

The Impact of Mass Media, ICTs and Interpersonal Relationships on the Political Awareness of the Students (Between the Years 2000-2004): A Study on the Undergraduates of Tehran University

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Abstract

The modern era has entitled the age of information explosion and communication revolution, an era in which everything depends on information. Nowadays, politics, governments, and societies have been incredibly intermingled with mass media more than any other era. The quantitative and qualitative developments in mass media and ICTs have played a significant role in upgrading the political awareness of the audience. The rapidity of socio-political events, universal crises, etc, have necessitated the acquisition of information. This paper demonstrates the impact of mass media, ICTs, and interpersonal relations on the political awareness of undergraduate students at Tehran university. It also discusses the relationship between the participants' trust towards each of these information sources with their level of political awareness.

Keywords: Mass media, Information and communication technologies, (ICTs), Press, Domestic and foreign radios, Domestic and satellite TV, Political awareness, and Undergraduate students

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Introduction

The press and independent media are indicators of the dynamism and vigor of a civil society. Some sociologists believe that the vitality and dynamism of democracy is correlated with the well-being and independence of communication systems in civil society, for the simple reason that democracy could not sustain without social and political awareness. To this end, the media play a vital role. The mass media and ICTs can disseminate political awareness, and critical and democratic viewpoints to a large extent, and shape the public opinion on that.

The student population is critically-oriented, and cognizant of doctrines, values and democratic viewpoints, and this political awareness provides great incentives for their political behavior.

Universities have been one of the most active political center-stages in most countries, especially in developing countries. The ever-increasing number of the students in state and Islamic Azad Universities, their emergence as an important referent group, their political and social growth, and the considerable increase in the political potential of the universities in recent years, has been the most important realities of our society in Iran. The quantitative and qualitative increase of the press and the availability of the internet at the universities have influenced political awareness of this group recently.

This study has two goals: (1) examining the impact of mass media, ICTs, and interpersonal relationships with the informed individuals on the political awareness of the undergraduates at Tehran University; (2) examining the correlation between the participants' trust towards each of the above mentioned information sources with their level of political awareness. More specifically, this research delves into the following questions:

1. Which sources of political information (mass media and ICTs) have had a significant positive effect on

the extent of the students' political awareness between the years 2000-2004?

2. Which sources of political information (mass media and ICTs) have a significant correlation with the students' political awareness in terms of their extent of trust towards each of these sources?

Review of the Related Literature

The information diffusion theory has been put forward to deal with the information transfer from information sources and its effects on the audience. According to Shanon, any message is potentially information-carrier. The reception and interpretation of a message lets the receiver increase or refine his knowledge (cited in Heath, 1992, p.107). At present, we acquire the bulk of the information from mass media and ICTs.

According to MC Quail (2003), mass media have two basic functions: (1) they play a significant role in the production, reproduction, and dissemination of information; (2) they play a mediating role between socio-political realities and individual-social experiences of the audience and shape their understandings of political events (p.87). The more the reception of news, reports, and political analyses, the greater the political awareness and given this fact, we should bear some points in mind i.e. (1) goals and incentives; (2) attentive awareness of the news and media information; and (3) processing and analyzing the news and information. (Eveland and Mosel, 2000, p. 27 and Defleur & Rokeach, 1982, pp. 241-242).

The political communication approach in relation to the impact of mass media and ICTs on the political awareness of the audience needs to be considered too. According to Karl Deutch, political communications involve the transfer of information and political message on the part of the political communicators with the purpose of influencing socio-political awareness,

attitudes and behaviors of their audience (cited in Rasch, 1988, p.171). The major political communicators include: (1) political institutions (the government); (2) parties and groups; (3) politicians, professional, and party activists, and (4) mass media (Mc Nair, 1999, p. 4). Political players, in their attempt to direct and influence public opinion, are highly dependent on mass media. In a political communication process, the mass media play a significant role in manipulating the public opinion, and increasing the political awareness of the citizens through news, analyses, political comments, and articles. Mass media are the major sources of information and political awareness on controversial political, social, and economic issues in a public sphere.

The 'agenda-setting theory' needs to be considered in this paper, too. The basic assumption of this theory is the media play a significant role in highlighting some of the social and political issues, and inculcating them to their audiences (Baran, and Davis, 2000 p. 302). Research shows that there is a significant relationship between media reports and their importance for the audiences (Heath, 1992, p. 302).

The 'silence spiral theory' proposed by Neuman (2002, cited in Perry, 2002, p. 204) asserts that mass media play a dominant role in directing the public opinion and conveying the predominant thoughts to the audiences, and the minority groups either accept these thoughts or keep silent; consequently, socio-political awareness of the audience is overwhelmed by the predominant thoughts. She enumerates some characteristic features for mass media to the following effect: (1) the over-arching feature of the media, i.e. the media connect the news events and analyses every time and again; (2) consensus and consonance, i.e. the media provide a coherent picture of an event about which there is a consensus of opinion (cited in Baran and Davis, 2000, p. 304).

Given the fact that we live in an ICTs era, considering the effect of these technologies on the political awareness of the audience seems essential. In this era, information is running through the fabric of the network society with a lightening speed. With the advent of the ICTs, a new public sphere has emerged in which political parties and groups, non-governmental organizations, etc., have their virtual presence in the network (Norris, 2001, p. 3). Each of these political groups and activists propagate their beliefs, thoughts, and social and political ideals through ICTs, and in this way, increase the political awareness of their audience. At present, there are more than 1000 political parties online (Norris, 2000, p.1) besides, political parties, news groups, newspapers, magazines and radios online. According to a report, the Yahoo site hosts 6600 newspapers, 2500 magazines, 8500 radio stations, and 538 television stations (Norris 2001, p. 5). Satellites and internet have a great instructional potential. They instruct and inform citizens with reference to parties, civic communities, political events, citizen communities and rights, and the governments' responsibility towards the public. Moreover, the interactive ICTs can inform citizens through online meetings and socio-political debates (Barber,1998, p. 582).

Research Hypotheses

1. From among the information sources (mass media, ICTs, and interpersonal relationships) only the press and internet have a significant positive effect on the extent of political knowledge of the students between the years 2000- 2004.
2. From among mass media and ICTs, there is a significant positive relationship between the students' extent of trust to the press, internet, foreign radios, and the political awareness of the students between the years 2000- 2004.

Method

This research is a survey research. The questionnaire used consisted of three parts: the first part dealt with background information (age, sex, field of study, etc), the second part consisted of questions on the independent variables (mass media, ICTs and interpersonal relationships and the third part consisted of questions on the dependents variables (i.e. 15 questions on the extent of the students' political awareness).

The participants consisted of the present undergraduates (both daily and night courses) at Tehran University in the fields of engineering, fine arts, social sciences, literature, and human sciences, law and political sciences. The sample consisted of 426. We used a stratified random sampling procedure.

Results

A. Descriptive Data

The press, domestic TV, and interpersonal relationships with the mean scores 1.61, 1.54, and .70 were the most important information sources for the participants respectively between the years 2001-2002. The rank ordering in terms of importance for the years 2003-2004 shows the mean scores of 1.43, 1.35, and 1.13 respectively representing the press, internet and domestic TV as the most important sources of information for the students. One important point in this time interval (2003-2004) in comparison with the previous time interval is that internet has been lifted from the fourth rank to the second rank in terms of importance, and TV has been slumped from the second rank to the third rank. Foreign radios, satellite TVs, participation in meetings, and domestic radios respectively turn out to be in the lowest orders in terms of importance. Research results also show that between the years 2000-2004, domestic TV and radio have had a downward slope in terms of importance amongst the

university students.

The questionnaire results demonstrated that the press ($\bar{x} = 2.41$) and internet sites ($\bar{x} = 2.05$) have the greatest impact on the increase of the students' political awareness. Some of the most important factors for the significance of the press among the students include: the considerable quantitative increase of the press publication, fading away of some of the political and legal restriction on the press (mainly among the reformist media), severe opposition between the views and discourses of the reformists and authorities in the press, the quantitative and qualitative increase of the editorials, comments, and socio-political articles. Research results also demonstrated that the reformist press had the greatest influence on increasing the political awareness of the students, and the conservative press had the lowest effect between the years 2000-2004.

Some of the main reasons with respect to the significance of the internet as an important source of political information amongst university students include: (1) the availability of the internet amongst the students (especially at universities in Tehran); (2) the availability of the internet at home for 66.1% of the students; (3) reference servers (like Gooya in Persian), so that many of the newspaper and some important journals, radio, and satellite TV are accessible; (4) reflecting a lot of news and political analyses on Iran, and on socio-political groups with little censorship on the net; (5) the novelty and attraction of the internet for the academics; (6) the speed of communication through the net; (7) availability and accessibility of some sites by opposite, critical, political activists and groups; and (8) the availability of news archives and political reports.

One other research finding is that internet with the mean score of 2.12, and the press with the mean score of 1.93, have the greatest trust value among the students

between the years 2000-2004. As a result, we can claim that the students' trust in the internet and foreign radios (foreign media) has been greater than on the domestic radio and TV.

B: Inferential Data Analyses

To deal with the first hypothesis, we used Somers'd

statistics. The results in Table 1 demonstrate that TV as an information source has a negligible reverse effect of the level of political awareness of the university students. This shows that the students pay little attention to this information source, and its effect was not found to be significant.

Table 1 Impact of TV on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	11 7.8%	31 22.0%	41 29.1%	58 41.1%	141 100.0%
	1.00	6 10.0%	10 16.7%	23 38.3%	21 35.0%	60 100.0%
	2.00	14 13.6%	18 17.5%	35 34.0%	36 35.0%	103 100.0%
	3.00	14 12.0%	35 29.9%	32 27.4%	36 30.8%	117 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$Chi^2 = 11.06, sig. = 0.27, d = -0.09$

Table 2 shows that domestic radio, as a source of information has a rather reverse negligible effect on the level of the students' political awareness. This means that university students pay little attention to this source

of information. The results turned out to be significant which could be extended to the whole sample population.

Table 2 Impact of Domestic Radio on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	35 9.8%	80 22.4%	110 30.8%	132 37.0%	357 100.0%
	1.00	1 2.6%	11 28.9%	14 36.8%	12 31.6%	38 100.0%
	2.00	8 36.4%	3 13.6%	5 22.7%	6 27.3%	22 100.0%
	3.00	1 25.0%		2 50.0%	1 25.0%	4 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$Chi^2 = 21.55, sig. = 0.01, d = -0.10$

Table 3 shows a positive effect of the press on the students' level of political awareness. This means that they pay great attention to the press as a source of

information. The results turned out to be significant and could be extended to the sample population.

Table 3 Impact of Press on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	20 20.6%	21 21.6%	30 30.9%	26 26.8%	97 100.0%
	1.00	8 10.8%	20 27.0%	19 25.7%	27 36.5%	74 100.0%
	2.00	11 9.2%	31 25.8%	39 32.5%	39 32.5%	120 100.0%
	3.00	6 4.6%	22 16.9%	43 33.1%	59 45.4%	130 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

Chi² = 23.64, sig. = 0.005, d = 0.16

The results in Table 4 show that foreign radios have a weak positive effect on the students' level of political awareness. The results also showed that this effect is not significant.

Table 4 Impact of Foreign Radio on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	36 11.5%	68 21.7%	99 31.6%	110 35.1%	313 100.0%
	1.00	6 12.5%	12 25.0%	14 29.2%	16 33.3%	48 100.0%
	2.00	2 4.8%	9 21.4%	12 28.6%	19 45.2%	42 100.0%
	3.00	1 5.6%	5 27.8%	6 33.3%	6 33.3%	18 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

Chi² = 4.01, sig. = 0.91, d = 0.04

The results in Table 5 show that internet sites have a positive effect on the students' level of political awareness. Chi-square results also show that this effect is not significant. It should be mentioned that the positive effect of the internet sites has been significant through the Somer's d.

Table 5 Impact of Internet on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	20 12.5%	39 24.4%	53 33.1%	48 30.0%	160 100.0%
	1.00	9 8.7%	23 22.3%	36 35.0%	35 34.0%	103 100.0%
	2.00	10 9.7%	22 21.4%	27 26.2%	44 42.7%	103 100.0%
	3.00	6 10.9%	10 18.2%	15 27.3%	24 43.6%	55 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

Chi² = 7.38, sig. = 0.59, sig = 0.04, d = 0.09

Table 6 shows that satellite TVs have a reverse effect on the level of students' level of political awareness. i.e. the students pay little attention to this source of

information. Chi-square results also demonstrated that this effect is statistically significant.

Table 6 Impact of Satellite TV on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	32 9.5%	72 21.4%	102 30.3%	131 38.9%	337 100.0%
	1.00	6 16.2%	8 21.6%	13 35.1%	10 27.0%	37 100.0%
	2.00	7 19.4%	13 36.1%	7 19.4%	9 25.0%	36 100.0%
	3.00		1 9.1%	9 81.8%	1 9.1%	11 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

Chi² = 25.31, sig. = 0.003, d = 0.17

Table 7 shows that interpersonal relationships have a significant and weak effect on the level of the students'

political awareness. Chi-square results show that this effect is not statistically significant.

Table 7 Impact of Interpersonal Relations on Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Rank ordering of the Sources' Scores	.00	30 13.2%	47 20.6%	67 29.4%	84 36.8%	228 100.0%
	1.00	7 7.3%	23 24.0%	31 32.3%	35 36.5%	96 100.0%
	2.00	4 6.3%	16 25.0%	23 35.9%	21 32.8%	64 100.0%
	3.00	4 12.1%	8 24.2%	10 30.3%	11 33.3%	33 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

Chi² = 5.29, sig. = 0.80, d = 0.002

Given the Chi-square analyses, our first hypothesis is supported for the press (as a significant and positive source of information), and it is rejected for the internet. None the less, if we consider Somers'd statistics; our first hypothesis can be supported for the internet, too.

that there is a reverse negligible relationship between the level of trust in TV and the students' level of political awareness. The results show that there is no significant relationship between then two variable.

To deal with our second hypothesis, Table 8 shows

Table 8 Correlations of TV & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust on Sources	low trust	27 10.0%	54 19.9%	90 33.2%	100 36.9%	271 100.0%
	Ave Trust	12 12.0%	26 26.0%	31 31.0%	31 31.0%	100 100.0%
	High Trust	6 12.0%	14 28.0%	10 20.0%	20 40.0%	50 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 5.74$, sig. = 0.45, Tc. = -0.05

Table 9 shows that there is a negligible positive relationship between the students' level of trust in domestic radio and their level of political awareness. The statistical results showed no significant relationship between the two variables.

Table 9 Correlations of Domestic Radio & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust on Sources	low trust	32 10.7%	69 23.1%	92 30.8%	106 35.5%	299 100.0%
	Ave Trust	12 13.0%	16 17.4%	33 35.9%	31 33.7%	92 100.0%
	High Trust	1 3.3%	9 30.0%	6 20.0%	14 46.7%	30 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 6.84$, sig. = 0.33, Tc. = 0.02

Table 10 shows that there is a positive relationship between the level of trust in the press and students' level of political awareness. The statistical results show that there is significant relationship between the two variables.

Table 10 Correlations of Press & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust on Sources	low trust	22 18.2%	34 28.1%	34 28.1%	31 25.6%	121 100.0%
	Ave Trust	15 8.0%	42 22.5%	57 30.5%	73 39.0%	187 100.0%
	High Trust	8 7.1%	18 15.9%	40 35.4%	47 41.6%	113 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 19.00$, sig. = 0.004, Tc. = 0.16

Table 11 shows a reverse, negligible relationship between the level of trust in foreign radios and the students' level of political awareness. The statistical

results also showed no significance relationship between these two variables.

Table 11 Correlations of Foreign Radio & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust to Sources	Low trust	28 12.1%	53 22.8%	67 28.9%	84 36.2%	232 100.0%
	Ave Trust	7 5.6%	25 20.2%	45 36.3%	47 37.9%	124 100.0%
	High Trust	10 15.4%	16 24.6%	19 29.2%	20 30.8%	65 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 7.28$, sig. = 0.30, Tc. = -0.01

Table 12 shows a positive relationship between the level of trust in internet sites, and the students' level of

political awareness. The statistics showed a significant relationship between these two variables.

Table 12 Correlations of Internet & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust to Sources	Low trust	17 15.7%	26 24.1%	39 36.1%	26 24.1%	108 100.0%
	Ave Trust	14 9.9%	31 21.8%	36 25.4%	61 43.0%	142 100.0%
	High Trust	14 8.2%	37 21.6%	56 32.7%	64 37.4%	171 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 12.69$, sig. = 0.4, Tc. = 0.09

The results in Table 13 demonstrate a reverse, weak relationship between the levels of trust in satellite TVs and the students' level of political awareness. The

statistics shows a significant relationship between these two variables.

Table 13 Correlations of Satellite TV & Students' Political Information

		Score of political information				Total
		weak	middle	good	nice	
Level of Students Trust to Sources	Low trust	25 9.4%	50 18.7%	83 31.1%	109 40.8%	267 100.0%
	Ave Trust	9 10.7%	22 26.2%	27 32.1%	26 31.0%	84 100.0%
	High Trust	11 15.7%	22 31.4%	21 30.0%	16 22.9%	70 100.0%
Total		45 10.7%	94 22.3%	131 31.1%	151 35.9%	421 100.0%

$\chi^2 = 12.55$, sig. = 0.05, Tc. = -0.13

Therefore, the positive relationship between the level of trust in the press and internet sites, and the student's level of political awareness is supported, while this relationship for foreign radios is rejected.

Conclusion

This paper, indicates that between the years 2000-2002, the university students considered the press, domestic TV and interpersonal relationships (respectively in a descending order) as the most important sources of political awareness. Between the years 2002-2004, the press, internet, and domestic TV (respectively in a descending order in terms of importance), were shown to be the most important sources of information respectively. According to the results, the press and internet sites were shown to be the most effective sources of the information in increasing the students' political awareness. Moreover, the reformist press had the greatest, and the conservatives press the least effect on the students' level of political awareness. More importantly, internet, and the press received the greatest level of trust amongst the university students between the years 2000-2004.

The first hypothesis of our research was supported only for the press (as a positive and effective source), but it was rejected for the internet. None the less, taking Somers'd statistics into account, we can support this hypothesis regarding the internet too. Furthermore, the second hypothesis as to the positive relationship between the level of trust in the press and internet sites, and the students' level of political awareness is supported, but this relationship is not significant for

foreign radios.

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