

Media-centric Election Propaganda: Theoretical and Practical Aspects

*Samantha Herath
Journalism Unit*

The term 'Propaganda' originates with the Roman Catholic Congregation for the propagation of faith established by the Catholic Church in 1622. The term was largely brought about by its popularization during wars - especially since the World War I. Originally propaganda was a rather neutral word, meaning 'to disseminate or propagate idea', but over time, especially since World War I, common usage has given a negative connotation. Propaganda messages are perceived as 'dishonest', 'manipulative' and 'brainwashing'.

Social scientific research on propaganda is considered as one of the most important types of early communication research. Harold Laswell's doctoral dissertation on the use of propaganda techniques in the World War I, published in 1927, presented careful attempts to define propaganda. Laswell advanced his definition in 1937 and it is still a popular one: "Propaganda in the broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by manipulation of representations. These representations may take spoken, written, and pictorial or musical form".

Early studies on propaganda paved the way for mass communication research and in a certain sense the communication study itself emerged in 1920's and 1930's with the empirical research on propaganda carried out by social scientists from various disciplines. Some of the early theories on effects of mass communication were derived from analyses of propaganda. Researchers in those days attributed great power to the media, seeing media messages as having direct impact on audience members. This idea was known as 'Magic Bullet Theory' and the assumption was that people are extremely vulnerable to mass communication messages assuming the message is on target and encoded skillfully.

In the 1940's Paul Lazarsfeld and his associates carried out initial studies of how people decide whom to vote for in an election. They conducted two survey studies - one in 1940 and the other in 1948 - and both studies made a point of looking at the mass media as important factors in the election decision making process. Both studies came up with the surprising finding that the mass media played a weak role in decision making compared with personal influence. Lazarsfeld and his team found the fact that media simply reinforced the initial preferences of the voters and it was only personal influence or interpersonal relationships that changed the voting behaviour of the voters. Personal Influence Theory and the Two-step and Multi-step models of communication were the outcomes of these studies.

The Agenda Setting Theory, one of the dominant concepts in communication theory in 1970's was derived from a classic study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw conducted on presidential election campaign - 1968, in the United States. Agenda setting theorists described how mass media stories are selected, packaged and presented and how this agenda affects, what people think about the relative importance of the issues presented. Later, agenda setting theory has been extended to deal not only with issues which are emphasized in the media, but also how these issues are presented.

It is evident that in contemporary democracies media play an all-encompassing role and the usage of media in election propaganda campaigns has enormously increased. In Sri Lankan context the nature and the usage of media - both print and electronic - has been expanded with

the intention of influencing the attitudes and voting behaviour of the people. Hence, this discussion intends to reveal the central theme of media-centric election propaganda theoretically and to illustrate some of the key characteristics of election propaganda practically with reference to Sri Lankan mass media.

An identification of the reasons for paddy cultivation progress in Sri Lanka in past three decades
A study with Institute of paddy research - Bathalagoda

D.M. Karunadasa Dissanayake
Department of Geography

Rice was the staple diet of Sri Lankans from the earliest historical times. Non perennial streams flowing across the North-western and South-eastern plains in the Dry Zone were harnessed by building hydraulic structures from pre-Christian times. Many rulers built anicuts, weirs, dams and reservoirs to conserve the water supply received in Maha, the major rainy season in the Dry Zone, from October to February. The other cultivation season, Yala, is from March to August.

According to previous information in the early 1960s the paddy yield had been very low due to several physical and relevant agricultural policies. But after two decades the paddy yield has started to increase gradually. In the 1990s it has increased to nearly a self-sufficient level of the rice requirement in the country. This study has tried to find out the positive and negative issues for paddy harvest and paddy cultivation in Sri Lanka.

To achieve the set objectives the study has used two types of data both primary and secondary. Primary data was obtained from a survey, field observation and focus group interviews. The secondary data was obtained from the Institute of Rice Research (Bathalagoda) and different government agencies and reports.

This study has identified several major reasons that affected the increasing trend of paddy harvests in Sri Lanka. The first one is that the paddy harvest has been decreased by 25% in Sri Lanka. There are around five major factors that can contribute to increase the paddy harvest and the extent of cultivation. The introduction of the high yield varieties (seeds) is the first reason. Owing to that there is special attention given to it in this study. We have only two options to increase the paddy yield for food requirements in Sri Lanka. The problem is that the land available for paddy cultivation is almost completely used up. Therefore, the only solution is to introduce scientific technology to develop new varieties of seeds to increase the paddy harvest.