independent institution, distinct from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, yet powerful in shaping governance. However, in contemporary democracies, corporate media ownership, political biases, and censorship challenges threaten the media's ability to serve as an unbiased watchdog.

Jürgen **Habermas's Public Sphere Theory** further explains how media facilitates rational discourse and deliberative democracy. Historically, coffeehouses and print journalism provided spaces for public discussion and debate, allowing citizens to engage in collective decision-making. However, modern digital platforms and social media have disrupted the traditional public sphere, leading to both greater access to political engagement and increased risks of misinformation, polarization, and ideological echo chambers.

Building on these perspectives, **Agenda-Setting Theory** by **McCombs and Shaw** demonstrates how media influences public perception by determining which issues gain prominence. The media does not tell people what to think but what to think about, shaping the national conversation through issue prioritization and narrative framing. In India, media-driven discourse has influenced policy debates, election outcomes, and legal interventions, underscoring its agenda-setting power.

This research integrates theoretical insights with real-world **case studies from India**, including:

- **The Bofors scandal (1980s)** – Investigative journalism's role in exposing corruption and influencing elections.
- **The Nirbhaya case (2012)** – Media-driven activism in shaping legal reforms and gender justice policies.
- **The Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement (2011)** – Media's role in mobilizing public support for policy change.
- **The Farmers' Protest (2020-2021)** – How digital and independent media countered mainstream media narratives.
- **The Kathua rape case (2018)** – Media's role in shaping public outrage and judicial accountability.
- **The Rafale deal controversy (2016-2019)** – Investigative journalism and its impact on electoral politics.

By analyzing these cases through the lens of **the Fourth Estate, the Public Sphere, and Agenda-Setting Theory**, this paper explores the **dual nature of media**—as a tool for **democratic empowerment** and as a **potential instrument for ideological manipulation**. The findings highlight **pressing concerns about media ethics, misinformation, and corporate-political influence**, emphasizing the **need for independent journalism and policy interventions to safeguard democratic integrity**.

There are several renowned theories that explore the relationship between media and democracy, each offering different perspectives on how media influences democratic processes. Below are some of the most influential theories:

Media as the Fourth Estate: The Role of Media and Democracy

The concept of media as the "Fourth Estate" has its roots in the work of Edmund Burke, a British political philosopher and statesman, who first coined the term in the 18th century.

The European idea of the three estates of the realm—the clergy, the nobles, and the commoners—is where it all began. The phrase has evolved to represent the press or media as a sector of society that has a significant but indirect role in shaping the political system.

The *Fourth Estate* theory views the media as a crucial institution that provides checks and balances on government power. It refers to the media's role in monitoring the government, holding it accountable, and ensuring transparency.

In 1841, Thomas Carlyle wrote, “Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all” (On Heroes, Hero- Worship, and the Heroic in history).^{*} Four years earlier, Carlyle had used the phrase in his French Revolution: “A Fourth Estate, of Able Editors, springs up, increases and multiplies; irrepressible, incalculable.” Carlyle saw the press as instrumental to the birth and growth of democracy, spreading facts and opinions and sparking revolution against tyranny.[†]

According to Carlyle, the term "Fourth Estate" is not just a metaphor or a simple fact. In medieval times, the Fourth Estate referred to the press, as it was the main source of information before the invention of television and radio. Carlyle believed that printing was

^{*} Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, University of California Press eBooks, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520911536>.

[†] “Introduction | Journalism in the Digital Age,” n.d., https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/Journalism/index7f0d.html?page_id=16.

the essence of democracy—it played a vital role in shaping people's ability to choose their leaders. The news and opinions shared in newspapers had a significant impact on public decision-making. Carlyle's perspective still holds true today, as media continues to influence democratic processes and public opinion.[‡]

The concept of the "Fourth Estate," popularized by Edmund Burke and later expanded by Thomas Carlyle, underscores the media's integral role in democratic governance as a powerful yet unofficial branch of accountability. Acting as a watchdog, the media bridges the gap between the state and the public by informing, critiquing, and fostering debate on matters of public interest. Its ability to shape public opinion and influence political discourse underscores its democratic significance, ensuring transparency and holding power to account. As Sir Gerard Brennan highlights, the media's role extends beyond mere reporting to critically analysing governmental and judicial actions, promoting an informed citizenry essential for the rule of law. However, this influence demands a commitment to objectivity and independence, as an unchecked media can sway public perception and potentially jeopardize impartiality. Thus, the media's function as the Fourth Estate lies at the heart of a thriving democracy, ensuring that power remains a tool for public service rather than personal gain.[§]

The media, often called the "Fourth Estate," plays a powerful role in shaping society. It informs and entertains, influences trends, and shapes attitudes and values. The media acts as a bridge, presenting the actions of the government's three branches—executive, legislative, and judiciary—to the public. While it is not an official part of the government, its impact on a free and democratic society is immense. With advancements in technology, the media's influence is only growing stronger.

The truth is that democracy depends on citizens being well-informed. Burke's insight highlighted the crucial role that the media plays in shaping public opinion and holding governmental powers accountable. Over time, the Fourth Estate theory has evolved into a critical pillar of democratic societies, asserting the media's responsibility to act as a counterbalance to the three traditional branches of government: the executive, legislature, and judiciary. These branches are all part of the government, so there needs to be an independent, external body to keep them in check. The media acts as this fourth arm of

[‡] Amodu, Lanre & Usaini, Suleimanu & Ige, Oyinkansola. (2014). The Media as Fourth Estate of the Realm. 10.13140/RG.2.2.19311.02720.

[§] BRENNAN, GERARD. "THE THIRD BRANCH AND THE FOURTH ESTATE." *Irish Jurist* (1966-) 32 (1997): 62–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44026430>.

government, serving as a watchdog for society and making sure the government remains accountable to the people. At the same time, it ensures that citizens can participate in the governance process. This section explores the significance of media as the Fourth Estate, critically examining its role in fostering democratic principles, its functions within the public sphere, and the challenges it faces in contemporary political landscapes.

The Role of Media in Democracy: At the core of its function within a democratic society, media serves several essential roles: information dissemination, political engagement, and accountability. Firstly, the media provides the public with information about political events, government policies, and social issues. This informational role enables citizens to make informed decisions, which is crucial for the exercise of democratic rights such as voting.

In addition to informing the public, the media also fosters political engagement by providing a platform for debate and discussion. Public dialogue, mediated through newspapers, television, radio, and online platforms, allows citizens to engage with political issues, shaping opinions and influencing policy agendas. Through its coverage of elections, legislative activities, and social movements, the media offers citizens a mechanism to express their views, mobilize support, and advocate for change.

Finally, the media's role in holding government accountable remains one of its most vital functions. Journalists and investigative reporters serve as watchdogs, scrutinizing the actions of public officials and exposing corruption, abuse of power, and violations of democratic norms. The media's ability to uncover hidden truths is essential for maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions and ensuring that those in power remain answerable to the public.

Media as a Counterbalance to Power: The idea of the media as a counterbalance to power draws heavily from Burke's vision of the Fourth Estate. The media's ability to scrutinize the actions of government actors and expose wrongdoing is central to its role as a democratic institution.

Challenges to the Fourth Estate in the Contemporary Political Landscape: Despite its central role in democratic societies, the media faces significant challenges in the modern era. The rise of digital platforms, the concentration of media ownership, and the prevalence of misinformation have all posed threats to the media's ability to function as an effective Fourth Estate.

The digitalization of news dissemination has fundamentally altered the media landscape. While the internet and social media platforms have democratized access to information, they have also introduced new complexities. The spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and politically biased content has raised concerns about the quality and accuracy of information

available to the public. This proliferation of misinformation undermines the media's role in fostering informed political engagement and accountability.

Moreover, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few corporations poses a significant threat to the diversity of perspectives in the public sphere. Large media conglomerates often have significant influence over the narratives that are presented to the public, which can result in biased or skewed coverage of political events. The commercialization of news media, driven by profit motives, has also led to sensationalism and a focus on entertainment over substantive political reporting, further eroding the media's role as a neutral and reliable source of information.

Finally, government control and censorship of the media present an ongoing challenge to its ability to function freely and independently. In authoritarian regimes, media outlets are often subject to heavy surveillance, restrictions, and suppression, undermining their capacity to act as an effective check on power. Even in democracies, the media can face pressure from political elites and business interests, which can influence editorial decisions and limit critical coverage of certain issues.

Therefore, the media, as the Fourth Estate, plays a crucial role in supporting democratic governance. It provides essential information, facilitates political participation, and holds government power accountable. However, the media's ability to fulfill these roles is increasingly challenged by digital transformation, concentrated ownership, and the spread of misinformation. As democracy continues to evolve, it is imperative to critically assess the media's changing role and ensure that it remains a vibrant and independent institution capable of fulfilling its foundational duties in the democratic process. The Fourth Estate theory, as articulated by Burke and subsequent theorists, remains a key framework for understanding the media's essential function in modern democracies.

"Media as the Fourth Estate in India: Case Studies of Democratic Accountability and Influence"

The Bofors Scandal (1980s)

The Bofors scandal, a major political and defence corruption case in the 1980s and 1990s, exposed allegations that Indian politicians, including Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and key officials received kickbacks from the Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors AB to secure a \$1.4 billion deal for 410 155 mm howitzers.** The scandal, initiated by a whistleblower's

** Indo-Asian News Service, "Timeline of Bofors Scandal," www.ndtv.com, March 4, 2011, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/timeline-of-bofors-scandal-443872>.

revelation on Swedish radio in 1987, gained traction through investigative journalism led by Chitra Subramaniam of *The Hindu*. She unearthed over 350 documents detailing payoffs amounting to ₹640 million (equivalent to \$96 million in 2023) to Indian politicians and defence officials. These revelations exposed flaws in the procurement process and raised questions about political accountability during the tenure of then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

The scandal dominated headlines and public discourse, leading to massive public outrage and contributing to the Congress Party's electoral defeat in 1989. The media's relentless pursuit of the truth forced authorities to launch investigations and prosecute individuals involved, though the case lingered in the courts for decades. The Bofors scandal exemplifies the media's role as the Fourth Estate in holding those in power accountable and reinforcing transparency in democratic processes.

The Nirbhaya Case (2012)

The 2012 Nirbhaya case, involving the brutal gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi on 21st December, became a defining moment in India's fight against gender-based violence. The incident not only shocked the nation but also triggered unprecedented public protests and legal reforms. The media, as the Fourth Estate, played a pivotal role in this transformation, acting as a catalyst for change by informing, mobilizing, and amplifying public outrage.^{††}

From traditional outlets like television and newspapers to new media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the coverage of the Nirbhaya case was relentless and far-reaching. The press provided detailed accounts of the crime, the victim's medical condition, and the protests, ensuring the story remained at the forefront of public discourse. Social media platforms further magnified the impact by enabling citizens, particularly youth, to organize protests and express their anger. For example, groups such as "Delhi for Women's Safety" and hashtags like #NirbhayaJustice trended widely, creating a digital platform for collective activism.

The media's coverage not only spotlighted the systemic failures in women's safety but also pressured the government to act decisively. The resulting public outcry led to the formation of the Justice Verma Committee, which reviewed laws on sexual violence and recommended significant legal reforms. This eventually culminated in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act,

^{††} Kumar, Amit. (2014). Role of Social Media in Mass-Movement: A Case Study of Delhi Gang-Rape.

2013, which introduced stricter punishments for sexual offenses. The media's persistent reporting also held law enforcement and the judiciary accountable, ensuring timely prosecution and sentencing of the perpetrators.^{‡‡}

Despite its positive role, the media faced criticism for sensationalizing the case and focusing disproportionately on urban issues while neglecting similar crimes in rural areas. Nevertheless, the Nirbhaya case underscores the power of the media as the Fourth Estate to influence public policy, drive societal change, and uphold democratic accountability. It highlights the indispensable role of both traditional and new media in shaping collective action and fostering systemic reforms in response to public demands.

Both the Bofors scandal and the Nirbhaya case illustrate the critical role of media in functioning as the Fourth Estate within India's democracy. By exposing corruption and advocating for justice, the media serves as a watchdog, holding power to account and driving societal change. These case studies underscore the media's ability to mobilize public opinion, challenge authority, and shape the political and social landscape, reaffirming its indispensable role in ensuring transparency and accountability in governance.

The Role of Media and Democracy in Habermas's Public Sphere Theory

Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere, first articulated in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), remains one of the most significant contributions to democratic theory and media studies. Central to Habermas's concept is the idea of a "public sphere" as an arena in which citizens, through communication and rational debate, engage in discourse concerning public affairs.^{§§}

The concept of the public sphere, as elaborated by Jurgen Habermas, is characterized by a complex interplay between the private and public realms of social life. It underscores the idea that the public and the private are mutually inclusive, not mutually exclusive, realms of social life. From this perspective, the public sphere is not merely a space for the exchange of ideas, but also a realm in which individuals assert their autonomy through participation in collective discourse. Habermas's view implies that autonomy is not an isolated condition but is reciprocally constituted in relation to others. The notion of autonomy in this context suggests that individual freedom and social life are not separate; rather, they are inherently

^{‡‡} Vijay Yadav and C.V. Raman, "IMPACT OF NIRBHAYA CASE ON INDIA," *Pramana Research Journal* 8, no. 4 (2018), https://www.pramanaresearch.org/gallery/prj_r_a_14.pdf.

^{§§} European University of Tirana, "City Research Online - Critical Notes on Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere."

connected through the public sphere. As Habermas notes, the public sphere allows for the expression of individuals' autonomy in relation to others, establishing a foundation for democratic interaction and societal integration. It is within the public sphere that individuals come together to deliberate on matters of shared concern, making it a cornerstone of democratic life.^{***}

In his later works, particularly *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas reformulated his concept of the public sphere by integrating it more explicitly with his broader theory of communicative action. He argued that communication should not only be about the exchange of information but also about the construction of mutual understanding among individuals based on validity claims—claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness. This shift emphasized the importance of communicative rationality in the public sphere: the idea that citizens, through dialogical engagement, should arrive at a consensus that is not coerced but is rather the result of a process of reasoned argumentation (Habermas 1981). To understand the public sphere today, it's essential to examine its historical development, shaped by social, political, and technological changes. The evolution of the public sphere has been crucial for promoting democracy and political accountability.^{†††}

- **Ancient Greece:** The public sphere was a specific space, the *agora*, where citizens directly participated in political life and debates.
- **European Monarchies:** In non-democratic monarchies, the royal court was the public sphere, with the king controlling what was considered public.
- **Salons and Coffeehouses:** In the late 17th and 18th centuries, coffeehouses and salons became spaces where aristocrats and the middle class discussed politics and art, moving from private gatherings to a truly public discourse with the advent of newspapers.
- **Tribal Gatherings:** In stateless or tribal communities, gatherings functioned similarly to Western citizen assemblies, representing the public life of the tribe.
- **Church Congregations:** During times of political struggle, the Church provided spaces for marginalized groups to voice their concerns and organize.

^{***} European University of Tirana, "City Research Online - Critical Notes on Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere," n.d., <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/1101/>.

^{†††} CommGAP, "The Public Sphere," *CommGAP*, n.d., <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b45e5274a27b2000a69/PubSphereweb.pdf>.

- **Presently:** The public sphere today is largely defined by mass media, particularly the internet, offering unparalleled opportunities for information exchange, public deliberation, and including diverse voices in the democratic conversation.

The evolution from physical spaces to communication networks underscores the critical role of media in shaping the modern public sphere.

Media's role in the public sphere, according to Habermas, is both enabling and constraining. In its early form, media served as a platform for facilitating the exchange of ideas among the bourgeoisie, exemplified by salons, coffee houses, and printed publications (Singh, 2012, 637). These institutions were instrumental in creating a space for critical engagement on societal issues, enabling citizens to influence political decision-making through public opinion. However, Habermas later critiqued the degeneration of the public sphere in late capitalist societies, highlighting the role of media in this transformation. He observed that the press, initially a cornerstone of the public sphere, had become increasingly commercialized and co-opted by political and economic elites. This commercialization shifted media's focus from fostering critical public debate to generating profit, leading to the manipulation of public opinion (Singh, 2012, 638). Habermas referred to this phenomenon as the "manipulative public opinion," which contrasted sharply with the authentic, critical publicity of the early public sphere.^{†††}

The role of media in this framework becomes even more pronounced as the technology for communication advanced. The advent of the internet and social media platforms has transformed the public sphere, enabling greater participation and broader dissemination of information. Yet, this transformation also presents new challenges. While social media has democratized access to public discourse, it has also introduced new forms of manipulation and disinformation. The vast, decentralized nature of online platforms makes it difficult to maintain the quality of deliberation that Habermas envisioned. In this context, the public sphere faces tensions between the ideal of inclusive, rational debate and the realities of media manipulation and political polarization. Furthermore, citizens must be vigilant in ensuring that the media remains a space where reasoned debate can flourish, free from the corrupting influences of concentrated power.

In conclusion, Habermas's theory of the public sphere underscores the essential connection between media, democracy, and rational-critical deliberation. For democracy to function

^{†††} Singh, Mayengbam Nandakishwor. "Jurgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere: a perspective on the conceptual transformations in his thought." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* (2012): 633-642.

properly, the media must serve as a forum for genuine public debate, enabling citizens to form informed opinions and hold power to account. However, the transformation of the media landscape in the 21st century, marked by both democratization and commercialization, presents significant challenges to the realization of Habermas's vision of the public sphere.

"Media as the Modern Public Sphere: Case Studies from India Exploring Democratic Discourse and Public Deliberation"

The Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement (2011)

The Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement of 2011 serves as a prime example of how media can function as a modern public sphere, fostering democratic discourse and public deliberation in India. The movement, centered on the demand for the Jan Lokpal Bill, witnessed massive public participation driven largely by the media's role in shaping the narrative.^{§§§}

The 2011 Indian anti-corruption movement, popularly known as Anna Andolan, was a landmark series of protests demanding strong legislation against corruption, notably the Jan Lokpal Bill. It began on April 5, 2011, when social activist Anna Hazare initiated a hunger strike at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, sparking a nationwide wave of non-violent civil resistance, including rallies, marches, and acts of civil disobedience. The movement, supported by prominent figures like Arvind Kejriwal, Kiran Bedi, and Prashant Bhushan, aimed to address corruption, political kleptocracy, and repatriation of black money from foreign banks.^{****}

The movement's roots trace back to earlier rallies, including a November 2010 protest led by Baba Ramdev against corruption in the 2010 Commonwealth Games. It gained mass traction with public gatherings at Ramlila Maidan and was bolstered by extensive media coverage, particularly through social media, which mobilized millions across cities. Peaceful demonstrations, unaligned with political parties, reflected citizens' frustration with systemic corruption. Recognized as one of Time magazine's "Top 10 News Stories of 2011," the movement forced the Indian Parliament to take the Jan Lokpal Bill into consideration, marking a significant moment in India's democratic history.

Television media played a pivotal role by providing extensive live coverage of the hunger strike, protests, and sit-ins held across India. News channels like NDTV, Times Now, and

^{§§§} Paul, Arpan. "COVERAGE OF ANTI CORRUPTION MOVEMENT: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS." *SCIENCE COMMUNICATOR*: 74.

^{****} Goswami, Debika, and Kaustuv K. Bandyopadhyay. "The anti-corruption movement in India." *PRIA, New Delhi*. Retrieved from https://cetri.be/IMG/pdf/Anti-Corruption-Movement_India.pdf (2012).

others continuously aired debates, interviews, and panel discussions involving activists, political leaders, and public intellectuals. These programs created a platform for citizens to engage in rational-critical debate, aligning with Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere as a space for deliberation on societal issues. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook became tools for coordination and opinion-sharing, reflecting Habermas's concept of an inclusive public sphere where rational-critical deliberation can occur.

The media's portrayal of the movement not only influenced public opinion but also pressured the government to respond to the growing demands for accountability. This demonstrates how the modern public sphere, enabled by media technologies, can facilitate democratic participation by bridging the gap between citizens and the state. At the same time, it raises questions about the role of media in shaping public discourse, including the challenges of media sensationalism and potential biases.

The 2020-21 Farmers' Protest: A Case Study

The 2020–2021 farmers' protests in India were among the most significant mass mobilizations in recent Indian history, challenging the reforms introduced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government. The movement emerged in response to three contentious agricultural laws that sought to deregulate agricultural markets, favouring corporate interests at the expense of small and marginal farmers. The protests, which lasted over a year and culminated in the government's eventual repeal of the laws, demonstrated the potential of grassroots activism in shaping democratic discourse.

Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as a domain where private individuals come together to discuss matters of common concern, independent of state and market influences, and where public opinion can hold political power accountable. The farmers' protest can be understood as an instance of counter-public formation, wherein marginalized communities created their own communicative spaces to contest state policies. The protestors strategically occupied Delhi's borders—Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur—transforming these sites into democratic spaces where farmers deliberated, negotiated, and resisted the neoliberal agricultural policies that threatened their livelihoods.^{†††} Unlike Habermas's classical bourgeois public sphere, which emphasized rational-critical debate in literary salons and print media, the farmers' movement operated within a mediated public sphere shaped by digital communication technologies. The movement's strength lay in its ability to combine traditional modes of protest—such as sit-ins, hunger strikes, and mass rallies—with

^{†††} Roy, Suddhabrata Deb. 2022. "The 2020–2021 Farmers' Struggle in India: A Post-Marxist Detonation?" *Critique* 50 (4): 665–83. doi:10.1080/03017605.2023.2199590.

contemporary digital activism. Farmers, particularly from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, utilized social media to amplify their grievances, counter state narratives, and mobilize national and international solidarity.

Media and the Contestation of Public Discourse: The role of media in the farmers' protest was twofold. First, mainstream corporate media largely framed the protests through a state-centric lens, often portraying farmers as "misguided," "anti-national," or even "terrorist sympathizers." Right-wing media outlets aligned with the government's stance, focusing on alleged violence during the Republic Day tractor rally of January 26, 2021, rather than engaging with the broader economic concerns that underpinned the movement. This media strategy aligns with what Chantal Mouffe (2005, 15) describes as the hegemonic suppression of dissent in neoliberal democracies, where dominant political actors attempt to delegitimize counter-hegemonic struggles.^{††††}

Second, digital and independent media platforms played a crucial role in countering mainstream narratives. Alternative news portals, independent journalists, and social media influencers provided real-time updates from protest sites, highlighting police crackdowns, internet shutdowns, and the resilience of protesting farmers. The viral tweets by international celebrities such as Rihanna and Greta Thunberg in early February 2021 amplified global attention to the movement, prompting a reactionary counter-campaign by the Indian state. This dynamic illustrates what Nancy Fraser (1990, 63) describes as "subaltern counter-publics"—spaces where marginalized groups develop alternative discourses to contest hegemonic narratives.^{§§§§}

Jurgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere remains central to understanding the relationship between media, democracy, and public discourse. The public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas, is a space where individuals engage in rational-critical debate, shaping public opinion and holding power accountable. However, the transformation of media in the 21st century, particularly the rise of digital communication, has altered the dynamics of public deliberation. While new media technologies have expanded access to the public sphere, they have also introduced new challenges, including media fragmentation, misinformation, and corporate influence.

The case studies of the Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement and the 2020–2021 farmers' protests in India illustrate how media can function both as an enabler and a constraint within

^{††††} Mouffe, Chantal. "Art and democracy: Art as an agonistic intervention in public space." *Open* 14 (2008): 6-15.

^{§§§§} Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy 1." In *New Critical Writings in Political Sociology*, pp. 489-513. Routledge, 2024.

the public sphere. The anti-corruption movement demonstrated how media, particularly television and social media, can facilitate mass mobilization and democratic participation. Similarly, the farmers' protests highlighted the role of digital platforms in countering hegemonic narratives and fostering an alternative public sphere. However, both movements also exposed the vulnerabilities of media to state influence, sensationalism, and ideological bias.

As Habermas warns, democracy cannot thrive if the public sphere is dominated by corporate and state interests rather than being an arena for genuine deliberation. Habermas envisioned the public sphere as a space where private individuals come together to engage in rational-critical debates on matters of public interest, thereby shaping public opinion. In the modern era, media—both traditional and digital—functions as a critical component of this sphere, enabling dialogue, dissent, and deliberation. The farmers' protests underscore how media, particularly social media, can serve as a site for democratic discourse and public deliberation in a country as diverse and complex as India. While mainstream media sought to delegitimize the movement, independent digital platforms enabled counter-discourses that challenged state narratives.

Agenda-Setting Theory (Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw)

The History and Evolution of Agenda-Setting Theory: Media Influence and Democratic Discourse

Agenda-setting theory, formally developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, emerged from their seminal 1968 study on the United States presidential election, commonly referred to as the "Chapel Hill study." Their research demonstrated a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in local media coverage and the perceptions of voters regarding the most significant election concerns. By examining the salience of topics in news content and comparing them to public perceptions, McCombs and Shaw provided empirical evidence that mass media wield considerable influence in shaping public opinion—not by dictating what audiences should think, but by determining what they should think about (McCombs and Shaw 1972).**** This distinction underscores the media's agenda-setting function, wherein frequent and prominent coverage of an issue leads audiences to perceive it as more important.

**** G. M. Kosicki, "Maxwell McCombs. Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 2004. 184 Pp. \$54.95 (Cloth); \$26.95 (Paper).," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (February 28, 2006): 124–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfj003>.

The theoretical foundations of agenda-setting can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), particularly the chapter titled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." Lippmann argued that mass media serve as the primary conduit between real-world events and the public's mental representations of those events. While he did not explicitly use the term "agenda-setting," Lippmann's assertion that people respond to a mediated "pseudo-environment" rather than the actual environment aligns with the core premises of the theory (Lippmann 1922).^{††††} He contended that individuals lack direct access to the vast complexity of the world and must instead rely on simplified models constructed by the media. This conceptualization prefigures the idea that media institutions, through their selection and framing of news, shape public priorities.

Building upon Lippmann's insights, Bernard Cohen further articulated the agenda-setting function of the press in his 1963 work, stating that while media might not succeed in instructing people on what to think, they are "stunningly successful in telling their readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963, 13).^{‡‡‡‡} This perspective laid the groundwork for McCombs and Shaw's empirical investigation, which systematically analyzed the relationship between media coverage and public issue salience during elections. Their findings provided concrete support for the hypothesis that the salience of issues on the media agenda correlates strongly with the salience of issues on the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972).^{§§§§}

In parallel to McCombs and Shaw's work, G. Ray Funkhouser conducted a similar study around the same time, analyzing media influence on public perceptions of important issues. However, Funkhouser's contributions remain comparatively overlooked, partly because he did not formally name the theory or extensively develop his research beyond his initial article (Rogers 1993). Additionally, his geographical isolation at Stanford, in contrast to McCombs and Shaw's active engagement with the academic community, limited the influence of his findings.^{*****}

^{††††} Arnold-Forster, T. (2023). Walter Lippmann and Public Opinion. *American Journalism*, 40(1), 51–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2022.2161665>

^{‡‡‡‡} Cohen, Bernard C. *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

^{§§§§} McCombs, Maxwell & Shaw, Donald. (2017). The Agenda-Setting function of mass media. *The Agenda Setting Journal*. 1. 10.1075/asj.1.2.02mcc.

^{*****} Everett M. Rogers et al., *Diffusion of Innovations*, Third Edition (The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), <https://teddykw2.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/everett-m-rogers-diffusion-of-innovations.pdf>.

Since its formalization in the early 1970s, agenda-setting theory has evolved into a widely studied framework within media and communication research. The 1968 "Chapel Hill study," published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1972, catalyzed over 400 subsequent studies on the agenda-setting function of mass media (McCombs 2004). The theory remains pertinent to contemporary discussions on media influence, particularly in democratic societies where the press plays a crucial role in shaping political discourse. In modern contexts, the expansion of digital media has introduced new dimensions to agenda-setting, such as algorithmic curation and the role of social media in amplifying or diminishing issue salience (Wolfsfeld 2022).^{†††††}

Agenda-setting theory remains fundamental to understanding the intersection of media, democracy, and political engagement. In democratic societies, an informed citizenry is essential for robust political participation, and the media serve as the primary mechanism for information dissemination. However, the media's ability to prioritize certain issues over others raises questions about editorial bias, corporate influence, and political agendas. The extent to which media-driven agendas align with democratic values—such as pluralism, accountability, and transparency—remains a critical area of inquiry in political communication scholarship.

Agenda-Setting Theory and the Role of Media in Democracy

The agenda-setting theory, originally conceptualized by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), posits that the media have a profound influence on public perception by determining which issues receive prominence in the public discourse.^{‡‡‡‡‡} By controlling the salience of topics in the news, the media shape not only what the public thinks about but also how they think about it. ^{§§§§§}This effect is particularly significant in democratic societies, where the media serve as a crucial link between political institutions and the citizenry.

Media Influence on Public Opinion and Policy Agendas

In contemporary democracies, the role of media has expanded beyond merely setting public agendas to also influencing political and policy agendas. McCombs and Valenzuela (2019) outline six key aspects of agenda-setting theory, including attribute agenda-setting, network

^{†††††} Wolfsfeld, Gadi. (2022). Making Sense of Media and Politics: Five Principles in Political Communication. 10.4324/9781003176657.

^{‡‡‡‡‡} McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176-187.

^{§§§§§} McCombs, Maxwell, and Evatt, Dennis. "The Second Level of Agenda-Setting: The Impact of Attribute Salience in the Media." *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 4 (1995): 707-717.

agenda-setting, and the origins of media agendas.^{*****} The interplay between these elements underscores the complexity of media influence on democratic processes. The media do not simply reflect reality but actively construct it by selecting, framing, and emphasizing particular issues over others.

Agenda-Setting and Political Communication

The agenda-setting function of the media is particularly critical in electoral democracies, where public opinion is shaped by media portrayals of candidates, political parties, and policy issues. The first empirical test of agenda-setting in the 1968 U.S. presidential election found a strong correlation between the issues emphasized in the media and those perceived as important by the electorate.^{††††††}

More recent studies have extended this framework to digital media environments, where traditional gatekeeping functions of mainstream media are increasingly challenged by **social media platforms and alternative digital outlets**. The concept of **network agenda-setting**—which examines how interconnected themes and issue attributes shape public perceptions—has become particularly relevant in the age of social media.^{‡‡‡‡‡‡}

Despite these shifts, the fundamental premise of agenda-setting remains intact: media influence public priorities by making certain topics more salient. The **framing effect**, closely linked to agenda-setting, further dictates the interpretive frameworks through which issues are understood, impacting public attitudes and policy debates.^{§§§§§§}

Democracy, Public Deliberation, and Media Power

The intersection of agenda-setting and democracy raises critical concerns about media power and pluralism. Ideally, democratic systems rely on **an informed and engaged public**, facilitated by diverse and independent media sources. However, in reality, media conglomeration and political biases often lead to **agenda homogeneity**, where a limited number of actors determine the scope of political debate.^{*****}

^{*****} McCombs, Maxwell, and Sebastián Valenzuela. "The Agenda-Setting Role of the News Media." In *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, edited by Kristen Eichorn and Don Stacks, Chapter 8. New York: Routledge, 2019.

^{††††††} Coleman, Renita, Maxwell McCombs, Donald Shaw, and David Weaver. "Agenda Setting." In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, 147-161. New York: Routledge, 2009.

^{‡‡‡‡‡‡} McCombs, Maxwell, and Donald L. Shaw. "The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 2 (1993): 58-67.

^{§§§§§§} Guo, Lei, and Maxwell McCombs. "Network Agenda-Setting: A Third Level of Media Effects." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (2011): 555-574.

^{*****} Swanson, David L., and Paolo Mancini, eds. *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy: An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and Their Consequences*. New York: Praeger, 1996.

This is particularly evident in electoral contexts, where political actors seek to manipulate the media agenda to align with their strategic interests. The **commercialization of news**, characterized by sensationalism and the prioritization of entertainment over substantive political coverage, further exacerbates the distortion of democratic deliberation.

While some scholars argue that the rise of digital media has democratized agenda-setting by enabling greater public participation in content creation, others warn that online echo chambers and algorithmic filtering may reinforce ideological polarization rather than fostering deliberative democracy.^{††††††††}

The agenda-setting function of the media remains a crucial mechanism in shaping public discourse and political outcomes in democratic societies. While new media technologies have diversified the channels through which information circulates, the core principles of agenda-setting theory continue to explain how issues rise to prominence in the public sphere. Moving forward, understanding the evolving nature of media influence—especially in the digital age—will be essential for maintaining a **robust and pluralistic democratic discourse**.

The implications of agenda-setting theory for democracy are particularly salient in the context of emerging challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and the erosion of trust in institutions. As the media landscape becomes increasingly fragmented and polarized, the ability of the media to set a coherent public agenda is undermined, leading to the proliferation of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Pariser 2011, 9).^{††††††††} This fragmentation not only weakens the media's capacity to inform the public but also exacerbates societal divisions, as individuals are exposed to divergent and often conflicting agendas. In this context, the role of the media as a democratic institution is called into question, raising urgent concerns about the future of informed citizenship and collective decision-making.

In conclusion, agenda-setting theory provides a powerful lens for understanding the media's role in shaping public opinion and democratic processes. The work of McCombs and Shaw underscores the media's dual capacity to inform and influence, highlighting both its potential to enhance democratic governance and its susceptibility to manipulation. As the media landscape continues to evolve, the challenges posed by agenda-setting dynamics will require

^{††††††††} Tewksbury, David, and Jason Rittenberg. *News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

^{††††††††} Pariser, Eli. 2011. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin Press.

Careful scrutiny and innovative solutions to ensure that the media remains a force for democratic accountability and public enlightenment.

Case Study 1: The Kathua Rape Case (2018) – Media’s Role in Shaping National Outrage

The Kathua rape case of 2018 serves as a significant example of how media influences public discourse, legal reforms, and policy decisions through agenda-setting. The case involved the brutal gang-rape and murder of an 8-year-old girl from the Bakarwal community in Kathua, Jammu & Kashmir. The religious and political dimensions of the crime—where the accused belonged to the majority Hindu community and the victim to a nomadic Muslim group—intensified its media coverage and public response.

Initially, the case received limited media attention, but as more details emerged, the media played a pivotal role in bringing it to national prominence. Continuous coverage, graphic descriptions, and in-depth reporting mobilized public outrage, framing the case as a failure of law enforcement and an instance of religious extremism. The media’s role in agenda-setting was evident in how different outlets framed the issue: while independent media and social activists demanded justice, certain right-wing platforms politicized the case, arguing that it was being used to target Hindus. This polarization in media narratives led to wider debates on communalism, gender justice, and media ethics in India.

The media-driven public pressure had tangible legal and policy outcomes. The Supreme Court intervened, transferring the case to Pathankot to ensure an unbiased trial. The case also led to fast-track hearings, resulting in the conviction of six accused in June 2019. Furthermore, public discourse influenced amendments to the Indian Penal Code (IPC), particularly the introduction of the death penalty for child rape under The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2018.

From an agenda-setting perspective, the Kathua case exemplifies first-level agenda-setting, where media prioritized gender justice and communal tensions as national concerns. Additionally, it demonstrates second-level agenda-setting, where the framing of the case shaped public interpretation—either as a state failure in protecting minorities or as a politicized attack on religious groups. The legal and policy shifts following the case reinforce the idea that media-driven narratives can directly influence governance. However, the polarization in reporting also highlights the risks of ideologically motivated journalism, where different media outlets shape contrasting public perceptions based on political leanings.

Case Study 2: The Rafale Deal Controversy (2016-2019) – Media's Role in Political Accountability

The Rafale fighter jet deal controversy provides another compelling case of media's role in setting the political agenda and influencing electoral narratives. The 2016 agreement between India and France for the purchase of 36 Rafale aircraft was mired in allegations of corruption, favoritism, and inflated pricing. The opposition, particularly the Congress party, accused the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of favoring Anil Ambani's Reliance Group over the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in the deal. The media played a crucial role in shaping the controversy, determining its salience in public debate and election discourse.

Investigative journalism was central to the media's role in this controversy. Independent outlets such as The Hindu and NDTV published detailed reports questioning the deal, particularly regarding price discrepancies and procedural changes. Their investigative coverage pressured mainstream media to take up the issue, making corruption and governance failures key election issues ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. However, the narrative remained highly polarized—pro-government media downplayed the allegations, emphasizing India's defense needs, while opposition-aligned media framed it as a scandal comparable to the Bofors scam. The "Chowkidar Chor Hai" (The Watchman is a Thief) slogan, popularized by Rahul Gandhi, was widely covered in news debates, further reinforcing the media-driven polarization of the discourse.

Despite the intense media scrutiny, the Supreme Court reviewed the deal in December 2018 and found no evidence of wrongdoing. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) also cleared the deal, stating that the negotiated price was better than earlier proposals. However, the controversy remained a dominant election narrative, demonstrating how media's agenda-setting power extends beyond legal judgments.

In terms of agenda-setting theory, the Rafale case highlights first-level agenda-setting, where media prioritized corruption and governance as central election issues. It also exemplifies second-level agenda-setting, as different media houses framed the issue through either a pro-government or opposition-driven lens. While the controversy failed to directly impact electoral outcomes, it showcased how media narratives influence political accountability and voter perception. The polarization of media coverage in politically sensitive topics remains a significant challenge for objective journalism and democratic discourse. Therefore, The Kathua rape case (2018) and the Rafale deal controversy (2016-2019) exemplify the media's agenda-setting power in shaping public discourse, influencing legal and policy decisions,

and steering political debates in India. The Kathua case saw extensive media coverage that amplified public outrage, framed the crime as both a gender and communal issue, and pressured the judiciary to ensure a fair trial, ultimately leading to fast-track convictions and stricter child rape laws under The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2018. Meanwhile, the Rafale controversy demonstrated how investigative journalism can shape election narratives, scrutinize governance, and fuel political discourse on corruption, though its impact was countered by the BJP's national security-focused narrative during the 2019 elections. Both cases highlight how media framing influences public perception, often reflecting ideological biases, where narratives are selectively amplified or downplayed based on political leanings. Furthermore, the rise of social media has intensified agenda-setting, allowing both independent voices and misinformation to shape national discourse. These case studies reaffirm Agenda-Setting Theory, demonstrating that media not only determines which issues dominate public attention but also how they are interpreted. However, as media landscapes evolve, challenges such as polarization, misinformation, and ideological biases call for greater journalistic integrity and media literacy to ensure agenda-setting remains a tool for public interest rather than political manipulation.

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore the pivotal role of media in shaping democratic discourse, public perception, and governance accountability. Through the Fourth Estate theory, Public Sphere theory, and Agenda-Setting theory, this study demonstrates how media functions as both a watchdog and a gatekeeper, influencing policy decisions, legal reforms, and political outcomes. The case studies of the Kathua rape case (2018) and the Rafale deal controversy (2016-2019) highlight the dual nature of media—as a force for justice and transparency, but also as a tool for ideological polarization and political manipulation. While media has the power to mobilize public opinion, foster deliberative democracy, and hold powerful entities accountable, its growing commercialization, political affiliations, and susceptibility to misinformation pose significant threats to its democratic function. The rise of digital media and social platforms has expanded public participation but has also created challenges such as media fragmentation, ideological echo chambers, and misinformation campaigns. For media to continue serving as a pillar of democracy, it is essential to strengthen journalistic integrity, promote media literacy, and implement regulatory safeguards to curb bias, misinformation, and corporate-political influence. As democracy evolves, so must media ethics and governance frameworks to ensure that media remains a force for truth, accountability, and democratic engagement rather than a tool for propaganda or vested interests. Moving forward, a balanced, independent, and transparent media ecosystem will be crucial in maintaining the public's trust in democratic institutions and processes.