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Media's role in intensifying Gender Conflict in South Korea

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Introduction

Media are indispensable actors in our society. They not only convey information, but also play an important role in holding the government or anyone with power accountable to the public. However, people often forget that media are also managed by human beings, who are imperfect in nature. Even if we expect media to deliver messages in impartial manners, journalists frequently make biased reports either consciously or unconsciously. While small biases may be tolerated since they are inevitable, it was discovered by various scholars that such a flawed nature has been causing and intensifying political polarization in contemporary societies.

This paper aims to address the issue of media's role in shaping polarization and explain why it is an issue that we must deal with. To illustrate the seriousness of the issue, this article will also conduct a case study to describe how media plays a significant role in exacerbating gender conflict in South Korea. It shows that both liberal and conservative media have manipulated the perceptions of young males and females by precluding them to understand the exact and overall picture of the issue through either conveying false information or omitting supplementary information.

Media's role: why it is an issue that we must care about?

Media's role is important in contemporary society. News platforms are not only conduits, but also watchdogs that prevent tyranny and protect transparency (Trappel & Nieminen, 2018). When it comes to democratic societies, their role becomes much more crucial. First, media become stages for public debates. They invite interest groups or representatives to propose their claims and negotiate, and this facilitates debates among citizens on the issue since they are more well-informed (Nieminen, 2016). Second, media also play active roles in assisting civic

activities. They help citizens to organize and act on their own behalf by instructing the people and giving voices to various experiences. Third, media offer platforms for deliberation and facilitate its process. They present various arguments for the debate and push the authority to fully respond to the conclusions of deliberation. These are why “liberal democracy cannot be thought of without the media” (Trappel & Nieminen, 2018, pg. 192).

The premise, however, is that these roles can only be properly conducted when the media are ‘fair-minded participants’ (Stromback, 2005). This is a clear prerequisite since the stages that are prepared by the media platforms for deliberation would not be fully fair if some of them are acting on behalf of a particular party. There is a considerable chance that, either intentionally or unintentionally, the stages would become uneven playing fields. Nevertheless, scholars have been pointing out that media cannot be fully objective in nature, and they often report in biased manners (Curran, 2002). They have also been concerning that these biases may undermine the democratic processes since manipulation of information distorts the representation of the world (Street, 2010).

Unfortunately, it appears that the scholars’ fears have already been realized in recent years. Today, political polarization is prevailing in every part of the world, and several social and political scientists started to accuse media as dominant actors that are intensifying such chaos. For example, Wagner & Gruscynski (2018) criticized media for producing more polarized content, as they found that ideologically polarized politicians have been receiving more news coverage than before. Arceneaux et al., (2013) further insisted that ideological talks by these political figures have exacerbated polarization among the people. In short, media, which are supposed to be the core pillars of liberal democracies, are becoming threats to contemporary

democratic societies.¹

The problem that makes such an issue much more complicated is that there is no definite answer to stop the media from intensifying political polarization. As every individual has different perceptions and thoughts, what one sees as biased or polarized content another may see as fair reporting (Street, 2010, pg. 32). In other words, deciding whether particular news or specific reporting manners of the journalists are acceptable or not are matters of subjectivity. If the government accuses and regulates certain media platforms for causing political polarization, it will necessarily face massive criticisms from the oppositions as violating freedom of the press. Therefore, this makes us extremely difficult to effectively deal with the issue since it is impossible to establish a system that could identify and regulate “problematic” media platforms.

Despite such a challenge, we must consistently raise the awareness of the media’s role in shaping political polarization as they are playing vital roles in fragmentizing the society and undermining democratic processes. Even if we fail to reach a consensus on how to solve the issue, constantly addressing the problem will allow people to remind that media are not perfect in nature, and their contents are prone to be biased and polarized. This will help us to listen critically to media reports and take any misleading content with a grain of salt. As a result, the problem of political polarization may be alleviated to a certain degree.

¹ Of course, I am not arguing that media are completely useless today. They still play vital role in today’s society.

Media's role in intensifying South Korea's Gender Conflict

Background

South Korea has been suffering from serious gender conflict in recent years, particularly after the murder of a young woman in Seoul in 2016. Young females perceived the incident as a “misogyny hate crime”, and they started to examine the attitudes towards women in the country. Eventually, this triggered countrywide feminist movements, which not only aimed at securing women's safety but also included campaigns against sexual harassment and spy cams. However, few young men began to claim that a couple of slogans used by the feminists were too radical, which appear to be inciting gender discrimination against men (Kwon, 2019). Consequently, anti-feminist sentiments quickly spread among young males, and they started to show strong hostility against feminists by calling them as “radical feminists”.²

In the following paragraphs, I will analyze how media played crucial roles in exacerbating the gender conflicts by examining the media's reporting manners on two topics: the 2016 murder case, and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.³

Media's role

The abovementioned murder case in 2016 was a crime caused by the mental illness of the perpetrator. Although the murderer confessed that he killed the victim “because women had always ignored [him]”, both the prosecutor and the court, after receiving the psychiatric test

² See (Park, 2021) for more detailed information.

³ Ministry of Gender Equality and Family is a governmental body that aims to promote gender equality and establish family policies. However, many young males have been arguing to abolish the ministry in recent years (Jung & Hong, 2019). Details will be further discussed in the second paragraph of “Media's role”.

result of the suspect, made a judgment that schizophrenia was the reason. Nevertheless, various liberal and feminist media platforms framed the crime as “misogyny murder” just one day after the incident occurred by quoting the statement: “because women have always ignored me” (Lee, 2017). On the other hand, conservative media focused on the mental illness of the perpetrator and framed the case as “a random killing of a person with a mental illness” (Woo, 2021). As people are still arguing against each other on whether the case was a “misogyny murder” or not (Han, 2021), it is sure to claim that the hasty conclusion made by the liberal and feminist news platforms have caused irreversible polarization within the society.

Conservative media are also responsible for intensifying gender conflict, especially for giving the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF) a bad name. They have been portraying the ministry as “excessively advocating” the women (victims) when the agency or the minister simply makes a statement on sexual harassment issues. This led young males to perceive the MGEF as an organization that only serves the interest of the females, and any policies that are made by the MGEF are against men’s interests. Furthermore, the conservative media have also been framing the MGEF as “incompetent” by describing the ministry as a government body that cannot effectively execute its policies due to a lack of budget. Although this is somewhat true, they never further elaborated the structural problems of the MGEF that caused the agency to suffer from a lack of budget and power. As Korean young males are mostly conservatives, and they primarily select conservative media to obtain information, this should have a great impact on males’ perception of the MGEF (Jeong & Hong, 2019).

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