

Mass Media vs Covid 19

As Covid 19 continues to engulf the world, the thirst for information, both on a local and global scale has fed a mass media response, perhaps larger than any would have expected. Countries are fast adapting to a new norm in the way we live; one that includes social distancing, alert levels, and lockdowns. Common measures taken by Governments around the world, such as extended lockdowns, although proving effective, have not come with full support. Businesses have rallied against the hardship caused by this measure, and individuals have questioned its legality. There have been lots of voices to hear and the various forms of mass media available have become the platform for these discussions. Just how much of a hand has mass media had in influencing the decisions of others during the global pandemic?

Today's digital information age allows mass media to inform and update people irrespective of geography, faster than ever before. As a powerful source of information, it can not only educate but also has a significant ability to change an individual's opinion towards a particular event. In New Zealand, with divided opinion about the need for lockdowns, the Government has used the media to assist in communicating to the public a message of necessity and social responsibility. Daily updates on TV have been used by the Prime Minister as a way to provide the public with a sense of seriousness towards the issue. Generally viewed by the public as the Government providing open communication and reassurance, these press conferences were also a clever strategy to use mass media as a tool to strengthen the Government's position regarding their response. The message being that "we are a team of 5 million" and together we need to give up a small period of freedom for the greater good of eliminating Covid-19 from our country. It was a message that quickly spread across the world, putting New Zealand in the limelight for both praise and criticism regarding our response.

Did the media influence public opinion regarding lockdowns? In my opinion it certainly seemed to unite people, but it would be wrong to assume that all of the influence is always positive. Social media forums, such as Facebook and Twitter provide the general public with a voice to discuss opinion and share this openly, without the validation of expert opinion or even sometimes a balanced perspective. This can feed a movement on a global scale which might otherwise remain limited to a small sector of a community. This was clearly illustrated in the growing anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movement for Covid-19. What starts as a small group of people with a particular opinion, can quickly become a global movement with the technology and influence offered by social media. Mass media then facilitates the organising of events such as the anti-lockdown protests in Melbourne this year

where 4000 protesters took to the streets in Melbourne, resulting in 218 arrests and the hospitalisation of 6 police officers.

The storehouse of information that is Mass Media certainly seems to hold a power capable of directing changes in society. Negative public opinion, supported by information from the New Zealand political opposition parties, eventually drove a move to legally verify the Government's power to enforce lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the ultimate decision regarding this debate rested with the High Court, mass media played a crucial part in highlighting this as a public issue and one which the people requested answered. In contrast, the information gathered back from this same public forum allowed the Government to positively respond with lessons learnt and changes to the Alert Level system put in place for future lockdowns. Mass media is both friend and foe.

Mass media is an influencer. Growing up in an age of digital technology and fast paced, multi-dimensional media outlets, means that sometimes you are unaware that you are being influenced. In the words of Sir Francis Bacon, "knowledge itself is power". How that power is used must however, surely be in the fate of those who are given it. Whether it be by the sharing of information to a far greater audience than ever before, or its' ability to be used by various groups to harness and share opinions, Mass media is now an integral part of the society we live in. It definitely holds the power to influence, but just how much, is the power that rests with the individual.