

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study sought to investigate the “So Sorry” politoons. The previous chapter reviewed the literature on cartoons, political communication, and Indian news media. This chapter further reviews the literature on the agenda-setting theory of mass media, the propaganda model, and the five filters of media operations- the theoretical framework adopted for the study. Besides, it briefly highlights the issues addressed by the agenda-setting theory and the propaganda model in the performance of media. It then justifies the theory and model chosen to guide the data collection to explore the research objectives. The study is based on McCombs and Shaw’s Agenda-Setting theory and Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model.

In this study, I apply the key notions of agenda-setting theory and propaganda model to critically analyse the performance of “So Sorry” politoons during the “2019 Lok Sabha elections.” Thus, the thesis has investigated the editorial policy of the “So Sorry” politoons. The study has provided significant insight into how the “So Sorry” politoons routinely make public consensus on the subjects of the day, changing their perceived salience in public discussions, (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004)—or diverting public attention away from some stories and news items while concurrently directing attention towards others, (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The study has followed the traditional 1980s agenda-setting theory, which focuses on how candidate images – their attributes – are constructed and how the attribute agenda-setting affects the news coverage of political candidates on the public’s image of those candidates, (Baumann, Zheng, and McCombs, 2018). In addition, Herman and Chomsky’s Propaganda Model postulates that media routinely make selection choices that define ‘worth’ and ‘unworthy’ issues. I have explored these predictions in this study and applied the model to “So Sorry” politoons. Thus, the thesis focused on analysing the performance of “So Sorry” politoons during the “2019 Lok Sabha elections”. The study has also expanded my knowledge of the state of contemporary Indian news media. This study focuses on the pre-and post-election coverage of India’s most famous political cartoons to “identify the salience of the major political parties.” Ethnographic content analysis has been used to analyse the “So Sorry” politoons and examine the portrayal of

each party and leading candidate and the depiction of the respective adversaries (the candidates of the two opposing parties). I endeavour to explore the themes, representation of political parties and imageries constructed in the episodes of “So Sorry” politoons.

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting research has become the subject of hundreds of studies and publications since the 1968 Chapel Hill study, which McCombs and Shaw (1972) tested empirically for the first time. As a result, agenda setting is now one of the most crucial “frameworks in media effects” research. Agenda-setting research is one of the most well-established theories in political communication scholarship. Anywhere there is a “reasonably open politics and a reasonably open media system,” according to McCombs (2004, p. 37), agenda-setting effects occur. The media’s redefining role from “managing what people think” to “what people think about” fits the central tenet of agenda setting (Chan, 2002). As a result, the agenda-setting theory has been readily associated with shaping public opinion or persuasive propaganda by academics around the world.

Agenda-Setting began as a study of conventional news in “political communication, drawing on the seminal work” of McCombs and Shaw (1972). More recently, agenda-setting theory has expanded to a wider range of media platforms (such as “cable news, news websites, and blogs”), as well as to fields outside of communications (such as “economics, education, or political science”) and the field of communications itself (such as “health or corporate communication, public relations”) McCombs (2005). The “public agenda, the media agenda, and the political agenda” are three areas where agenda-setting takes place (Tan & Weaver, 2007).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) discussed the agenda-setting role of media, which Bernard Cohen first summarised. Cohen (1963, p. 13) argued that the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. Initial, agenda-setting theory posits that issues emphasised by the mass media are perceived as important by their audiences; that is, the media can transfer salient issues on the media agenda to the public agenda. Agenda-setting describes how the media helps shape public opinion on current events by changing how essential people believe such problems to be in public discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). Following the original agenda-setting

study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), subsequent researchers looked into the circumstances that created the media agenda (Kushin, 2010). McCombs and Shaw (1972, p. 176) state that

“In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues-that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign.”

It is crucial to talk about agenda-setting throughout election campaigns. With time, technology has enabled people and organisations to communicate directly with an audience through social media. Since its early research studies, campaign finance with “money that offers greater message exposure through advertising” has significantly changed “agenda-setting” in an election campaign context.

In 2008, Bennett and Iyengar (p. 709) emphasised agenda-setting in specific: the agenda-setting paradigm reflects the capacity of ideas to motor on, unimpeded by inconvenient realities to the contrary. Previous studies have investigated the agenda-setting effect that “serves as an appropriate basis for studying new political communication realities” (Holbert et al., 2013, p. 1675); conclusively, the agenda-setting effect in political cartoons (Boukes, 2019). However, agenda-setting as a “multidimensional theory” has developed, “representing and extending the wide range of viewpoints already found in the literature” (Boukes, 2019). Most importantly, introducing political cartoons into this has broadened the diversity of agenda-setting research. However, with political cartoons’ current popularity, this “reinvented style of political journalism” (Baym, 2005) could potentially have an agenda-setting effect. Traditional news media are still the focus of agenda-setting studies. The humorous nature of the genre, however, would restrict its impact because exceptionally reliable venues would sway assessments of public importance (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982).

3.1.1. First-Level Agenda Setting

There is a considerable discussion about agenda-setting related to “framing and priming.” During the past four decades, the exploration of agenda-setting effects has

expanded from issue “agenda setting (first-level agenda setting),” in other words, the “transmission of object salience,” to “attribute agenda setting (second-level agenda setting),” which is the “transmission of attribute salience” (McCombs, 2004).

According to the original agenda-setting study, a topic of public salience is influenced by how much media attention it receives. The public’s perception of a topic’s salience and ability to move from the “media agenda to the public agenda” results from recurrent media exposure. The idea contends that the lack of media attention given to an issue reduces its likelihood of becoming an important item on the public agenda. Because of the limitations of “media time and space, topics compete to be a part of the media agenda.” Shaw and Martin (1992, p. 911) state, “the press may, unconsciously, provide a limited and rotating set of public issues, around which the political and social system can engage in dialogue.” Wanta (2007, p. 42) argued,

“if the news media do not devote coverage to issues, individuals will perceive these issues to be less salient than the issues that receive coverage. Transfer of salience based on selection could include the variable of story placement.”

3.1.2. Second-Level Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting at the second level specifically emphasises candidate images in the context of elections. Prior studies indicate that candidate qualification and personality qualities are some of the more salient characteristics that are “highlighted by both the media and voters” (Nimmo & Savage, 1976; Graber, 1972). McCombs, Lopez- Escobar, and Llamas (2000) discovered a strong relationship between the “valence of audience descriptions” of those “same candidates during the 1996 Spanish general election and the valence of newspaper candidate portrayals” (“positive, neutral, and negative candidate attributes”) concerning five important candidate attributes (“ideology/issue positions, biographical details, perceived qualifications, integrity, and personality and image”).

Coleman and Banning (2006) discovered that viewers of “television news images of candidates” communicate parodies that are seen as “sympathetic or unsympathetic” by the public depending on whether they exhibit “positive or negative” behaviour, such as “gestures and facial expressions.” According to research, news coverage of political candidates affects how the public perceives those politicians (Kim & McCombs, 2007;

Becker & McCombs, 1978; Weaver et al., 1981; King, 1997). The “agenda of attributes” revealed in the “election coverage” is strongly connected with the “agenda of attributes in the voters’ descriptions of the candidates,” according to studies of candidate image development (e.g. Kim & McCombs, 2007; McCombs, Lopez- Escobar, Llamas, 2000, Luo, 2013).

The task of “selecting and framing messages” is one of the key functions of mass media. One major “theoretical model of the late twentieth century” that reflects this key “decision-making role of the media and their influence on the public is agenda-setting research identified” by McCombs and Shaw. The fundamental idea behind agenda-setting is a transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. A topic’s volume of coverage (media choice and repeated exposure of a topic) was the basis for agenda-setting research’s initial test of the “transfer of topic salience.” Later, questions about the transfer of salience through the issue’s presentation were added (“media framing of topic attributes”). The “agenda-setting” theory postulates that the media may effectively influence what and how the public thinks about those specific themes. Agenda-setting scholars have constantly questioned, “how public agendas are generated.” In the past, this research has recognised the media’s ability to choose and frame content, but it has also noted that people and groups with a particular goal may try to sway the selection of media content.

At the second level, agenda-setting is the transmission of attribute salience. Even once a topic has been selected for coverage, the media’s ability to cover every story’s angle is constrained by time and space, much like the selection phase of content decision-making. The “selection of the facts or highlights that will be included in that particular story,” known as framing, is part of the media function, which is expanded to cover more than just the themes that are exposed. Schudson (1998, p. 31) resists that “the journalist has the opportunity, indeed the professional obligation, to frame the message.” Entman (1993, p. 57) further clarifies,

“to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. He augments that frames call attention to

some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions.”

Agenda-setting research has concentrated on the “transfer of salience” of subject aspects, attributes, or qualities that can be given in media coverage, expanding on the original agenda-setting premise that media exposure alone influences the public salience of topics. The aspects of the coverage that are highlighted are those that can more easily move from the “media agenda to the public agenda.” Thus, the “agenda-setting function” can be summed up as a process through which the media can affect the subjects that the public considers and the aspects of those subjects that they find significant. Ghanem (1997, p. 8) accentuates that

“the frequency with which a topic is mentioned probably has a more powerful influence than any particular framing mechanism, but framing mechanisms could serve as catalysts for frequency in terms of agenda-setting.”

3.2 Propaganda Model

The Propaganda Model of media operations was first laid out in the book *Manufacturing Consent* by Herman and Chomsky. It argues that the “mass media are instruments of power that mobilise support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity,” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. xi). It says that in a capitalist democracy, media function as essential propaganda mechanisms and suggest that class interest has “multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices” (Ibid., p. 2). The propaganda model contends that media serves “political ends” by “mobilising bias, patterning news choices, marginalising dissent, and allowing the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public,” (Ibid., p. x).

According to Jeffrey Klaehn (2002), the Propaganda Model (PM) demonstrates how the media frequently makes editorial decisions that identify and categorise what constitutes “worthy” and “unworthy” causes. He points out that Herman and Chomsky accuse the “elite, agenda-setting media” of effectively legitimising and facilitating the “(geo)political-economic interests” of dominating elites through framing news coverage of “government (state) policies in general (foreign and domestic).” The PM claims that

media material is frequently structured to create consent and silence critics of corporate hegemony simultaneously.

Klaehn (2002) has called for an investigation that draws on the propaganda model to understand the “state’s and corporate capitalism’s” interrelations and the “ideological network” and scholarly debates on the pattern of media behaviour. The propaganda model emphasises the pattern of media behaviour concerning institutional imperatives and structural dimensions in which media work. It explains media behaviour patterns in “mechanisms and policies whereby the powerful protect their interests naturally and without overt conspiracy” (Herman, 2000, p. 109). Chomsky comments that “the media will protect the interests of the powerful, not that it will protect state managers from the criticism” (Chomsky, 1989, p. 149). The propaganda model claims that media sets the agenda; this functions as a propaganda mechanism in several ways. The model assumes that the “media routinely make a selection of choices that establish and define ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ issues.” The elite media decide which “topics, issues, and events are eligible to be considered newsworthy for lower-tier media,” which Herman and Chomsky named “other media” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 1-2).

The propaganda model is an “institutional critique of media performance” (Ibid., p. 34) and theorises as an “outcome of market forces.” It outlines the “circumstances under which media will be relatively open or closed” (Chomsky, 1989, p. 149). Klaehn argues that the “powerful have individual objectives but presumes that dominant elites share common political, economic and social interests”; and that the media will reflect these interests in ways that are functional for dominant elites and social institutions, (Herman, 2000, p. 168). Herman and Chomsky acknowledge that “journalists and editors” play a vital role in “disseminating information and mobilising support for policies advocated by the special interest groups that dominate the state and private economy” (Ibid., p. 150). They argued that meaning is “formed and produced at an unconscious level, so conscious decisions are typically understood as natural, objective, and common sense” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). In effect, the propaganda model postulates that “media content serves political ends” in numerous ways (ibid). Thus, the media is understood as an ideology “apparatus for dominant elites” (ibid). This idea is also at the core of my inquiry.

Chomsky outlines the role that the media plays in connection to society, the government, and the general public in terms of “propaganda.” Chomsky sees the media as a dependent since it operates under market conditions that serve the political elite’s entrenched interests. Due to the interdependence of political and economic elites, the political elite—represented by the state—consequently shapes the media. Chomsky questions the media’s objectivity in modern politics and links it to the characteristics of our society and democracy. He has two different ideas about democracy. One of them is that it should be a people-friendly approach with free and open access to information, but in reality, such a social structure is rarely obvious. As a result, in the alternative democracy he described, knowledge is confined and regulated, and people are not allowed to manage their own affairs. The alternative democratic model and media operation are used everywhere.

3.2.1. Five “filters” of news production

The propaganda model consists of five elements or “filters.” After passing through these five filters, only the cleansed news gets printed. These “filters explain the structural forces of the media that come to bear on the media product” (Comeforo, 2010). Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 2) argue that these five filters:

“fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns.”

Herman and Chomsky described five editorially distorting filters used in news coverage in mass media. These filters allow money and power to manufacture filtered news fit to print, marginalising dissent, and allowing the government and dominant private players to get their messages to the public in order to serve their interests, (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 3). The five filter elements are;

“(1) ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by the government, business, and “experts” funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4)

“flak” as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) “anti-communism” as a national religion and control mechanism.”

The first filter underlines that the “media is closely interlinked with and shares common interests with dominant institutional sectors, such as corporations, the state, and banks” (Ibid.). The second postulates advertising as a source of primary income and the “influence of advertising value on the news production process” (Ibid). Most media must sell markets (readers) to buyers (advertisers) to remain financially viable. Chomsky (1989, p. 8) comments that the media content naturalises, reflecting “the perspective and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product.”

The Third filter is Source. Government and corporate sources are held in high regard and generally trusted — rarely challenged. These dominant elites routinely facilitate the news-gathering process: providing press releases, advance copies of speeches, periodicals, photo opportunities and ready-for-news analysis, (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 18-24). The fourth filter is termed ‘Flak’. Flak means dominant social institutions (most notably the state) possess the power and requisite organisational resources to pressure media to play a propagandistic role in society, (Herman, 2000, p. 160).

The fifth filter is the ideology of anti-communism. Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 29) explained that:

“Communism as the ultimate evil has always been the spectre haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and superior status... This ideology helps mobilise the populace against an enemy. Because the concept is fuzzy, it can be used against anybody advocating policies threatening property interests or supporting accommodation with communist states and radicalism.”

The fifth filter provides several dimensions that are connected to the dominant ideologies. Currently, the dominant ideology in most of the capitalist world is neoliberalism. Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn (2018, p. 280) conclude in their book that

“Neoliberal ideology, with its commercialism, entrepreneurialism, individualism, and cynicism, are amplified by online algorithms, video games, and TV shows.”

(Radical) representatives of the establishment thus term alternatives to neoliberalism as communist or socialist (Ibid.). Anti-communism serves to consecrate neoliberalism through Thatcher’s dictum, “there is no alternative” (Ibid).