

MEDIA IMPACT ON POLICY DEBATE

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Introduction

Policy-making is a political process. It is affected by political, social, and economic factors. Media systems play an important role in giving shape and meaning to policy decisions. Modern phenomena of 24-hour news-cycle and the rise of social media have further impacted the way policies are formulated. Textbook policy-making follows an orderly process where problems are identified, solutions devised, alternatives are weighed, policies adopted, implemented, and evaluated. In the real World, however, policy-making is much more complex than this simple linear process. Policies are formulated through the struggle of competing ideas. In this sense media play very important role. It is the media through which citizens learn not only what the government policies are, but also, how these policies will affect them. Government also gets some valuable feedback in the process. Media's ability to focus some issues, while ignoring others, has given it tremendous powers in shaping, and often changing, the discourse on policy issues. It is this ability of media that enables it to influence policy debate in contemporary politics. This paper looks in to this aspect of media. Section one discusses some of the effects of media on policy-making. Section two discusses theory associated with media role. Section three discusses some examples. Section four discusses advantages and disadvantages of 24-hour media. Last section concludes the essay.

Effects of Media on Policy-Making

Soroka and his colleagues (2013) have mentioned several ways in which media affect policy-making debate. Media can draw public attention toward a particular issue and keep the issue alive as long as it wants. Media can completely change the discourse around a policy debate by re-framing the issue

in order to attract or dissuade the public from the issue. It has the ability to change the nature; sources or consequences of a policy issue in such a manner that completely changes the way people look at the issue and bring into question the solutions proposed by policy-makers. Highlighting individuals in such a manner that can aid, abet, or hinder their cause by highlighting their role in policy-making. Media also play the role of intermediary between the government and the people, relaying information on political and economic issues between the state, businesses, and civil society (Soroka et al 2013).

There are two theories in the literature on media and policy-making that are most relevant to this topic: agenda setting and issue framing.

Agenda Setting

Media has the ability to impact agenda setting by persuading the individuals and giving priority to certain issues over others, or by putting more focus on one story, ignoring others. McCombs and Shaw's study (1972) concluded that the media has the ability to set the public agenda by consistently, prominently featuring issues. For instance, the role media played in the rise of consumer protection as a policy issue (Soroka et al 2013). Cohen observed that the mass media "may not be successful in much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling it readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963:13). Kingdon (1995) has pointed issue attentiveness as a critical precursor of policy change. It is natural for issues to get attention of the policy-makers that stay for long on the media scene. Sensational issues are the issues in which media play a leading role. Media is impacting individual political and policy actors directly. These actors rely on media to know what the people are thinking about and prioritize their policies accordingly (Soroka et al 2013). The 24-hour news-cycle has particularly changed the way political and policy actors think about the issues. Many political actors as well as government institutions have established special units to monitor media to know about the issues being discussed. In this way the media's reporting directly influences them.

Issue Framing

Framing effect occurs when describing an issue, a speaker emphasizes minor, but relevant, aspect of the same issue in such a way that the listener focuses on these minor aspects when constructing his/her opinion (Soroka et al 2013). In other words framing looks at the way issues are presented. It “refers to the selective exposure of information to an audience with the intent of shaping their understanding of an issue” (Soroka et al 2013:4). We can say that framing is “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality...in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993:52). This use of framing deeply influences the direction of a policy, especially by bringing values and emotions in to discussion. However, policy-makers also engage in policy framing.

Media is clearly a policy actor. It can impact agenda setting and can change the direction of a policy by re-framing the issue. Media matter, throughout the policy process. Media plays three roles. These roles are of gatekeeper, scorekeeper, and watchdog. In the gatekeeper role media introduce and keep a topic alive in the national mindset. Best example of this is the issue of global warming. This topic can be found in movies, books, news, blogs, radio talks, and social media websites. Media have brought this issue to public and hope to initiate or reform policy and legislation. Many governments around the World have taken steps to reduce carbon emissions in to atmosphere because of media’s persistent coverage of the issue (Lopatic 2008). In the role of scorekeeper media watch individual personalities and cause increase or decrease in their popularity because of the coverage given to them. In its watchdog role media check corruption within the government. In 60’s and 70’s The Pentagon Papers and Watergate Scandal were released in the US. In this role media hope to ensure that the public can hold the government accountable.

The rise of social media has particularly impacted the way policy-makers think about policy issues. Policy actors' Tweeting and posting on Facebook and/or other social blogs has given them the ability to connect to people and get unfiltered feedback, by-passing the commercial media. Politicians are now using social websites to put across their message, interact with their constituents, and receive some useful feedback on policy issues. "Social media presents a growing body of evidence that can inform social and economic policy. It has value for government, the policy community and public service delivery organizations" (Leavey 2013:5). Major social networks such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter have become public policy actors. For the responsive policy-makers, social media can act like a bridge between the government and the people, skipping intermediaries effectively (Leavey 2013).

Facebook and Egypt's Revolution

Active citizens have used social media to mobilize campaigns, protests and to engage in political opinion expression. An example of social media's role in raising awareness and social transformation is Egypt's revolution of 2011. Social media was not fully responsible for the revolution, but it helped the thought leaders to connect with the ordinary citizens, rapidly expanding the network of people who became willing to take action. It started with a Facebook page, created in the honour of Khalid Said, who was brutally killed by the police. Soon the page attracted some 470,000 fans. Inspired by the Tunisian revolution, the page became a focal point for the popular protest in Egypt. It expanded the ranks of activists in Tahrir Square, joined by young educated people, lawyers, doctors, women, and judges. Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube were soon flooded with news and videos from Tahrir square. A revolution was underway. This has proved that social media, and conventional electronic media as well, enabled the people to connect quickly around shared values. It is shifting power to the people (Mainwaring 2011).

CNN Effect

There is a theory in political science and media studies that suggests that the development of 24-hour news television had a major impact on decision-making. This has been dubbed as 'CNN Effect', referring to the widely available round-the-clock broadcasts of the Cable News Network (Belknap 2001). Instant and continuous transmission of news and images fire public opinion that demand instant responses from government officials. Professor Steven Livingston of George Washington University has described it as a loss of policy control on the part of policy makers because of the power of the media, a power that they can do nothing about (Strobel 1996). The CNN Effect was first felt when in 1992. President Bush decided to send troops to Somalia after the media coverage of starving refugees. Those disturbing images made people to demand their government for some action. Less than a year later, President Clinton decided to withdraw US troops from Somalia after scenes were shown of dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. This action of the US President of troops withdrawal confirmed the power of 24-hour news media (Belknap 2001). Similarly, live coverage of events like Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, Gulf wars, 911 fall of Twin Towers, and Afghanistan war had a profound effect on the public opinion and policy makers. More recently, speeches from President Obama and US Secretary of State, John Kerry, on the Syrian poison gas issue suggest that the US foreign policy heavily relies on the media information. President Obama's speech on September 10, 2013 on the Syrian issue is full of references to videos and images of children shown on news channels. He is imploring the nation to watch those videos and images and then decide how America can choose to look away. In a sense these media footages are used as policy tool. Here are a couple of quotes:

"The images from this massacre are sickening: men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas, others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath, a father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk".

“Indeed, I’d ask every member of Congress and those of you watching at home tonight to view those videos of the attack, and then ask, what kind of World will we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly violate international law with poison gas and we choose to look the other way” (Keating 2013).

These statements confirmed the existence of CNN Effect in US foreign policy and showed how media drive the decisions of American policy makers. It involves both agenda setting and re-framing the issue to generate favourable public opinion and influence policy makers.

Good or Bad?

Whether the 24-hour news cycle and the rise of social media are good or bad developments, is a difficult question. There are both good and bad aspects to it. The 24 hour media enable people to access news at any hour of the day. The availability of news source gives the people an opportunity to know what is going on throughout the World, raising awareness among the people. In its watchdog role, media keeps an eye on the performance of the government. Due to constant vigilance of media, government is careful in its policy development and implementation. Media is a good source of gauging public opinion for the government. Because of 24 hour broadcast, government gets the reaction of the people in real time.

However, 24-hour news-cycle has compromised the quality of the news. There is a race for breaking news. To fill the 24 hours, very trivial things are presented as news and presenters spend hours upon hours dissecting different aspects of the issue. In the race to get the news first for his/her channel, journalists have abandoned their fundamental responsibility to report accurately. There are always gaps and news is not based on facts or truth. Politicians have adapted themselves to this new reality. Now politicians are seen tweeting or posting on Facebook. Due to the pressure to respond to media queries, politicians cannot concentrate on policy issues. A constant discussion on

policy issues in the media has virtually made it impossible for government to come up with long term, stable policy solutions. Policy issues, nowadays, take years to be resolved. Lastly, there is the issue of media corporatization. Few western global conglomerates own media. This raises questions of impartiality and meaningful participation of citizens in policy-making process. These huge corporations have become powerful political actors.

Conclusion

The 24-hour news and social media have impacted policy debate considerably. Media can influence policy-makers by agenda setting and re-framing the issues in a manner that influences public opinion and pressurizes government to take action. Social media have the ability to connect people and mobilize them to take collective action. In the developed World 'CNN Effect' has played major role in foreign policy decision-making. In Australia politicians are adapting to 24-hour media and social media reality. This has diverted their attention from policy making to mere policy discussion on media. The development of 24-hour news and social media has both advantages and disadvantages. It is a source of news and raising awareness among the people. It is a watchdog over the actions of the government. At the same time, quality and accuracy of news has been compromised. Rich corporations own media outlets that have their own agenda.

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