MEDIA AND POLICY MAKING

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# INTRODUCTION

Media according to Business Dictionary implies Communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and internet.[[1]](#footnote-2)

In general, media according to Jack Lule (2013)[[2]](#footnote-3) can be defined as a means of communication that is intended to reach a larger audience in order to relay information, news or entertainment. It includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and internet. Media are very integral part of our lives as they generate popular interest and debate about any social problem. Other calls them as mass media.

Media is Sometimes called the "fourth branch of government,"[[3]](#footnote-4) the mass media serve a number of functions within the context of government policy making. Through media, people are able to get informed and be updated about what is happening around them and the world and make judgments regarding various issues.

*According to Jack Lule (2013), Media fulfill several roles in culture, including the following:*

a) Entertaining and providing an outlet for the imagination

b) Educating and informing

c) Serving as a public forum for the discussion of important issues

d) Acting as a watchdog for government, business, and other institutions[[4]](#footnote-5)

Policymaking is a political process which is affected by various social and economic factors and the media plays an integral role in shaping the social context in which policies are developed. Through the media, citizens learn how government policies will affect them, and governments gain feedback on their policies and programs. The media acts as the primary conduit between those who want to influence policy and policymakers controlling the scope of political discourse and regulating the flow of information[[5]](#footnote-6). Policymaking follows an orderly sequence where problems are identified, solutions devised, policies adopted, implemented and lastly evaluated.

In reality, the policy process is more fluid, where policies are formed through the struggle of ideas of various advocacy coalitions. The policies, on which the media focuses can, and often does, play an important role in determining the focal issues for policymakers.

The media are active participants in the policymaking process and the ability to stimulate change or maintain the status quo depends on their choice of subject or policy issue and how they frame it. Active (investigative) reporting attempts to shape policy outcomes, but this does not necessarily mean that it always represents the most successful approach for gaining policy changes. In fact, sometimes passive (straight) reporting can have a greater influence on policy choices.

When this occurs, media independence is largely bypassed, as the news generated depends solely on the information released (as public relations material) from legitimate news sources. The media may also influence policy outcomes through their ability to exclude certain policy options from the media, which sets the boundaries for legitimate public debate. Such analyses have led some researchers to posit that the media has a powerful monolithic influence on all policy processes, while others suggest it plays an insignificant role in policy making processes; a more likely scenario is that its degree of influence varies considerably, being issue based in nature.

## types of media

*Different types of media can be divided into three categories: print media, broadcast media (Electronic media) and new –age or digital/social media*

## role of media in policy making

In public policy process, especially the agenda setting stage every policy actors will always wish to emerge as a victor. Some of the key and common actors in public policy are political leaders, bureaucrats, Media, civil societies, parliamentarians and the judiciary. Policy decisions are always influenced by policy actors who know how to effectively influence policy agenda.

According to Anderson,[[6]](#footnote-7) there are two categories of policy actors; the primary and secondary actors. The primary actors include all official policy makers who have statutory duty to make policies. These officials include, the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary organs including the administrative agencies. The secondary policy makers include all pressures groups who can influence policy decisions but they don’t have binding decision like the primary policy makers. These pressure groups are like CSOs, Media, and Think Tank etc.

This paper focuses on the role of the media in policymaking. All categories of Media as elaborated above play an integral role in shaping the social context in which policies are developed. Through the media, citizens learn how government policies will affect them, and governments gain feedback on their policies and programs. Media systems act as the primary channels between those who might want to influence policy and the policymakers controlling the scope of political discourse and regulating the flow of information.

John Fincher proved the following 10 possible media functions in the policy process:[[7]](#footnote-8)

1. Anticipating problems in advance of public officials,
2. Alerting the public to problems on the basis of official warnings,
3. Informing the public of the stakes the competing groups had in solving problems,
4. Keeping various groups and the public abreast of competing proposals,
5. Contributing to the content of policy,
6. Deciding the tempo of decision making,
7. Helping lawmakers decide how to vote,
8. Alerting the public to how policies are administered,
9. Evaluating policy effectiveness, and
10. Stimulating policy reviews

## media’s role during the policy making stage

Policy making stage has been dived into the following three processes;[[8]](#footnote-9)

### Problem identification, Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation.

(i) **Problem Identification** - The media play an enormous role in the problem formulation stage.[[9]](#footnote-10) The nature of the media is to report things to the public. Daily reporting (hard news) helps to bring into light different social problems or issues to the public eye. Reporters tend to report to the public all the happenings in the community, in this way the media will be doing problem identification. Media daily or weekly reportage is crucial because when the media begins reporting on the issues of importance to the public the policy makers tend to start listening.[[10]](#footnote-11) Thus, through reportage they frame policy issues or suggest changes on the existing ones

(ii) **Agenda Setting** - An agenda is a set of problems that government wants to solve. Usually there are so many of them that they must be prioritized, with some problems getting earlier and more attention than others. Agenda setting may respond to pressure from interest groups, political parties, the media, and other branches of government. Agendas usually are reshaped during election through part manifestos or when a new leadership takes office after an election. A crisis such as war, natural disasters, or a tragic accident, almost always re-prioritizes issues. Thus agenda setting takes a shape of Problems, proposal and Politics as provided above in three stages.

In political stream, the media use to play a very crucial role in setting policy agenda because they become a link between the public, policy actors and politicians. In this way media give feedback to the public what policy actors are about to do on the proposed policy agenda.

The use of social media and internet was seen to be useful to the public in Arabic countries in Africa like Tunisia and Egypt. The uprising and public movement in those countries ignited from social media such as face book and blogs. This is a good example showing how modern media can be effective in influencing policy agenda setting

(iii) Policy Formulation Stage - The next stage in the policy making process is the formulation stage. This is the stage in which the policy makers decided what to do about the things on the agenda. The media’s role in this stage is very important, and could be the most noticeable. During this stage the policy makers try to appeal to the people through the medium of the media. Politicians tell the media their ideas for a certain policy and then the media reports it to the people.

## media’s role during policy implementation stage

Policy Implementation Stage According to Van Meter and Van Horn (1974: 447-8) policy implementation encompasses those actions by public or private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions. The role of the media during policy implementation is very open because this is the stage in which policies are put in to effect and used.

The media’s role here is that of a watchdog and public awareness raising. Reporters often investigate how policies are being put into effect and report to the public. It is during this stage that reporters often uncover scandals revolving around policies and sometimes can cause the administration of policies to change. Thus, the media’s role in this stage is to make sure that the public knows exactly what the policy makers are doing or what exactly the policy is all about.

Like the policymaking stage, also policy implementation level requires multiples actors for effective implementation of the policy objectives. According Prof Brynard Peter (2005) a list of the policy implementation activities would include: passage of national government enabling legislation, and national, provincial and local standard setting, capacity creation within relevant national and local agencies, formalization of agency operating procedures, allocation of resources within relevant agencies etc. He also insisted that policy implementation includes all the many activities that happen after the statement of a policy that happen at very different levels.[[11]](#footnote-12)

## media’s role in the policy evaluation stage

The final stage in the policy making process is the evaluation stage. Evaluation is an important step for determining the extent to which a policy has met or is meeting its objectives within many different settings and amongst a variety of affected stakeholders. During this stage feedback is sought to determine the overall effectiveness of newly enacted policies. The media’s role here can be very important by holding the government accountable by showing what is going on, by researching policies, reporting studies on the policy, and allowing people to voice complaints about a policy. This is important because if it is found that a policy is not being effectively employed it can be changed so that it does work.

Basically, in the evaluation stage the media provides the public and the actual policy makers with evidence regarding the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of policies.

## Indian Media & Public Policy

The Delhi gang rape of December 2012 was among the most sensitive issues where investigative journalism brought to fore the intricacies of altering societal norms. It subsequently became a priority on the Indian policy agenda and led to substantial political reforms. It provided the public accessibility to debate existing government policies, and thrust the centre into formulating stringent laws and regulations as regards the safety and protection of women in the country.

News Media coverage of a particular incident provides the prospect of being able to manage one’s own interests by way of favouring or upholding a particular stance on the issue, and consequently, voting for that party that promises the change one desires. With the news media allowing the common man to formulate opinions, pass judgement on political parties and question government decisions, the centre becomes obligated to act in haste as it cannot afford to enrage public opinion beyond a certain extent.   
  
The news media is a significant contributor to the process of government policy-making. It is a parallel medium that provides debate on public issues whilst being an effective forum for political participation. During the Delhi rape case trial, the media managed to garner greater public outcry, forced the administration to institute immediate justice through the setting up of fast track courts, swifter judgements and increased safety-protection units for women across the country.

# CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it is now obvious that mass media play an important role in policymaking. We have discussed here, however, that it is important to note that, the role of the media is key not just at the beginning but throughout the policy process, and also media can be not only as external player in policy process but as a key player. We have also highlighted how public media can be seen as not reliable source or actor in policy process because of biasness and lack of independence. In each stage of policy process the mass media perform functions, although the functions seem more important in relaying information than in influencing the policy process.

There are several issue(s) with regard to the effects of news media on national policy and strategy. This commentary looks at four major facets in the relationship between the two critical institutions in India. First, governmental accountability and its responsiveness towards the public’s policy preferences is comparatively greater in areas where news media circulation is high than in areas where it is low and/or negligible. The government thus takes action on several socio-economic and political issues amidst public pressure. For instance,studies indicate that a substantial number of sexual assaults and rapes take place in India’s rural areas. However, legal action is often missing due to negligible media coverage and social stigmas that hinder the victims from filing an FIR. As a result, governmental outreach and the ability to reflect on reforms remain limited and trivial.

Second, in India, as elsewhere, the media garners mass attention on specific issues that interest the common man. This, at times, skips some of the most pertinent issues that need immediate reformation by the government. For instance, there is a high probability that the new government provisions for the safety, protection and justice for women in India would not have been institutionalised if the Delhi gang rape had not received the media coverage that it received. The media’s tendency is to give prominence to the most newsworthy or sensational story.

Third, the media also has an indirect influence on national policy agenda. This is by influencing public opinion thereby shaping the policy agenda. Consequently, the government also influences public opinion via media coverage that eventually feeds back to the government, leaving the government as the key player in the end. Since India is yet to have a cogent national media policy, the government is the sole authority in the policy-making process.   
  
Lastly, another noteworthy issue is that the government pays more attention to issues that are covered in the press. Policy-makers base their decisions on what they perceive as the mood of the nation. Indirectly, the effects of news media may be difficult to disentangle from other factors that shape policy-making, but there are substantial reasons to believe that it plays a pivotal role in it.

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6. Anderson, J.E (2011). Public Policy Making, Wadworth-USA [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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