CHAPTER 5

MEDIA - SOCIETY INTERFACE IN CASE OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS IN WEST BENGAL

OVERVIEW

The nationalist press had a steady influence on the politics of Bengal and elsewhere in the country in the pre-independence days. The upheaval involving the political realities of the time found voice in the fiery writings of the newspapers of that time. Both the vernacular as well as the English nationalist press of the time dedicated columns to campaign for the cause of undivided Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century and in support of various subsequent movements for the freedom of the country. This zeal of the press somewhat dissipated post independence. Active participation in the Indian freedom struggle provided them with the raison d’être that ceased to exist post-independence. The press literally dropped guard and as successive Congress governments at the Centre and the federal governments (a majority of which were led by the Congress party at the initial stage and several years after independence) found out became mere observers and commentators on various issues; a far cry from their haloed stature of crusader in the colonial days. As Aishwariya Subramanian (2009)\(^{1}\) pointed out “Post 1947, newspapers in India had a choice to make – either align with the government and support all its initiatives or act as a critique to the newly democratized country and its head. Newspapers for a long period acted as unofficial sponsors of the various initiatives and schemes of the government. The five year plans especially was highly endorsed by the national newspapers.” This implied that mainstream newspapers resorted to recounting events rather than probing them. The mainstream press was heavily dependent on the news agencies and official sources for their regular feed of news and information post independence. The scope for actual public participation in a representative democratic country like India was limited and on top of that, newspapers, the dominant media for many years following Independence, chose to rely on select news sources. The newspapers usually toed the official line on policy matters, as has been mentioned earlier, instead of reflecting the dissenting voice or the alternative views.
Press in India regained its pre-independence stature during the Emergency (1975-77) imposed in the country when many newspapers protested against the measure and criticized the Indira Gandhi government for it. In the 1980s the Indian newspaper fraternity underwent crucial transition and in the 1990s they assumed the role of whistleblowers of the society in several cases. But while investigative journalism did get a boost there was lot to be said about the treatment given to fundamental issues like campaigning for the democratic rights of the grassroots or development initiatives to be undertaken in the remote interiors.

The newspaper industry was overtly (because of authorized news sources) and covertly (for business and advertisement opportunities) dependent on the government and party in power before liberalization (1992). The Indian Newspaper Society admitted advertisements formed a major source of revenue for the newspapers in India and the government is the biggest advertiser in India. Government advertisements form 40 to 50 per cent of the total volume of advertisements in a large newspaper and about 30 per cent of the ad revenue. These include advertisements released by the Directorate of Advertising and Audio Visual Publicity (DAVP) as well as display and tenders issued by the Central as well as State government agencies. While the classified ads form about 10% of newspapers’ revenue, the rest of the advertisement revenue is collected from commercial display ads. Newspapers in India earn up to 80% from advertisements while reader subscription, syndication constitute the rest income. The readers therefore are a secondary source of revenue.

Newspapers are considered a mass communication medium as they operate on a large scale and involve everyone in the society. There is no doubt that commercial Indian newspapers operate on a huge scale but there are questions over their public characteristics.

THE POWER OF MASS MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

It may sound clichéd but mass media have an imperative sway over the political organizations of contemporary democratic societies. The mass media are an essential component of the democratic political process - disseminating diverse information and opinions, making aspirants and incumbents of the electoral office widely known to the electorate and providing platform for wider debates on public issues during election as well as at other times. The popular conception is that mass
media helps voters to exercise informed choices in the election procedure. The most fundamental questions of the society – those concerning the distribution and exercise of power and resources, the management of the problems and the processes of change and integration – depend on communication, more specifically on the public means of communication in the form of information, opinion or even entertainment. Despite the enormous changes in media institutions and technology and in society itself, the perspective on the potential social significance of the media is still very much relevant. Many consider the media as a separate ‘social institution’ within the wider society. But the power of mass mediated communication is not absolute, it is related to the societal reality. The media may have scope for independent influence and may gain autonomy as their range of activity, economic significance and informal power expands but they are ultimately dependent on the society.

The belief in the power of the mass media was initially based on the observation of their wide reach and apparent impact. In India, for example, the mobilization of the press for nationalist purposes during the colonial days strengthened the belief in the power of the press. The impact of the nationalist press on the common masses left little doubt over the potency of media’s influence on the masses when effectively managed and directed. More recent events have confirmed the position of media as an essential and dynamic component in any power struggle where public opinion is an important factor. It is well known that the electoral fortunes of political parties and their contestants in modern democratic set-ups are largely dependent on the public opinion formed from the coverage by the popular mass media in a country.

The mass media institution is located in the “public sphere” so theoretically speaking it is open to messages transmitted by all senders and encompasses a large section of the receivers. The formation of public opinion on any issue requires widespread reach of the media, consensus in the message disseminated and some amount of credibility and acceptability of the senders in the eyes of the receivers. The media industry in any country can actively aid the formation of public opinion on issues of national importance on complying with the above three criteria.

The power of the mass media in shaping public opinion has been somewhat stymied by the institutional development of the mass media that has eroded if not eliminated its radical potentiality. The operative logic of commercial public communication at present is more towards management of existing social and
The daily newspaper coverage of the Panchayat elections in West Bengal as reflected in the subsequent chapters will support the aforesaid statement. The coverage emphasized the incidents of violence in the run up to the election; instances of political bickering between allies of the ruling coalition and allegations of electoral malpractices of the ruling coalition by the opposition parties rather than instances and implications of active public participation in the democratic decision-making process which was a crucial change from the earlier times when the role of the grassroots in the panchayats was limited to decision implementation. Participation in governance and policy-making is necessary for political, social and economic empowerment of the masses. But the sample newspapers did not focus on the issues of participation and empowerment. The institutional controls over the newspapers seemed to have overpowered the need for news and information.

**MASS MEDIA'S ROLE IN LOCAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESS: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS IN WEST BENGAL**

The mass media’s role in the formation of public opinion takes backseat in the local democratic set-up as members can directly interact with each other for the formation of the gram panchayat or on its administration later on. The ideal role of the mass media in the local democratic process would be mobilization of the masses for proactive participation in the election process and in the local government thereafter. Media reporting on the working of the incumbent panchayats as well as ways of improving public participation in the policy-making process involving the panchayats would be appreciated. The empirical study in this research would elucidate whether the newspaper coverage in the run-up to the panchayat elections was close to the above scenario.

Here it is necessary to relate the characteristics of mass communication and their relevance in the local democratic setup with special reference to the panchayat election in West Bengal.

1. **Mass Communication is designed to reach multiple audiences.**

The reach of the English and Bengali sample newspapers of my study can be termed as moderately widespread. The audiences of these newspapers were both the urban and rural readers. While the news organizations targeted multiple audiences, the
news reports showed preference for the urban audience in their selection of content, language and presentation. For example, issues related to the rural local politics were presented in a sensational manner to make them palatable to the urban readers rather than making sensitized portrayal of such issues much to the approval of the rural audience. So though the sample newspapers had multiple audiences, they did not cater uniformly to the audiences from the various strands of the society. Yadav’s (1994)\(^{10}\) observation on the urban-oriented press in India is apt here, “The press in India, concentrates on political events, controversies and personalities. Crime and entertainment also finds fair coverage. It is no secret that the Indian Press is urban and elitist and bypasses the multitude of people who live in rural and tribal India. Reporting from rural areas and about rural people is far between, and that too when some politician goes for inauguration, stone-laying ceremonies or for an aerial view of the flood affected area.” The distribution of newspaper readership is also uneven between the different audiences. For every 185 urban dwellers who read a newspaper, the figure of rural readers is a paltry 15.\(^{11}\) It is true that the privileged including the moneyed and/or educated in the urban or rural set-up are more likely to read newspaper than otherwise. Thus though the circulation of sample newspapers of my study was widespread, their power to mobilize participation of the grassroots in the Panchayat election or in the panchayat administration remained undetermined in the abovementioned scenario.

2. The one-sided, impersonal communication undertaken by the mass media determines its relationship with the receiver. There is physical as well as social distance between the sender and the receiver. The mass media audience is more or less anonymous. The sender whether the news organization or its correspondents is more powerful and socially superior. The relationship between the sender and its news sources are often calculative and even manipulative in intention.

The one-sided relationship between the sender and the receiver in mass mediated communication has two implications - the accountability of the sender is of little consequence and the receiver has no opportunity to confirm the veracity of the news disseminated. As Christopher Lasch (1990)\(^{12}\) observed, “..... Democracy requires public debate, not mere information. . . . Unless information is generated by sustained public debate, most of it will be irrelevant at best, misleading and manipulative at worst. . . .”
The physical distance between the sender and receiver is palpable from the inclination of the news reports published. The news writers of the sample newspapers were usually based in the city away from the actual proceedings and depended on indirect news sources like news agencies and stringers, or institutional news sources like government circulars, press meetings held by the political parties, briefings by the political leaders for their reporting on the panchayat elections. There were a few reports on the ground reality and the overall newspaper coverage contributed very little to mobilize grass-root participation in the election process and the panchayat administration thereafter. The repercussions of this 'armchair' journalism could have been many. News sources like the political parties and prominent political leaders who dominated the press reporting could manipulate information to fulfill their electoral objective. The reporters wary of losing their accessible sources would not be in a position to disregard or disappoint them. The reciprocal relationship between a news media and its powerful sources disaffected and disenchanted the grass-root audience. The possibility of mobilizing this skeptical audience was remote if not impossible.

3. The content or message conveyed by the mass media is ‘manufactured’ in standardized ways and is reused and repeated in identical forms.

The power of mass media rested on mass production and mass dissemination of messages. The messages disseminated by the mainstream vernacular and English Language newspapers of my study show a concurrence that indicated both homogeneous content and uniform source. The repetition of the identical message in various media channels reinforced the power of the mass mediated communication but this also meant new messages that may have included differing information and alternative viewpoint were excluded from the public means of communication. Mass Communication is often seen by those with power to transmit messages as an efficient device for getting a message to many people whether in the form of advertising campaign or political propaganda or as mere information. That the receivers may have a different point of view and consequently disregard the transmitted message is overlooked. (The dominant paradigm theory invoked mass communication theories with such linear approach.) The sample newspaper reports of my study are not concerned about the feedback of the subjects of their reports – the panchayat members, candidates or voters. They were content to transmit messages (information, stories, and opinion) that established the relevance of mass media in electoral politics.
Such communication benefitted political parties and their leaders but had no role in the empowerment of the grassroots. The media messages that generated during the panchayat elections’ coverage had specific value for ‘opinion leaders’\(^\text{13}\) like the political parties and their leaders but were of little significance to the grass-root participants.

4. The mass audience is conceived by the mass media as large aggregates of dispersed and passive spectators, without opportunities for collective participation or response.

A unit of the mass audience is conscious of being part of a much larger set but the detached units have little scope of contact and interaction with fellow audiences. Mass media’s power emerges from the fact that the dispersed audience is incapable of acting collectively in an organized way to secure their objectives. They are rather acted upon by mass media and ‘opinion leaders’ and intermediaries who control the mass media content by virtue of their privileged access and superior social status. This makes the mass audience easy prey to manipulation. Like the mass audience, the mass electorate is a social formation subject to the manipulation of the mass media or through them by the influential in the society\(^\text{14}\). In their oft-quoted book *Media Power Politics* (1981)\(^\text{15}\), Paletz and Entman argued that "by granting elites substantial control over the content, emphases, and flow of public opinion, media practices diminish the public’s power." What this means, they concluded, was that "the mass media are often the unwitting handmaidens of the powerful." It has been indicated in several studies that political party leaders in representative democracies use mass media to direct and even control the political behavior of the mass electorate.\(^\text{16}\) Walter Karp (1989)\(^\text{17}\) in an article titled ‘All the Congressmen’s Men,’ observed that "the press does not act, it is acted upon...." He quotes from a wealth of sources and presents ample evidence suggesting that political powers have in effect subjugated and distorted the media. We can state that the power of mass media in large modern democracies has been generally restricted to providing electoral opportunities for political party leaders who are intermediaries between the political system and the electorate.

In case of local elections where localized interaction and interpersonal relation between political party candidates and the voters are common, the influence of mass media messages is reduced considerably. The effect of mass media in the local democratic set-up can be significant if it participates in the mobilization of grassroots in the local election process and ensure their meaningful involvement in it. The local
government institutions experience much public communication. The mass media can transmit these public messages involving issues like participation of community members, relation between the local government and the corresponding community and correlation between the diverse activities and participants of the local democracy. In local democratic units the media can build association and co-operation, issues that were ignored by the sample newspapers while covering the local panchayat elections in West Bengal.

MASS MEDIA AND THE SOCIETY – THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

There is obvious relation between mass media content and the society in which it operates. For example the media content generated in a totalitarian society would be different from the ones generated in a democratic society. Similarly the content in a traditional society would not be similar to the ones produced in a modern one. The domain of ‘society’ includes both political rule and economic resources, and refers to social relationships like communities and families, social roles and occupations like those carried on by mass media and its functionaries like reporters and journalists.

The history of modern society has been described as a materially driven process with society as the ‘base’ and culture as the ‘superstructure’. The domain of ‘culture’ includes essential aspects of social life like social customs and practices and personal inclinations of society members. The relation between culture and society with reference to the mass media is not easy to determine. Mass communication as a process can be considered both as a ‘societal’ and a ‘cultural’ phenomenon. The mass media institutions are part of the societal structure as their infrastructure and management are part of the economic and political power base while the ideas, images and information produced by the media are an important aspect of culture.

K. E. Rosengren in his ‘Mass Media and Social Change: Some Current Approaches’ (1981) has offered a simple typology, which cross-tabulates two opposite propositions: ‘social structure influences culture’ and its reverse, ‘culture influences social structure’. This yields four main options that are offered for describing the relation between mass media and society.

If we consider mass media as an aspect of society then the option of materialism is presented. There is considerable body of media-society theory that views culture (media content) as dependent on the economic and political power
structure in a society. It is assumed that whoever owns or controls the media (the
media proprietor or the editors and reporters or authoritative news sources) can decide
on the content.

If we consider the media primarily in the light of their contents (thus more as
a culture) then the option of idealism is indicated. The media is assumed to have a
potential for significant influence and so the ideas and values propounded by it are
seen as key to social change. This view leads to the strong belief in media effects for
good or ill.

Interdependence of society and mass media implies that the two are
continually influencing and interacting with each other. The media responds to the
demands from society for information and entertainment and at the same time
contribute to transforming the socio-cultural climate for better, which sets off new
demands for mass media communication. This indicates a constant interweaving of
influences between the society and the mass media.

Autonomy in the relations between society and culture is inconsistent with the
above view. This option assumes that the society and mass media can work
independently. The autonomy position validates those who are skeptical about the
power of the media to influence ideas, values and behavior prevalent in the society.
There are different views on the plausible extent of autonomy or the detachment
feasible between media and society.

The four types of relation between Society and Culture (Media Content) are
depicted below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CULTURE INFLUENCES</th>
<th>SOCIAL STRUCTURE</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERDEPENDENCE</td>
<td>IDEALISM (STRONG MEDIA INFLUENCE)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(TWO-WAY INFLUENCE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MATERIALISM (MEDIA ARE DEPENDENT)</td>
<td>AUTONOMY (NO CAUSAL CONNECTION)</td>
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</table>

Figure 5.1: Relation between Social Structure and Culture as conceptualized by
K. E. Rosengren
62)
The three main issues in any society are power, integration and change. Media can function to promote or hold back change, to repress or liberate society, to unite or fragment. The several media-society theories assign ambiguous role to the media. It is presented in progressive light or reactionary light depending on the perspective it embraces. Despite this ambiguity there can be little doubt that mass media is the primary messenger in most societies. A central presupposition concerning both society and culture is that mass media institutions are essentially concerned with the production and distribution of information that enables us to relate to our experiences in the social world. The information, images and ideas disseminated by the media may, for most people, be the main source of awareness of their social location. The media to a large extent is responsible for our perception of social reality and a key-determining factor of standards, models and norms in social life. McCombs and Shaw (1977)\textsuperscript{22} in their book “The Emergence of American Political Issues” argued that the most important effect of the mass media was "its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us." Mass media interpose it between the experiences encountered in the world and the society members. The society members are very much dependent on the media for a large part of their perception, impression and image of the relevant society. As Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976)\textsuperscript{23} in their article ‘Media Dependency Theory’ pointed out “the more a person is dependent on the media to fulfill his needs, the media will become more important to that individual and will have more influence and power over him.”

THE CONCEPT OF MEDIATION

The above observations led to the concept of mediation between social reality and members of a society. Mediation refers to third party relaying or second-hand observation of events and incidents. It refers to communication by social institutions like government departments, advertisers, politicians, experts and authorities of all kinds. Social relations mediated by mass media channels are likely to be more distant, more impersonal and weaker than direct personal ties. But in spite of these shortcomings mass mediated communication is pervasive in modern societies.
Early versions of the concept of ‘mediation’ assumed a division between *public spheres* where widely shared views of social reality was formed with the support of mass mediated messages and *personal spheres* where individuals communicated directly and openly. The recent developments in technology have undermined this simple division since a much larger share of communication and social interaction is now mediated via technology.\(^{24}\) The implication of this development is diverse. On one hand, it has led to detached social connections and disintegrated social relations; on the other hand, more individuals are able to access information through mediated forms of communication. The notion of mediation in the sense of media intervening between ourselves and the social reality point to several roles played by the media in connecting us to the myriad social experiences.\(^{25}\)

Mediation can achieve different objectives from informing, to negotiating, to attempting manipulation and control.

The various ‘mediation’ roles of mass media as elaborated by Denis McQuail (1983)\(^{26}\) are given below.

1) As a *window* providing a view of the events and experiences in the society which extends the vision of the audience enabling them to see what is going on in the society;

2) As a *mirror* reflecting events transpiring in the operating society though the perspective and direction of the mirror are decided by others and so the audience is not free to see what it wants;

3) As a *gatekeeper*, selecting parts of the social experience for special attention and closing off other views and voices. While this may not be deliberate but all the same it restricts audiences’ choice;

4) As a *guide* or *interpreter* leading the way or making sense of what is otherwise confusing or fragmentary;

5) As a *platform* or *forum* for presentation of information and ideas on issues concerning the social life with the possibility of response or feedback from the audience;

6) As an *interlocutor* who not only shares information but responds to queries in a quasi-interactive manner.

The above account of mass media’s mediating role reflects different aspects of mass media’s function in the society.\(^{27}\)
A FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR CONNECTING MEDIA WITH SOCIETY

The Westley-MacLean model (1957)28 gave a framework for connecting media and its corresponding society. The most significant idea of the model is that the media channels are sought out by 'social advocates' (the ‘opinion leaders’, according to Katz and Lazarsfeld) like politicians, government officials, advertisers and creative men like artists and philosophers as agencies for reaching the general public or specific groups and for conveying their perspectives on various incidents. The model took into account the following elements 1) events and voices in a society 2) communicator role of mass media 3) messages transmitted and 4) effect on receivers.

The Westley-MacLean model emphasized mass communicators do not originate messages. They relay to a potential audience their own account of a selection of events occurring in the relevant society or they give access to the views and voices of social advocates who want to reach a wider public. The three important features of the Westley-MacLean model are 1) emphasis on the role of mass communicators in selecting news events for publication or broadcast, 2) the assertion that selection of news items by the mass communicators is based on assessment of audience interests through audience feedback or judgment of mass communicators, which may not be neutral or unbiased and 3) the communication made by the mass media is not purposive beyond gratifying audience interest. The theory stated that mass media do not aim to persuade or educate or even inform the audience. The model, however, does not take into consideration the fact that mass media can sometimes be purposefully manipulated by the ‘social advocates’.

Westley and Mac Lean pointed out that social institution like family and community have always mediated social experience. They maintained that mass Communication is the new mediator that can extend, compete or even replace the existing social institutions. However the mass media is not completely free from the influence of the rest of the society. It is subjected to formal and informal control by individuals and institutions that have an interest in shaping public perceptions. The mass media is another social institution with its own goals, conventions and mechanism of control. Its objectives do not necessarily coincide with those of the relevant society. Denis McQuail (see flow-chart below) gives a view of the 'mediation of social reality' by the mass media based on the Westley-MacLean

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model but reflecting the changed observations of possibility of manipulation by powerful 'social advocates' 29:

![Diagram]

**Figure 5.2: A Frame of Reference for Theory-Formation about Media and Society based on Westley-MacLean model (1957)**


The media provides their audience with a supply of information, images and impressions, sometimes according to anticipated needs, sometimes guided by its own purpose (for gaining influence or revenue) and sometimes obliging the motives of social advocates and institutions. The motivations behind the selection and flow of content make it clear that mediation is unlikely to be a purely neutral process. The 'content' will always be at least to some extent construed by an intermediary (whether the news reporter or the news source) and therefore the resulting conception will not be without bias.

**RELEVANT MEDIA – SOCIETY THEORIES**

There are several theories concerning the media and its corresponding society. The media – society theories are fragmentary and selective, sometimes overlapping and often guided by conflicting ideologies and assumptions about society. Here I briefly discuss about the media-society theories that is relevant to my study on Grass-
MEDIASOCIETY THEORY I: THE MASS SOCIETY

The theory on mass society emphasizes the interdependence of social institutions with political and economic power. The media is considered as one such social institution and integrated with the other sources of social and political power. The media content serve the interests of the political and economic power-holders. The media in the mass society is not expected to offer a critical or alternative view to the public. The theory gives primacy to the media in mass society which lacks solidarity and involvement. The media is a potent means of manipulation yet it is also an aid to the survival of people under isolated and estranged conditions. Mass society is paradoxically both ‘atomized’ as well as centrally controlled.

As a theory of society, this theory invokes pessimism and is an antithesis to democratic ideals and community participation in democratic bodies. As a theory of media, this theory strongly invokes images of control and indicates a one-way influence from above. The media contribute significantly to implement this control in a society characterized by enormity of size, isolation of individuals and lack of coordination among the masses.

The theory states that the media in the mass society would be controlled and run in a monopolistic way by a few people who decide its content. The media in a mass society is an effective instrument for organizing people in mass associations as audiences, consumers and electorates. Mass media in a mass society are the voices of authority, givers of opinion and instruction. The media establishes itself as a dependable, trustworthy institution in the minds of the masses in respect of the views and opinions disseminated. According to the most articulate theorists of mass society, C. W. Mills, the mass media in a mass society exert a non-democratic control ‘from above’ with few chances of feedback. The lack of strong social organization and the relative isolation of individuals would make for possible manipulation by the mass media and opinion leaders of the society.

Audience Effects research has nullified certain claims of the mass society theory by asserting about the resistance offered by the audience against manipulation and control with the assistance of peer groups, and due to ethnic background and class
associations. Community also acts as a restriction on the ubiquitous power of mass media. The notion in the original theory of there being a small elite dominating the rest of the society is not accepted by Audience Effect Research, despite the evidence of increasing social inequality, existence of a self-perpetuating class of powerful people and powerful business conglomerates. The widespread public indifference towards democratic politics and lack of participation in the democratic process were reasons for the manipulative use of the mass media by politicians and political parties in a mass society.\(^3\)

**MEDIA-SOCIETY THEORY II: FUNCTIONALISM**

The second media-society theory that is invoked in my study is Functionalism. Functionalism relates social institutions and social practices to the ‘needs’ of the individuals in the corresponding society.\(^3\) The presumed ‘needs’ of mass media audience are concerned with continuity, order, integration, guidance, socialization, motivation, adaptation etc. The theory of ‘functionalism’ assumes that mass media responds to the demands of the audience and achieve unintended benefits for them.

This theory depicts the media as essentially self-directing and self-correcting. Apolitical in formation, it suits the pluralist conception of a democratic set-up. But the media like other social institutions are only means of maintaining the existing social structure and norms rather than a source of major change. Functionalist theory has been criticized for its assumption that what exists must be in some way necessary for the working of the social system. An essentially functionalist theory of ‘media dependency’ formulated by DeFleur and Ball Rokeach (1989)\(^4\) treat the dependency of audiences on mass media sources as a variable to be empirically determined. The theory posits that more an audience is dependent on the mass media for information, the more possibility that in times of instability or crisis the media would enjoy greater power.

Despite the many complexities, a functional approach is useful for some purposes. The description of media function or task or purpose or motive provides common ground to the mass communicators and their audiences. It refers to both - the tasks of the media (such as news writing or editing) and utilities perceived by a media user (such as being informed or entertained).
THE FUNCTIONS OF MEDIA

According to Harold Lasswell (1948) the main functions of mass communication in society are surveillance of the environment, co-relation of the different parts of the society in responding to their environment and the transmission of cultural heritage. Wright (1960) developed this basic format and added ‘entertainment’ as a fourth key media function. A fifth media function mobilization was added to reflect the widespread application of mass communication to spread political and commercial propaganda. The specific functions of media in a society are elaborated by Denis McQuail (1983).

# Information Dissemination
- Providing information about events and conditions in society.
- Indicating the relation between powers in society.
- Facilitating innovation, adaptation and progress.

# Establishing Co-relation
- Commenting, explaining and interpreting the meaning of events and information.
- Providing support for established authority and norms.
- Socializing.
- Coordinating different activities and powers.
- Building consensus.
- Setting the order of priority of events and signaling their relative status in the society.

# Developing Continuity
- Underlining the dominant culture in the society, recognizing subcultures and new cultural developments.
- Developing and preserving common values

# Providing Entertainment
- Providing amusement, diversion and means of relaxation.
- Reducing social tension.

# Mobilization
- Campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics and economic development.

Studies of media content have often found that mass media tend to be conformist and supportive rather than critical of existing values. This support takes
several forms, like avoiding criticism of key institutions such as democratic politics, providing preferential access to the ‘social top’, giving disproportionate attention to those who exemplify the aspirations of the majority or to those who reject the values and norms of the society (celebrities and criminal) in the content.

MEDIA-SOCIETY THEORY III: CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

The third media-society theory that connects with my research is the Critical Political-Economic theory. This theory associates the economic condition of the media organization to the content offered by it. From the point of this theory, the media institution is an integral part of the economic system with close links with the political system. The nature of media content is determined by the markets and the economic interests of owners.

The consequences of this dependence on economic interests are reduction of independent media sources, concentration on media markets and preponderance of dominant groups and culture, neglect of disadvantaged or insignificant sectors of the potential audience, avoidance of financial risk-ventures and reduced investments in less profitable media tasks such as investigative reporting. The effects of economic forces on the media industry are not random. According to Murdock and Golding (1977) "they work consistently to exclude voices lacking economic power or resources.” This “consolidates the position of already established groups in the mass media market and excludes those groups who lack the capital base required for successful entry. Thus the voices that survive largely belong to those who are least likely to criticize the prevailing distribution of wealth and power; those most likely to challenge the existing arrangements could not publicize their dissent or opposition because they did not command resources needed for effective communication."

Thus media activity is perceived as an economic process and the media content as a commodity or product. There is a variant of this theory that suggests that the primary product of the media is the audience. It refers to the fact that media direct audience attention to the advertisers and their product and shape their response. The commercial media provide advertisers with more or less guaranteed potential customers according to desired profile.

The relevance of the political-economic theory has been greatly increased by recent trends in media business. There has been a growth in concentration of media

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ownership in fewer hands and a decline in public sector mass media under the growing pressure of 'deregulation', 'privatization' or 'liberalization'.

Golding and Murdock (1996) indicated several implications of the political-economic theory. First, they argued that the increasing share of large media corporations in content production has led to reduction of the 'public sphere' and put pressure on the autonomy of the media professionals. The second implication, they said was that though there are definite benefits of communication abundance, there is also the potentiality of widening information gap between the rich and the poor.

MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY: PRESS COVERAGE OF PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS IN WEST BENGAL

Mass media's relation to the society in which it operates depends on a variety of factors. It is dependent on the social structure and norms of the particular society, its political organization and allocation of economic resources. These factors consequently decide the power and influence of media in the relevant society. Mass media are the primary messengers in all modern societies. The point of conflict between the several media-society theories is on the nature of the message disseminated by media. The effect of the media content on the three main issues of the society namely, power, integration and change is also hugely debated by the different media-society theories. The media, ideally, should mobilize the participation of individuals and groups in political power sharing and economic resource-distribution, motivate social integration of the marginal groups and reinforce social change through political and economic empowerment of the masses. But these tasks may not be simple to the media because of the various compulsions under which it operates.

The essence of media-society relation lies in the fact that mass media are intermediaries between incidents in the society and the perspectives of various members on those incidents. An issue may have varied interpretations but commercial media would focus on that interpretation which would not upset the political-economic set-up and harm its business fortunes. The media is a business enterprise and like any other business institution will continuously strive to defend its own interests. This is the reason why on most occasions media content is subject to 'gate keeping' enforced by media institutions or their functionaries, the reporters and editors, rather than imposed by the society. The media institutions and journalists
practice self-censorship, a process of selection and retention of chosen news items for dissemination based on their ‘discretion’. We know that journalists and editors have to select from a wide range of stories. We know that their selection is systematically driven by a combination of organizational factors, norms, and audience interests. And we also know that the resulting news content is skewed towards stories that are, for instance, more sensational, and/or unusual, and/or conflict-ridden, and/or geographically proximate.41

Media institutions and journalists consider ‘gate keeping’ as inevitable in the wake of paucity of resources, lack of adequate space/time for communicating all relevant content and consideration of commercial viability of the content. Gate keeping claimed to be based on audience interest and needs, is in reality based on the perception and preference of the media professionals. Gate keeping allows media professionals to use their discretion and that can override the ‘actual’ news requirement of the audience. It is obviously not tenable for this filtered news content to maintain an objective and neutral stance. The content is therefore inconsistent with the ideal role the media is expected to play in developing societies like mobilization of the masses in the political and economic empowerment process.

The news, information or entertainment, published or broadcast by the media may be concerned with issues unrelated to the economic development or political empowerment of the society members. Issues irrelevant to the process of social change and integration can take up valuable column/air space in the mass media compared to development news because of their marketability to the advertisers and sponsors. The ‘compulsions’ arising out of profit concerns are common to media enterprises in free market society.

Before analyzing the theoretical perspectives of the research problem I wish to give an outlook of the political and social backdrop against which the English and vernacular newspapers of my survey (namely The Statesman, The Telegraph, Amrita Bazaar Patrika, Anandabazar Patrika, Jugantar and Aajkaal) published news on the Panchayat elections in West Bengal. This will help understand the compulsions, if any, imposed by the political-economic set-up on the sample newspapers in the process of dissemination of news. The 25 years (1978-2003) span of my study has witnessed several changes in the social structure and life of the people in the state of West Bengal. But the same cannot be said of the political organization. The reason is that the governance of the political system remained with one political party or rather
coalition over all these 25 years. The results of the Parliamentary, Assembly and Panchayat elections indicated the control exerted by the ruling coalition and revealed its actual dominance. The Left Front coalition not only formed consecutive governments in West Bengal, it became synonymous with political power in the State. It is a fact that before the coalition came to power in West Bengal political panchayats were non-existent. Political power was concentrated in the hands of few traditional power bases and largely eluded the majority masses. The panchayat elections heralded mass participation in decision-making process, a distinct change from the earlier symbolic involvement in the decision-implementing process. The Left Front which ideologically believed in sharing political power with the grassroots to improve their economic and social circumstances, decided to decentralize the political and administrative system as soon as it came to power in the state in 1977. The first panchayat election was held in West Bengal in 1978. Since then panchayat elections have been regularly held every five years. The elected panchayats and their members wielded enormous political clout and influence in rural West Bengal. It is to the credit of successive Left Front governments that they have not only ensured devolution of political power to the panchayats, but also given them authority to develop and manage resources within their administrative precincts.

During 1978-2003 there was definite change in the social structure of rural Bengal. Land reforms involving distribution of surplus land among marginal farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural workers was the most significant policy adopted by the state government. The State administration took steps to improve the economic status of the hitherto underprivileged majority. The panchayats played a significant role in the implementation of the land reform policy charted by the state government, especially in the identification of landless farmers and distribution of surplus lands among them. Armed with legislation by the State government and the control of purse strings, panchayats undertook developmental works in the key areas of health, education, and irrigation in rural Bengal.

While there can be no doubt on the positive influence of the panchayat system and the panchayat elections on the political and social structure of West Bengal, the political organizations did not evolve in an expected way. Yet, the prospect of grassroots participation in the scale as mammoth as the panchayat elections and the panchayat system had raised such hope. The setback to the initial expectation from the panchayats can be ascribed to the fact that elected members of political panchayats
from a cross-section of the rural society were active members of political parties. They gave greater importance to party allegiance than to their role as panchayat functionaries. In the process they became agents of political parties who were keen to capture the rural vote bank. This affected their functioning, their association with their community and most importantly, collaboration with other panchayat members of different political hues. The consequence was that economic and social development of the panchayat area and its members was hindered.

In the pre-1978 era grassroots participation in decision-making was improbable. The rich and powerful landlords formed the power base in the society and influenced decisions while the poor and marginalized were disregarded. After the constitutional empowerment of the grassroots decision-making power was concentrated in the hands of panchayat leaders but they were controlled by party leaders. The participation of the grassroots remained limited to voting during the elections for a long period before the formation of gram sabhas, gram sansads and gram unnayan samitis that ensured decentralization at a microcosm level. The powerful panchayat leaders appointed by political parties formed a hegemonic association similar to the one formed by landlords in the pre-1978 era. They administered and controlled the panchayat bodies and all their decisions were subject to the approval of their respective political affiliations. Moitree Bhattacharya in her book ‘Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralization or Democratic Centralism’ (2002) raised the issue that though panchayats in West Bengal “still pursued developmental activities, the extent of people’s involvement in panchayat activities has started to diminish.” In searching the reasons for this volte-face, she found that “the CPI (M) which is in power in majority of the panchayats has followed a highly interventionist role in the garb of democratic centralism.” Through her empirical investigation, she showed that “the elected panchayat representatives of CPI (M) are so dependent on party organization for being nominated, elected and then for running the daily activities of the panchayats that they cannot override the wishes of the party leaders at local level while taking decision.” This tendency adversely affected the emergence of new leaders and hindered grass-root involvement.

This political scenario may have contributed to the ‘detached’ observations and opinions of my sample newspapers. It has already been pointed out earlier in this chapter that the media content is contingent upon the society in which it operates, its political organization, social relationships and norms. An analysis of the news content
on the panchayat elections during the 25 years span of my study in the subsequent chapters will corroborate the first statement of this paragraph. The sample newspapers did incorporate news on grass-root aspiration, perspective and participation in their coverage. But their primary news sources were bureaucrats in command of the election process or political party spokespersons based in various party headquarters or prominent state-level political leaders. The grass-root voters and candidates were mere receivers of the messages transmitted by these newspapers. The occasional news items that appeared as 'anchor stories' in the sample newspapers narrated the development work done by the incumbent panchayats or the actual participation of grass-root representatives in the decision-making process of the panchayats, thereby including those who had actual stake in the panchayats. Such news items increased in quantity with the passage of time (see Table 7.2, 8.2, 9.2, 10.2, 11.2 and 12.2 for the increase in news items sourced from grass-root participants in 2003 compared to the previous years). Most news stories in the sample newspapers could not do away with petty political bickering and the picture of political conflict. They included customary reports on political hostility, seat sharing or the lack of it, squabble between allies or status of the opposition in panchayat areas. The issue of prospective win and loss of political parties and candidates rather than discussion on the nature of grass-root participation in the election process or on the work done by the panchayats dominated the newspaper reports. News journalists will argue that one of their important function in a democratic political set-up is to collect information, present facts and opinions in a manner which will best serve the purpose of providing 'informed choices' to voters in the selection of the right candidate and party. But this 'poll-centric' outlook actually deprived voters from making 'informed choices' as the news disseminated was so dominated by electoral politics that significant issues of participation, empowerment and emancipation were eclipsed. The newspapers did little to encourage grass-root participation or promote grass-root empowerment. From the perspective of the newspapers as business enterprises this outlook could, however, be rewarding as the columns of clandestine political news and analysis on the electoral prospects aroused the interest of a certain section of readers leading to wider circulation. However such newspaper content could not have much 'influence' on the rural grassroots though they may have formed the opinion of the urban readers on the subject of panchayat election. The newspaper content was not only inadequate but
often unrelated to the needs of the panchayat audience with the result that the effect of mass media on them was largely insignificant.

The theoretical perspective of *Grass-root Empowerment and the Press: A Study of the Newspaper Coverage of the Panchayat Elections in West Bengal (1978-2003)* cannot be explained with the help of one particular theory on the relation between mass media and society. It has to be analyzed keeping in mind several overlapping yet conflicting media-society theory.

If we are to consider the propositions developed by K. E. Rosengren then the newspaper coverage of the panchayat elections in West Bengal indicate a case of social structure influencing culture as proposed in the option of materialism. Mass media (newspapers et al) is an extension of the existing social order. The media content (like newspaper reports) is dependent on the prevalent political power structure in the relevant society (in the case of panchayat areas the political power structure included the political parties and dominant political leaders). Frequent interpersonal interactions between the two most important constituents of the election process – the candidates and voters – at the panchayat level also made mass media content dependent on the political organization. Materialism presumes that whoever owns or controls the media decide its content. It is no different in this case. The media regulated content, disseminated select news and views most of which originated from familiar sources, who were the decision makers and opinion leaders in the political organization. The dependence of the sample newspapers on the social structure meant that they were incapable of independently initiating content that motivated and encouraged grass-root participation in the local political and development process. The press coverage of the panchayat elections from 1978 to 2003, discussed in the subsequent chapters, is usually focused on the comments, arguments and interpretations given by political leaders and includes the perspective held by the political parties. The political leaders and political parties became the most recognized face of the political organization. They determined the public agenda which the media (sample newspapers) followed. The mass media (press) content was mostly influenced by the dominant forces in the political structure.

The critical political-economic theory we know, stated that the content offered by any media is dependent on the economic structure of the media organization. In the viewpoint of the critical political-economic theory, media institutions are integral part of the economic system with close links to the political system. The content of the
sample newspapers of my study is dominated by the important constituents of the
political system—the political parties and their leaders. The content comprised mostly
information on the activities of prominent political leaders, election meetings and
rallies organized by them and statements issued by them to the media expressing their
opinions, interests and motives. There was also adequate information on incidents of
violence during the campaigning period or on the Election Day or sensational
allegations made by competing political parties. The content was not persuasive or
motivating, nor directed by the objectives of social transformation or political
reformation. The press reporting of the panchayat elections seldom covered the grass-
root perspective. The impact of democratization and decentralization of political
power or the scope of development initiatives through the panchayats was of
secondary importance to the sample newspapers. The primary concern was the
activities and viewpoint of the important constituents in the political system. This
follows the tenet that media is closely linked to the existing political system. The
consequences of such an approach of the media has been pointed out in the political-
economy theory—lack of independent sources (too much dependence on the political
leaders and spokesmen for news), consolidation of status of dominant groups
(political parties gained prominence and clout from the press coverage), neglect of
marginal sections of the audience (the grassroots were rarely included in the news
reports), and avoidance of risk-venturing media tasks (like investigative reporting to
avoid stirring the proverbial hornet’s nest). All the above mentioned aspects were
witnessed in the coverage of the panchayat elections by the sample newspapers.

The political parties and their leaders were politically and economically
powerful than the majority grassroots. Consequently they influenced media content as
‘familiar’ and ‘powerful’ sources and made themselves inevitable to the mass media.
The grassroots rarely got opportunity to communicate their views and opinions and
generate media content. They did not command resources required for independent
communication to a large audience like the economically strong, dominant sources.
This widened the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor in the
society.

The coverage by the sample newspapers was partial and dependent upon a
restricted number of ‘powerful’ sources. In the coverage of the panchayat elections
the reporters and correspondents overlooked new sources. The correspondents did not
rely upon unidentified sources. The majority of press reporters who answered
Questionnaire I (see Annexure I of the study) when confronted with the question, who was more reliable as a source – the leader of a political party or a panchayat member – chose the first option, maybe they were bound by their organization’s policy to give emphasis to the recognized sources (some reporters who took part in Questionnaire I when asked whether they were bound by the organization’s policy did not deny the proposition). This implies that the readers were provided with a constricted representation of the panchayat elections in West Bengal by the sample newspapers. The coverage of all sample newspapers was directed by this same one-sided perspective. This is hardly surprising considering the fact that they all relied on the same type of sources. The most explicable reason therefore for the inability of newspapers to influence the grass-root rural electorate turns out to be their failure to explore the different news sources. News on development, on the objective and prospect of the elected local bodies was overlooked for sensational news like the allegations of political parties against each other, the rhetoric of the leaders against opponents and the incidents of violence. The absence of different sources of contrary opinions and arguments was responsible for the homogeneous content which failed to have an influence over the grass-root audience in the panchayat areas.

The elements in the media-society interface in case of the West Bengal panchayat elections besides the mass media, (sample newspapers in this case) and ‘powerful’ news sources included the immediate surroundings of the audience (in the form of the village community and its members). The sample newspapers were like ‘remote’ transmitters, cut-off from the audience and partial to some ‘preferred’ sources. The grassroots are integral to the local election process but the sample newspapers of my study chose to maintain closer association with the powerful sources – political parties, leaders of different statures and the administration.

The ‘faceless’ newspaper audience did not comprise estranged individuals. The panchayats members interacted with each other in the day-to-day activities and in the close-knit village set-up so the realities would not be unknown to them and they were likely to have definite idea of the issues at hand. So election news-wise they were well-informed though this may not have translated to their own participation in the decision-making process.

The dissemination of information on election issues like candidates or agenda could be achieved even without much intervention of the mass media instruments like the newspapers, through community networking and political campaigning especially
at the gram panchayat level. The political campaigning is more direct at this level and therefore more intense and bound to have a wider reach in the close-knit local set-up. The nature of information transmitted through political campaigning may not be impartial but at least voters have access to contradictory information and diverse opinions and viewpoints. As Hartmann, Patil and Dighe (1989)\textsuperscript{50} observed “in terms of participation and interest in panchayat affairs, localized activities of political parties are important.” They further observed that “political information and views entered the local political debate through mass media but political efficacy at village level was a determinant of attention to the media not the other way around. The influence of mass media was facilitated by political awareness generated initially by engagement in organized political activity at the local level.”

In local democratic set-up especially at the village and block level, interpersonal and group communication overshadows mass communication initiative. Hartmann, Patil and Dighe (1989)\textsuperscript{51} observed in their study on Mass Media and Village Life – An Indian Study, interpersonal communication is more effective than mass communication as source of information as well as influence. The dependence on interpersonal relations and the availability of a shared platform for identification and resolution of local issues make local democracy somewhat independent of mass communication.

This is not to suggest that the panchayat election process was independent of mass media communication. The constituents of the election process, the administration, the political leaders and political parties depended on mass media (as explicated by the content of the sample newspapers) to circulate news, provide publicity and mobilize support. Mass media supported the voting process but there was little evidence in the news reports that mass media content induced or motivated grass-root participation in the local political process. Rather it can be said that the bonding between community members over the development work in the panchayat area or on the experience of political power-sharing at the local level as evident from some reports in the sample newspapers was achieved without adequate help from the mass media instruments.

The observations made from the reports in the sample newspapers is assimilated in the flow chart below modeled on the observations made by Westley-Maclean (1957) and the suggestions made by McQuail (1983) on it depicted in Figure 5.2 of this chapter.
Figure 5.3: A Flow Chart depicting the various Elements and their Characteristics in the Media-Society Interface during Panchayat Elections in West Bengal

This flow-chart is indicative of a set-up where the news sources and mass media are interdependent while the audience is the mere recipient of the one-way communication. But the audience is not dependent on the one-way communication provided by the mass media. It relies on the interpersonal relations and the collective forces in the relevant society. The audience receives the messages delivered by the mass media but they are not unilaterally dependent on those messages. It is the integration of these messages along with those emanating from the discussion among the members of the community and the influence exerted by the political parties and their leaders that decides the nature of participation of the grassroots in the electoral process or in the decision-making process thereafter. The interaction between community members became pronounced after the introduction of gram sabhas in every village. The interactions at the gram sabhas provide an opportunity for exploring the diverse opinions before taking decisions and help realize the potentiality of the community as an organization.

Here I would like to refer to the mass society theory. The mass society theory, as we know, considers media as a powerful social institution integrated with the other sources of power and authority in a society. In my study on ‘Grass-root Empowerment and the Press: A Study of the Newspaper Coverage of the Panchayat Elections in West Bengal (1978 – 2003)’ the content of the sample newspapers on
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panchayat elections mainly comprised news, views and opinions of the politically and economically powerful – the administration comprising the chief minister, members of the council of the ministers, chief secretaries, Block Development Officers (BDOs), Superintendent of Police (SP), District Magistrates (DMs) and other designated officials, and political party leaders. The messages disseminated by the sample newspapers were unilateral and mostly communicated the perspective of the people mentioned above. The content on panchayat elections in the reports (see the subsequent chapters) does not offer any critical viewpoint or alternative perspective to the grass-root audience.

But while the theory posits that mass media becomes dominant and overriding in a society which lacks participation of the public, the actual scenario in my study is different as the community plays a vital role in the local political process. The content of the sample newspapers gives an incomplete picture of the panchayat election process in West Bengal as the participation and the involvement of the grassroots and the role of the community are not adequately explored. The newspapers did little to mobilize grass-root participation or promote grass-root empowerment. They were content to reflect the evolution in the social structure and the growth in political consciousness due to the panchayats and the events surrounding the panchayat elections.

The ‘society’ in the mass-society theory is a society where isolated and estranged individuals are dependent on the mass media and are consequently controlled by it. But the grassroots involved in the panchayat election process did not live in ‘isolation’ rather they coordinated and communicated with each other in the functioning of the panchayats. (This is evident from the occasional glimpses in the sample newspapers where panchayat bodies ignore political difference to work for development.) Under such circumstances, even though the mass media content is controlled and decided by select few, the likelihood of manipulation by the mass media is reduced drastically. The modifications in the mass-society theory suggested by Audience Effect Research are pertinent to my study. The community participation in the socio-political process restricts the influence of mass media content. The strong influence of peer groups, locality and community also restrains attempts of control and manipulation by mass media. There is less chance of manipulative use of the mass media by the political parties and politicians in the local democratic set-up as the community and its members play a vital role. The flow chart above therefore includes
'community' as one of the elements in the media-society interface in the panchayats in the villages of West Bengal.

THE COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS WITH THE WESTLEY-MACLEAN MODEL

The theoretical perspective of my research problem would be incomplete without referring to the similarities and differences with the Westley and MacLean model (1957). The flow chart above is based on the Westley and MacLean model which has been referred to earlier in this chapter as a frame of reference for theory formation about media and society. The sample newspapers, in my research study, are utilized by 'institutional advocates' – the politicians and the political parties - as channels for disseminating their perspectives on panchayats and the panchayat election. As referred to in the Westley-MacLean model, the mass media (sample newspapers) did not originate messages (though in a few news items the 'source' is unspecified) but relayed to the readers the views and accounts of the social advocates or the opinion leaders (in this case those of the political parties, their leaders, and administration). The important features of the Westley and MacLean model are evident in my research study. The sample newspapers decide the news and information to be published based on the assessment of audience interest. This 'interest' has no relation to the benefits or requirements of the rural audience; it is more related to the interest of the urban readers akin to that of mass consumers in any other product. The selection of news item is not dependent on audience feedback rather it is based on the judgment of the reporters and editors who may not be objective and neutral. There are various institutional impediments faced by the news reporters and editors. There may be other factors responsible for the predisposition of newsmen. (The survey conducted among them through Questionnaire I gives ample evidence to doubt the impartiality of mass communicators.) There is also enough reason to agree with the Westley-MacLean model that mass media communication is not purposive beyond gratifying interest of its consumers. The emphasize of the sample newspapers on sensational items like violence related to panchayat elections, infighting between coalition partners and public spat between political leaders was intended to capture reader attention. The newspapers did not aim to persuade or motivate its readers. The mobilization of grassroots for participation in the electoral process and in political decision making did not feature as an objective of the sample.
newspapers. The newspapers did not take active interest in disseminating information related to grass-root empowerment or provide them with adequate information for exercising their constitutional rights.

The Westley-MacLean model pointed out before the advent of mass communication social institutions like family and community mediated social experiences. Mass media, the new mediator had the potential to replace the existing social institutions. In case of the local political set-up in West Bengal the allied community continue to play a vital role in mediating social experiences.

The need to refer to the third media-society theory 'Functionalism' may be surprising. We have already noted that the sample newspapers of my study reflected the activities and viewpoints of the powerful sources and the grass-root viewpoint was overlooked. The 'need' of mass media communication, however, is felt by the urban audience. The theory of functionalism states that mass media responds to the demands of individuals and other social institutions in consistent ways and achieve unintended benefits for them in the form of continuity, order, integration, guidance, socialization, motivation, adaptation. In this context we have to refer to the functionalist theory of 'media dependency' advocated by Ball Rokeach and DeFleur (1989). The dependency of the grass-root panchayat members on the sample newspapers was not absolute, considering the other influences and controls over the panchayat members. It is equally true that news and information disseminated by the sample newspapers on the panchayat elections did not adequately inform, motivate, or gratify the needs of the grassroots. But the content of the sample newspapers served to guide and integrate the urban audiences on the issue of panchayats. The functional theory makes it clear that media function can refer to both the objective tasks as well as the utilities perceived by a media user. Though the mainstream sample newspapers were not objective in their reporting and mostly presented a linear perspective yet they were important to the urban audience as their coverage reflected the nature of the political contests in the panchayat elections, the status of panchayats in the state, the problems faced by the panchayats and the extent of grass-root participation in the electoral process. Lasswell had stated that one of the functions of media in society was to correlate the different parts of the society. The sample newspapers of my study carry out this function. The reference to the functional theory is thus relevant in the above context. The sample newspapers provided information on panchayat elections and social and political circumstances under which the elections were held to the urban audiences.
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The co-relation function of the mass media is evident in the description, explanation and interpretation of events and information on panchayats and the panchayat elections published in the sample newspapers. Despite the observation that facts and opinions in the reports and editorials did not give the complete picture, there is no denying that these reports served to familiarize the urban readers on the rural local election process. The recurrent mention of the issue in the mainstream media helped to develop and sustain the political consciousness of the people and strengthen democratic institutions like the panchayats. A criticism of media functionalism relevant to my study is that reporting by the sample newspapers conformed to the established norms and authority in the society. This has a disconcerting impact on the political and social organization as the alternative and dissenting voice is muffled or overlooked. We have discussed on this disturbing effect in the preceding paragraphs – the disparity in media access to the different sections in the society, prominence to the social-top and slight of the grassroots. But, whatever the adverse implications, there is no denying that the sample newspapers during the panchayat elections communicated regular messages in the form of reports, articles, photographs and editorials to emphasize the significance of the event and establish it as an issue in the 'public sphere'. Audience Effect research has pointed out that one motivation for media use by individuals is to reinforce attachment with the events in the society.53

CONCLUSION

The theoretical concepts relevant to my study have been discussed in this chapter. The mass media-society theories specified in this chapter would find reverberation in the detailed discussion on the coverage of the panchayat elections by the sample newspapers in the subsequent chapters. I have referred to three media-society theories in this chapter which relate to the findings and observations of my sample survey.

The one-sided approach and embrace of dominant perspective by the sample newspapers present them in a somewhat reactionary light. But there is no denying the fact that the sample newspapers were integral to the communication system. The information and ideas disseminated by the sample newspapers of my study were, for many people, the main and sometimes the only source of awareness on the issue of panchayat election. There is a need to distinguish between mass media audiences who have access to other sources of information (like the panchayat members) on the issue.
and those who are dependent on media institutions for description and interpretation of the events on it (like the urban audience who were neither voters nor candidates).

The sample newspapers formed the perception and impression of the urban audience on the issue of panchayat elections to a great extent. The content of these newspapers connected the diverse audiences in the concerned society on the issue. I must mention here that several perceptions on the mediator role of mass communication are evident in the coverage of the West Bengal panchayat elections by the sample newspapers though there is a distinct absence of feedback or interaction with the audience members. The sample newspapers serve as an interface between the events and experiences in the society and the potential audience. But the images and content reflected in the sample newspapers are not an independent and unbiased reflection of the event as the mass communicators and their ‘powerful’ sources decide the nature and type of matter to be published and the audience is compelled to read the selected content. The ‘gate keeping’ role of the reporters and editors of the sample newspapers hinders the dissenting and alternative views and restrict audience preference. The negative implications of the mediator role notwithstanding there are no doubt that mass mediated communication guided urban audience perception in the panchayat elections. But as far as the media function of mobilization is considered the sample newspapers do not campaign for political or social development. Here we can refer to the observation made in the Westley-Maclean model that media as a social institution has specific objectives which may not coincide with the objectives of the society. So in case of the newspaper coverage of the panchayat elections the interactions between the sample newspapers and their readers was that of a guide and interpreter to a ‘chosen’ section but not a crusader or advocate of social and development cause.

REFERENCES
2. See www.indiannewspapersociety.org.


6. Ibid, pp 4-5.


8. Most contemporary conceptualization of the concept of “public sphere” are based on ideas of Jürgen Habermas in ‘The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Study’ (1962). It was translated in English by Thomas Burger, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989.


34. Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1989) *op cit.*


39. Ibid.


45. Ibid.


47. Moitree Bhattacharya, Panchayati Raj in West Bengal: Democratic Decentralization or Democratic Centralism, New Delhi: Manak, 2002 p 218.


51. Ibid, p 259.

52. Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1989) op cit.