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# UNIT 15 MEDIA AND PUBLIC POLICY

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## 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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Democracy and Media are two major elements in the process of Development, as development is no longer viewed as the sole responsibility of the elected governments. In spite of the policy initiatives, the governments need people's participation in the development and the various democratic processes like elections, movements and public debates help in securing it. The Media, including the news media, too provides a forum for public debate on the issues of development apart from providing information regarding such issues.

In this era of globalisation, the media has emerged as one of the most powerful components of social management. The role of mass media in shaping the public opinion is well known. However, some communication experts and social scientists think that opinion leaders have more significant role in shaping the public opinion. But from the days of Capitalist revolution, the press was accorded the status of the fourth estate for no other reason than its power to influence the minds and thus accelerate the political process in favour of bourgeois democracy.

In this Unit, we shall understand the role of media in the policy making in general and public policy in particular. The role of media is two fold. On the one hand, the media influences the policy makers by putting forth the opinions expressed by various groups including educationists, journalists and experts, leaders of different political parties, religious leaders, workers and peasants Unions, etc. On the other hand, the media pressurises the policy makers or the authorities to act in response to people's interest and demands by opening a debate and educate the masses. We shall also discuss the

impact of globalisation and technological advancement on the process of democratisation as well as on media and social development.

We shall also examine the role of media technologies in advancing the process of democratization.

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## **15.2 WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?**

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Public policy is a process that allows the national government, state governments, municipalities and panchayats to implement certain measures that would be in public interest. The matters regarding the health, social welfare, media, defense, agriculture, etc., are considered as issues affecting the masses and are said to be matters of public policy.

### **15.2.1 Definitions**

A definition of public policy could be the one given by Considine who says, “public policy is an action which employs governmental authority to commit resources in support of a preferred value”. Policy-making, according to him, includes “the clarification of public values; commitments of money and services; and granting of rights and entitlements” (Considine, 1994, p3).

According to a scholar, public policy is where the “communities trying to decide something as a community.” However, another scholar feels that public policies are “government decisions and actions to solve public problems”. He also defines public policy by saying, “Public policy is the result of the struggle over the definition of the good society and the best ways to make it happen”.

Yet, another definition of public policy could be the one that sees public policy as a strategy for achieving public goals through the management and allocation of power, rights, resources, information, and inducements.

As we have seen, the domain of public policy is very large and it includes anything under the sun that concerns people. Be it a matter of hygiene or be it a matter of potable drinking water there is always a need to identify a policy and then execute it in such a way that people feel good.

### **15.2.2 Public Policy and Governance**

In democracies, people elect their leaders at various levels based on the latter’s capabilities of providing good governance. If the leaders belonging to a particular political party that forms the government do not make policies on matters affecting the masses, they are rejected by people. It is important for political parties who rule and those who sit in the opposition benches to have a certain perspective and stand on major issues concerning public policy. In a way, one can say that policy making, debating over the existing policies and projecting a different viewpoint about public policy, becomes an integral part of democracy and democratic governance.

In democratic forms of government; the major part of public policies are made in the parliament through legislative processes. Democracies have many layers of policy making institutions like state level and local governing bodies. Parliament is the supreme symbol of people's participation where people elect their representatives. These representatives then discuss and debate all policy initiatives of the government before they are legislated upon. The political parties are another form of people's representation. People with similar political interest and views form a political party that reflects the ideology of a section of people. Workers and peasant movements, civil society like NGO's and Social Movements are also forums of political expression. Media is yet another institution that facilitates the communication between the government and the people.

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## **15.3 MEDIA AND DEMOCRACIES: ITS ROLE AND EFFECT**

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### **15.3.1 Early days**

The press and politics have been closely associated since the invention of printing press and later with the emergence of democracy in Europe. Though the press emerged in Europe much earlier than the bourgeois revolution, it acquired significance only during and after the revolution. The feudal system was overthrown to establish the bourgeois democracy that cherished the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. However, the press, before the revolution, became a leading forum for the debate without which the thoughts of John Stuart Mill, Hobbes and Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu and many other philosophers and political thinkers would not have been disseminated. The much-talked about philosophical debate between Pascal and Descartes also became possible by the existence of the press. It would be appropriate to say that the press became the vehicle for these debates that provided the theoretical base to the political movement of bourgeois democracy. Therefore, it was legitimate to grant it the status of the fourth estate in modern democracies.

The task of the press in the initial days of capitalism was to consolidate the achievements of the emerging democracy. It was at this juncture where the role of press in the political development was defined. It became the main vehicle of the ideological growth of bourgeois democracy and communicated with the people on behalf of the authorities. Those who came to enjoy power have always claimed that they are forming a government of the people, for the people and by the people. Whatever political, economic, social or cultural had to be reported could not have been reported if it would undermine the gains of the system and would attempt to revert the society to the older system. It was for this reason that the advocate of the democracy said, "if freedom is abused to the extent of threatening good morals and the authority of the state, it must be restrained."

In the years to come the bourgeois democracies matured and realised that the process of democratising the masses could not be accelerated without allowing a more free press than what it already was.

The modern democratic states with their lofty ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity regulated the political process of the nations with the help of Parliament (Legislature),

Government (Executive) and the Court (Judiciary). It declared the press as the fourth pillar of democracy. The Press then became the prime agent of free debate in Europe and America.

Talking about the mission of American Press, Herbert J. Altschull describes the relationship of democracy and the news media. He says:

“In a democracy, it is the people who rule, and their voices are heard in the voting booths. The decisions made by the people in voting booths depend upon the information made available to them. The news media primarily provides that information. Hence, the news media are indispensable to the survival of democracy. To carry the assumption a bit further: A democracy is a free society. In no other form of government are citizens free. Hence, for a society to be free, the flow of information to the citizens must come from news media that are free. By now this is a central assumption not only to Americans but also to the most other citizens in the capitalist world”.

### **15.3.2 Modern Democracies and the Press**

The media is increasingly intertwined with the practice of democracy in various countries. Government officials and political candidates use the media to advance their agendas. People rely more and more on the media to judge how their leaders campaign, govern, shape public policy, and communicate their ideas. Curiously, this increase in media influence corresponds to a decrease in voter participation. In order to be well-informed citizens and active participants in our democracy, people must understand both our governing processes and the role of the media in them.

Common citizens have a great deal of exposure to the media in the realms of entertainment and culture, yet most do not understand how the media, politics, and public policy interact with each other and thereby affect their lives. What they need is to know these things in order to become more thoughtful “consumers” of media messages related to politics. How can we challenge them to explore the changing relationships between the media and democracy? These are some of the questions that educators, journalists, media leaders, and citizens must explore together.

The modern democracies have witnessed the complex and increasingly critical relationship between media and public policy. In a society where a 24/7 news cycle bombards a fractured public, where ‘infotainment’ and the ‘argument culture’ often overshadow traditional journalism, it has become more difficult to focus public debate and build political consensus necessary to shape, lead or change public policy. Polls, focus groups, talking points, sound-bitten debates, massive spending by special-interests and corporate ratings/circulation pressures can distort and overshadow important issues.

It has become imperative on students of media and public policy to know how these forces collide in our modern media. Equally important is to examine how coverage decisions regarding public policy are made in newsrooms, how advocates use and rely on the media to advance their message and how different media reflect different strengths and vulnerabilities.

### **15.3.3 New Media Technologies and Democracy**

The emergence of Information Technologies and the convergence of various communication technologies have changed the nature of media. The media, which earlier meant the press alone, now included radio, television and computers to make it much wider than ever before. However, the growing use of Information Technology has brought many new changes in the nature of press. The information is readily available on the net, which has reduced the dependence of the readers or citizens on Newspapers. The Governments world over are now not only using internet for providing information to its citizens, but are promoting the use of the internet and other digital technologies to transact day to day business like submitting applications, filling the forms, issuing orders and notices, etc. It is this use of digital technology that is known as e-governance.

The spread of the computers and the Internet is limited for the time being. But with more and more rationalisation of costs of IT and telecommunication facilities, the new media technologies would have a greater freedom of expression as the public or private control on the content is much less in new media than other technologies like press, radio and television. The earlier media were allowed the freedom so that they would be able to represent the people, but due to the cost of technologies and their management, the ownership of these media had the privilege of selecting their own content.

Now with the e-governance and seemingly lack of control of the Internet, the government and the people have a live channel for communication and more and more interest groups are networking with other people of similar interest and are also able to manipulate public opinion on certain issues.

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## **15.4 MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC OPINION**

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It can be said with certainty that media shapes the public opinion to some extent. There have been various studies that have shown that media is not the only agent of shaping the people's perception. During the US Presidential elections in 1940, Paul E. Lazarfeld and others conducted a research and found that Mass media had no direct influence in the decision making of the people. In their book entitled "The People's Choice", they described the interpersonal relationships, peer group pressures and the opinion leaders as some of the major factors for shaping the public opinion. However, the role of mass media was not negated altogether in the two step flow of information model as the mass media was seen as a major player in disseminating the information to the people including the opinion leaders.

The communication theorists in the 1970s again emphasised the role of media in moulding the public perception. George Garbner (1967) worked on the Cultivation Theory in which he described the media as moulders of the society. He believed that Mass media has subtle effect on people's perception as he described the media as cultivators of dominant image patterns due to long and persistent exposure. His researches were in tune with the time as, during that period, advertising had made enough impact on the society. Later, the media and politics relationships were investigated and analysed by Maxwell McCombe and Donald Shaw (1972) who explored the role, the media played

in the agenda setting during the election. The Agenda setting theorists hold that the media is successful in telling the people “what is to think about” than in telling them “What to think”. This theory depends upon the study of media where the significance given to certain issues by media were compared with the importance given to the same issues by people and politicians. It says that over a period of time, the priority given to certain issues by media become the public priorities as well.

Other scholars of media have provided us with alternative theories of Mass Media, but here we would discuss two other theories. Melvin de Fleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach proposed the Dependency theory in which certain social and psychological factors prevent media from exercising control over their audiences. As they say, “Mass Media not only lack arbitrary influence powers, but also their personal lack of freedom to engage in arbitrary communication behaviour. Both media and their audiences are integral part of their society. The surrounding socio-cultural context provides controls and constraints not only on the nature of media messages but also on the nature of their effects on audiences.” The other relevant theory is called the Development Communication theory which was formulated during the efforts of McBride Commission to study the Communication problems of developing societies. The absence of communication infrastructure, the dependence on the developed world for hardware and software were some of these problems. The common commitment of these societies to economic, political and social development as the primary national task and the need to identify countries with similar interests and identities in international politics were the objectives that these countries wanted to achieve. The major concern of the development communication theorists was to find the means to use media for development programmes like poverty alleviation, population control, literacy drive, employment generation scheme, etc. The effectiveness of this theory depends upon the governments as they could restrict the freedom or intervene in media operations by legislating policies.

It is evident from the above facts that the media is a powerful tool of disseminating information, educating people on major issues and also of entertaining them. It is the power of media to influence the public opinion which sometime forces the governments to impose draconian measures like censorship.

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## **15.5 CASE STUDY**

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The role of media in influencing or affecting the public policy could be seen in numerous public policy issues. For the purpose of our learning, we are only taking one example of public policy analysis, though in recent days a number of policy shifts have taken place. Each one of such changes have provoked a serious public debate i.e., the MRTP, disinvestment, labour laws, Foreign Direct Investments, etc.

### **15.5.1 Public Policy on CNG**

Recently, the Delhi Government on the orders of Supreme Court, decided to introduce CNG as environment friendly fuel in order to reduce the air pollution in this metropolis capital of our country. The decision came as a blow to the diesel vehicle manufacturers especially to those who either had launched their light motor vehicles or were going to

introduce diesel driven cars in the market. The need to convert all public transport vehicles into CNG operated vehicles caused many hardships to the transporters. They in turn harassed the commuters. The Supreme Court intervened and ordered a deadline for implementing the policy. However, due to contradictory interests, there were many kinds of pressures. Finally, one could see a considerable battle of interest between BJP, the opposition party in Delhi, and the Congress, the ruling party.

This battle was extended to media as it reported on almost every stage of the implementation of this policy. Some of the major headlines of the stories that appeared in newspapers during this period would explain the involvement of media. They were as follows:

Polluted Delhi wants CNG, but BJP says no  
(Times News Network)

CSE hails SC judgement  
(Express News Service, April 6, 2002)

CNG issue leaves Cabinet a divided house  
(The Hindu, April 8, 2002)

Khurana, Sahib Singh, thumb noses at Supreme Court  
Claim Ministers Ram Naik and Arun Jaitley back an ordinance  
(Express News Service, April 8, 2002)

Centre is trying to usurp court's powers: Experts  
(Express News Service, April 8, 2002)

In fact, apart from media, the political parties, and the interest groups like the transporters and the commuters, there were other pressure groups and opinion leaders in this game. CSE (Centre for Science and Environment), an NGO, was vociferously advocating the use of CNG as an alternative Eco friendly fuel for the vehicles in Delhi. The details of this case are archived by the NGO in their web site. Knowing fully well that CSE itself is a concerned party in this case any one studying the public policy analysis must also visit other sites and people to know their stand and reasons for supporting or opposing the use of CNG. Nevertheless, the material documented by CSE in its web site itself is enough to understand the role of public policy and analyse the policy of various governments towards pollution and related matters.

The extracts from a few press releases of CSE which highlight the issue of air pollution and various political and business interests involved in supporting or opposing the use of CNG are given here below:

**NOVEMBER 1, 1998**

## **TWO DECADES OF BREATHLESS DEVELOPMENT**

*The GDP in India has gone up two and a half times in the past twenty years — and pollution from vehicles has gone up 8 times. Policies such as those which allow the proliferation of two-stroke and diesel vehicles are responsible, says CSE*

According to a study conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment, while the GDP in India has gone up by two and a half times in the 1975-'95 period, industrial air pollution has gone up four times, and pollution from vehicles has gone up by a shocking 8 times.

These figures were released by CSE director Anil Agarwal at a public meeting on November 1, the third anniversary of the CSE Right to Clean Air Campaign. The campaign was launched on November 1, 1996, after the release of the report, *Slow Murder: The deadly story of vehicular pollution in India*.

The campaign had immediate effect after it was launched in 1996, when the Supreme Court issued *suo moto* notice to the Delhi Transport Department following the release of *Slow Murder*, and asked them to come up with a comprehensive plan of action. Following the November 1, 1997 anniversary meeting, when CSE revealed that one person dies prematurely every hour due to air pollution in Indian cities, the then environment minister Saifuddin Soz reacted to the resulting media publicity by announcing a white paper.

However, the government has failed to come up with a well thought out short-term strategy, Agarwal said. Instead, they have encouraged the proliferation of vehicles with diesel and two stroke engines, despite evidence that these two components of the vehicle population are the most polluting. The population of two-stroke vehicles grew from 40 percent of the vehicle population in 1975 to 70 percent of the vehicle population in 1995, while hydrocarbons, the main pollutant from two-stroke engines, went up 10 fold in the 1980-'94 period.

Similarly, diesel consumption has gone up 4 times in the 1980 - 1994 period, resulting in a 9 fold increase in suspended particulate matter. Criticising the government for selling poor quality diesel, Agarwal said that if Indian refineries are unable to improve diesel quality, the country should import diesel. "The diesel manufactured by the public sector Indian refineries is 250 times dirtier than the world's best," Agarwal said.

**January 13, 2000**

**"We shall overcome" claims Delhi CM**

Addressing visitors to the CSE exhibition on air pollution at the Auto Expo at Pragati Maidan, Delhi's chief minister expressed optimism that the problem would be solved

Among the glitzy cars and short skirts that are the usual attractions of the annual auto expo, the Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) exhibition on air pollution stood out as a grim reminder that there is a hidden price behind the expanding automobile sector. An indication comes from the statistic that every time the GDP in India doubles, air pollution rises by 8 times.

The CSE exhibition was inaugurated by Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, who contributed to a graffiti board, writing, "We shall overcome with your help". The chief minister said the government was not able to implement the Supreme Court's order for CNG buses by March 2000, but claimed that it would definitely be implemented by the end of the year.



According to the CM, the delay was caused by lack of facilities to manufacture the CNG buses, and because the central Ministry of Surface Transport failed to meet its deadline in setting up 80 CNG stations in the city. Only 12 have been set up so far. But according to R Ramakrishnan from Ashok Leyland, their company already has the capacity to manufacture CNG buses. To increase production and meet the requirements of the government, Ramakrishnan says Leyland would need a large enough order to make it viable for them to manufacture the kits.

Answering a question from school children, who attended the inauguration as reporters for Gobar Times, the CSE magazine for children, Dikshit admitted that the government had not done enough to curb the growth of diesel. Diesel vehicles emit as much as 10 to 100 times more suspended particulate matter than petrol vehicles. Several large cities of the world, with a high concentration of vehicles, including Tokyo and California have taken steps to reduce the use of diesel vehicles. Separate studies carried out by the German Environment Ministry, the California Environment Protection Authority and a Swedish consultancy have confirmed that the harmful effects of diesel exceed those of petrol.

CSE asked the chief minister to consider a 'smog alert' system for Delhi, to warn citizens when pollution levels reach a harmful level. Additionally, luxury diesel cars have to be banned immediately, and tax systems to improve technology and fuel have to be introduced.

**Date: 9th August, 2001**

**The Centre for Science and Environment is shocked at the way the Union petroleum minister Ram Naik is out to sabotage the Supreme Court's orders on CNG by raising false fears and more uncertainty in the mind of the public.**

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 9, 2001: Just as the deadline for converting all public passenger transport to CNG by September 30, 2001, is coming closer, for once everyone else is turning around to implement the Supreme Court order, but the Union minister for petroleum and natural gas, Ram Naik, in charge of gas supply in the country, is not interested in dealing with long queues for CNG by augmenting its supply. He is on the contrary busy creating more uncertainties and the brunt of the confusion is being borne by CNG users in Delhi. There have been flurry of statements by Mr Naik to the media raising several problems and projecting them as insurmountable. He has made misleading claims that there is not enough gas to meet the transport requirements in Delhi, that the entire city's fleet will come to a halt if the gas pipeline bursts or is under repair, and that CNG prices will shoot up once the administrative price mechanism is dismantled.

Anil Agarwal, chairperson, Centre for Science and Environment, while addressing a press conference in the Capital today took a serious note of the devious designs of the ministry of petroleum and natural gas and strongly condemned this misinformation campaign, "It is shocking that even after more than three years since the Supreme Court issued orders on CNG conversion, the petroleum minister claims that very little gas is available for the city's transport fleet. This is totally contrary to the information that the Indraprastha Gas Ltd. (IGL) has regularly provided to the Supreme Court. It is an

excellent disinformation exercise. All our investigations have found that each of these fears is either unfounded or can be dealt with," says Agarwal.

Clearly, Naik is desperate to cover his ministry's tracks and is still hoping to get Euro II diesel classified as clean fuel, and then do nothing extra than what is already available in the market.

**Date: 11th October, 2001**

**Yet another CNG bus blows up in the Capital and both the Delhi and the concerned central ministries remain quiet. They don't have any plan of action to offer for safety inspection or make manufacturers liable.**

**NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 11, 2001:** Centre for Science and Environment is shocked at the recent incidents of bus fires - consecutively four episodes within a short span of three months, and the silent government. Obsessed only with the desire to discredit CNG technology the official agencies forgot to do their own bit. Except for the standard promise of setting up yet another committee to investigate the matter, they have no plans to enforce safety compliance standards and establish accountability. Even the findings of the earlier committee reports on fire incidents have been suppressed.

No provisions have been made for the inspection of buses whereby each and every CNG bus undergoes inspection of the engine and high-pressure fuel storage and piping systems before being allowed onto the road - this is a norm in the rest of the world.

The government has completely ignored the need for clear guidelines for installation, fitting and bus body fabrication. While the government does not admit its own lapse, it along with the manufacturers, conveniently puts the entire blame on the bus body builders. Official silence is only shielding the bus manufacturer who should have taken the greater responsibility in ensuring that the bus body builders are trained to handle fitting and installation that need special attention during body fabrication. Technical guidelines are needed for routing of pipes, minimising friction, vibration and so forth.

These few clips only highlight the nature of this public policy debate. The conflicting parties in this debate were the Diesel vehicle manufacturers, Delhi Transporters, The Civil society's movement for clean air, Principals of schools who were bothered about the lack of CNG supplies and also about their own fleets of Buses that had to be converted to suit the new policy. The two parties, Congress - having its government in the State of Delhi and the BJP - having their Government at the Centre were also viewing the implementation of this policy from their electoral gains or losses. The Supreme Court was also playing its assigned role as Judiciary. The media was there trying to inform the people about this complex situation and was helping various groups in their attempt to generate public opinion in their favour.

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## **15.6 SUMMARY**

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We saw that public policy is a process of acting for the good of the society by the government. Sometimes the civil society challenges the existing policies and forces the

authorities to change the public policies. Such changes are possible in democratic systems as they have various checks and balances. There is no absolute power in the democratic systems, and what is already a law could be reconsidered by parliament if there are pressures. The legislative, executive and judiciary are three major components of the democratic system. The Press or the media has emerged as the fourth most powerful institution of democracy as it has the potential to mould the public opinion and influence the public policy. Political parties and civil society also play significant role in making and reforming the public policies.

Public policy is an integral part of development process. Press may not generally report the development issues, but it does intervene in case of a conflict of views on development, reports all perspectives, and thus moulds public opinion in favour of one or the other viewpoint.

We also learnt about the historical relationship between the press and politics and discussed various theories of media that support the argument that press or the media moulds the public opinion.

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## **15.7 EXERCISES**

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- 1) What are public policies, and what role do they play in the Development?
- 2) How does media help in framing public policies?
- 3) Analyse and differentiate the role of media in shaping public policies and public opinion.
- 4) What is the impact of new media technologies on democracy and governance?
- 5) How does the process of globalisation influence development?