

The Media-Policy Nexus: Analyzing the Media's role in Policy Formation in Pakistan

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Abstract

Mass media plays an integral role in policy formulation, acting as a key influencer in the initial stages of the policy development by highlighting issues that attract the attention of politicians and policy makers. However, media's role extends beyond this preliminary phase of agenda setting, affecting the policy process in various ways. This study investigates the interplay between media narratives and policy development processes. It seeks to address expert opinion on the development of a framework which would encourage opinion from the public sphere in the legislative and policy procedures. By utilizing qualitative methodology and gathering data from 10 in-depth interviews, this study investigates how media influences policy decisions and its contribution to policy development and implementation. Additionally, it examines the media's watch dog function in policy formulation, assessing its impartiality, probing whether media outlets operate in an unbiased manner. It also investigates how media, both social and traditional, set their agendas and their impact on policy making. The findings show the imperative impact of social media on problem identification which led to development of numerous policies in the recent period. On the contrary, the conventional role of traditional media is increasingly perceived as manipulative due to their own political agendas. The research suggests that public engagement can be thoroughly reflected on policy formulation if social media is institutionalized in its information dissemination. This study contributes to the discourse on media influence in public policy, offering insights into the potential of social media as a transformative tool in policy development and public participation.

Keywords: Public Policy, social media, traditional Media, Policy formation, public participation

INTRODUCTION

Policy making is a political process which follows an orderly sequence where problems are identified, solutions devised, policies adopted, implemented and lastly evaluated. It 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. Its capacity to influence change or preserve the status quo is determined by the subject or policy problem it chooses and how it is phrased. Some studies have concluded that the media has a tremendous

monolithic impact on all policy processes, while others have concluded that it has a little role in policymaking, because it is issue-based, a more plausible scenario is that its level of effect fluctuates significantly.

While revisiting Pakistan's historical background and political discourse on public policy, it was found that certain factors contribute to the framework, which was broken down into three perspectives: internal, external, and contingency. The external perspective is explained as in which the developing states are bound to abide and adapt to the policies through international agencies and global aid organizations including the likes of World Bank, IMF, DFID and JAICA.¹ Such conditions by these external entities are proposed through economic policies which later articulates into trivial choices for Pakistan, such has been argued by different researchers but there is not much empirical evidence that supports the argument. But the mechanism and policy mix reveal much before the public lens how inconvenient the proposals are when the parliamentarians and opposition benches are engaged in heated debates.

Another aspect which reflects the Government's priorities is termed as "Visibility", it refers to the Government's positioning of their reputation and contribution in the developmental process which will be visible to the public eye. Through observation in Pakistan, it is of evidence that when a new regime takes over, they tend to abandon previous electibles active projects or sabotage the project with politically driven motives. Politically-driven initiatives were found to be frequently over-funded, extravagant, and often technically defective, with a lower effect, largely owing to the political factors that guided the aims.²

The policy framework in Pakistan has been discussed widely in the public sphere. There has been a debate over who controls the policy network and what's the reasoning behind the agendas it promotes. An unstable and inconsistent governing spectrum has brought the people to believe that the policies are formulated to serve the political elite, and in order to execute it consensually, the media is instrumentalized to gain public support or cultivate their social realities based on them. But recent developments of digital media have brought alternate opinions on central focus and the paradigm has shifted swiftly due to domestic scrutinization of societal issues by the general public on social media and the actions of the government in its regards are accounted for which entirely turns the tables of media's dominance. It is important to identify and analyze the role and implications of media's involvement in formulation of public policy making. Since the political paradigm in Pakistan is subject to instability even today, the policy making apparatus is widely debated along with it. It can serve as a framework for policymakers to recognize media's potential in identifying societal issues and shaping public opinion. This study can help lawmakers or officials to revamp their practices of policymaking in accordance to media and public opinion which in turn can help them to manage public affairs in a transparent, participatory, inclusive and responsive manner. Moreover, through this study media professionals can gain a better understanding of their influential role in the democratic processes and realize the importance of social media to serve as a platform for public discourse and accountability.

¹ Mubashar, Salman, and others, "Revisiting Public Policy Making Process and Strategies in Pakistan: A Governance Perspective."

² Tagar et al., "Public Policies and Sustainability of Industrial Growth in Pakistan."

Problem Statement

The current nexus of state politics is developed as a process where the social and political economy is the black box consisting of the legislators, lobbyists and state representatives acting as the system and the policies introduced are therefore considered as the output. Media acts as the advocate for the society's needs and plays the role of carrier. Media inputs the pressures on the system which result in new laws and policies. In context to Pakistan's case, the whole apparatus ceases to act out efficiently when the state players turn a blind eye to the concerning needs and devise a solution which favors against the majority. To quote as an example it is seen in recent times how the state is attempting to regulate the alternate media and with respect to that legislative houses are acting upon it. The problem arises what role does the media play in this while the state sabotages people's very fundamental freedom of expression. This study aims to analyses the gap of people's narrative in the perspective of public lawmakers and legislators and how much the media contributes in shaping those narratives adjacent to policy areas.

Objectives

1. To explore how policy makers utilize social media and traditional media while designing a policy.
2. To evaluate the extent of power of social media and traditional media on influencing policy.
3. To propose a framework for enhancing public participation.

Research Questions

Q1. What is the extent and nature of the media's influence in policy making?

Q2. How do policy makers use traditional and social media to identify issues while making policies?

Q3. How can we develop a public consensus in the policy formation framework?

As a rising number of people throughout the world utilize digital media technologies for information and communication, it has become an important component of individuals' political lives. It helps and hinder citizens' ability to be informed and involved.³ It has given voice to the unheard citizens, while also shifting national debates on critical legal problems. The importance of social movements in cause-lawyering is explored by Steinberg which introduces advocates to the function of social media in bringing about significant legal change.⁴ The findings reveal that digital activism (also known as #activism) may be used to effect legal and social change. Moreover, the lawyers should embrace social media since it has redefined how laws are made and enforced in many segments of society. Likewise, Gilardi explains the role of social media in political agenda setting. He has shed light on the decline of the gatekeeping role of the traditional media conglomerates through the surge of digital media.⁵ Results indicated that the three agendas; traditional media agenda, social media agenda of political parties and social media agenda of politicians, shared a connection where they influence each other.

³ de Zúñiga and Chen, "Digital Media and Politics: Effects of the Great Information and Communication Divides."

⁴ Steinberg, "# Advocacy: Social Media Activism's Power to Transform Law."

⁵ Gilardi et al., "Social Media and Political Agenda Setting."

In Pakistan's context mediatization has a mixed influence on the country's weak democracy's stability. Members of the policy community have a more favorable opinion of the media's effect on Pakistani society than those who work in the industry and claim they consider media reaction when making choices, despite this, all of the groups stated that the media is still unable to perform its watchdog duty without fear of retaliation.⁶ In another study, Hussain explores some of the main ideas in the media–government relations literature by evaluating the coverage of four separate events in Pakistan's securitized setting.⁷ A framing study of Dawn and daily Jang was carried out for this purpose. Generally, the outcomes were unsatisfactory.

Theoretically a link has been established in various studies between the media and public policy. It is evident in different situations across different regions of the world. The virtual public sphere, specifically, widens the regulatory space between the country and society by establishing a comprehensive medium for forming virtual popular support and popular sentiment. The author of this paper suggested some explanations of citizen involvement in the virtual public sphere for those pursuing political and social democratization in China.⁸ The media has been seen persuading the policymakers and higher authorities to act on media workers' and institutions' ideas.

Resultantly, the policymakers have regarded the media's appropriate demands and, several provisions in developed state's constitution have been modified as a result of their ideas and recommendations. The internet and related technologies have created a new public space for political discourse whether or not this public space becomes a public sphere is not up to the technologies. Internet-based technologies' data storage, fills political debate with material that would otherwise be unavailable. While internet-based technologies allow individuals from all over the world to communicate, they also frequently split political debate. There is a potential risk that internet-based technologies would adapt to existing political cultures rather than spawning new ones.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research design. In-depth interviews with executives from the provincial and federal Government officials has been conducted to learn about and evaluate a myriad of policy oriented subjects i.e what is their process and operation for inspecting problems in regards to their designated area, how is media affecting that cause of identification, how they are utilizing media in different aspects to recognizing a certain problem, how does public opinion impact their decisions and can the role of media capitalized in further engaging the public in designing legislations and policies.

Sampling

The in-depth interviews are based upon open-ended structured questions, along with a few unstructured follow-up questions for a detailed insight. For the data collection process, non-probability purposive sampling technique has been employed. The criteria of the respondents were based upon their position in the relevant state departments. The interviews purposely selected individuals at the executive level representatives of their department, who are aware of the

⁶ Pintak, Bowe, and Nazir, "Mediatization in Pakistan: Perceptions of Media Influence on a Fragile Democracy."

⁷ Hussain, "Analyzing Media–Government Relations on Policy Issues in the Semi-Democratic Milieu of Pakistan."

⁸ Jinrong and Enyi, "On Virtual Public Sphere and Network Citizen Participation."

Government's mechanism and conventions. The total sample size was 10 individuals, where 2 were from the media sector, and 8 were from the Government of Pakistan.

Findings and Results

Themes	Sub-themes
Mechanism of responsiveness to a problem	Hierarchical problem resolution structure Proactive and reactive approaches Monitoring and feedback mechanism Stakeholder engagement and collaboration Policy programs and compliance
Media Relevance in problem identification	Highlighting issues of importance Medias reporting and public awareness Government response to media coverage
Alternate mediums contributions	Social media as information hub Voice of public issues Rapid response and action Public engagement and feedback Information verification and authenticity
Traditional mediums contributions	Reliance of lawmaking departments on traditional media Collaboration with other mediums Centralized news structure Contribution towards policy programs Local channel monitoring
Partiality in Policy areas	Media bias and sensationalism Government and lawmakers' scrutiny and accountability Selective coverage Political and corporate influence over media Lack of media utility among lawmakers
Media's intervention in policy structure	Identification vs solution discussion Role in policy advocacy, follow-up and evaluation Change Catalyst Media as a critical observer/public watchdog Advocacy for public welfare Ineffective policy communication
Public participation in policy formation	Bottom-up approach Democratic engagement and representation Local bodies and community involvement

Problem identification__ media's role and mechanism of responsiveness

Pakistan has been facing various issues due to a lack of infrastructure and planning. Health, sanitation, land management, poor housing quality and ability to afford are some of the challenges to be named. It is ideally the state's responsibility to intervene and rectify these problems.

However, in recent times there has been a myriad of changes and amendments in departments which reportedly are the outcome of extreme scrutiny and criticism by the general public which compelled the government to intervene and drew their attention to these demands. The findings discuss how the officials address a problem and how the government is responding to these challenges. Interviewees discussed that a hierarchical structure is followed for problem resolution. One of the respondents mentioned that two approaches; a reactive and a proactive approach is carried out by the government to address a communal problem. Proactive approach includes policy formation and stakeholder engagement while the reactive approach focuses on the immediate response to the emerging issue. One of the respondents displayed the example of reactive approaches as embedded in the policy programs like that of Occupational Safety and Hazards (OSH), that guarded the labor rights of health and precautionary gear. Moreover, collaborations between public and stakeholders emerged as a key subtheme for mechanism of responsiveness to a problem. Thus, in order to attain sustainable solutions for the problems identified; all relevant parties should engage including public, government departments and legislators.

Furthermore, media's role in problem identification was discussed to which the respondents criticized the media's biased role in highlighting the issues of importance only thus, shaping public opinion of those specific issues. Interviewees also discussed that media's coverage and public attention often prompt government intervention consequently solving that highlighted issue. In this context, a respondent appreciated the media's role in a manner where he describes that a good thing that is happening right now is how different problems are being solved quickly by the government due to the influence of the media. Media has also played an imperative role in creating public awareness regarding salient issues. In this regard, one of the respondents' states that the media has more or less added to the cause of identifying the legal violations of their departments. Public opinion is of major concern to the department and that opinion is shared to them by the media outlets.

Partiality in policy formation and media intervention

Media's involvement in the policy process is multifaceted and far from unidirectional. One of the respondent states that it certainly depends on the media 's agenda, if it is to gather views then the public attention will be shifted to that direction but if media is impartial then yes, the collaborative effort of the policymakers and media with a proactive approach of constructive criticism can lead to a more positive output. Contrary to this, respondents highlighted the tendency of the media to sensationalize issues for higher viewership and ratings hence, neglecting more important or viral issues. This sensationalism results in biased reporting and it may prioritize less important issues, neglecting significant problems faced by marginalized segments of the population. A need for effective functioning of regulatory bodies like PEMRA with regard to media's functioning was also discussed which has failed to effectively perform its role. Respondents further discussed that type of media coverage can sway public opinion and potentially lead to partiality in policy formulation and implementation. Political and corporate pressures also influence media advocacy. This highlights the power dynamics between corporate identities, media advocacy and government initiatives leading to various challenges in policy implementation. The sub theme of government and lawmakers' scrutiny and accountability in policy areas also emerged. Transparencies and checks and balances are further required in policy making processes and equitable outcomes. Another major reason that contributes to the biasness in policy formation includes lack of media utilization by the lawmakers for policy promotion. A respondent expressed concerns about lack of

engagement and understanding of media utility among lawmakers in Pakistan. Many lawmakers do not utilize media for promoting policies and engaging with the public.

It is often observed that media is adept at identifying the problems but fails to propose solutions. Therefore, interviewees suggested that media despite of pointing out issues should also actively engage in constructive dialogues in order to address the problems effectively. Furthermore, the discussion suggests that media serves as a platform for policy advocacy and public discourse. The interviewees reference to utilizing media in favor of government initiatives indicates the strategic importance of media engagement in shaping policy outcomes. Also, the media need to play a more proactive role in evaluating the outcomes of policy implementations. Respondents further added that not only media should be efficient in its role but the government departments should also play an imperative role by navigating media landscapes, engaging in advocacy efforts thus, communicating policy objectives to the public through various media channels. Media's responsibility to address societal objectives and advocate for public welfare policies emerged as another key subtheme for this study. Interviewees underscored medias role as a watchdog thus ensuring that government policies align with public welfare and scrutinizing policies that may have negative implications. Therefore, the media has a transformative power in driving policy reforms and acting as a catalyst for change and accountability in governance.

Discussion

Extent and nature of the media's influence in policy making

Media mediums play the most pivotal role in the dissemination of political information and being a political actor it is the one entity that disseminates information through altering facts and propaganda, hence shaping the public discourse. The media has the power to restrict particular policy choices and setting the boundaries for 'legitimate' public discussion, thereby impacting the policy agenda.⁹ Some academics believe that the media has a tremendous monolithic impact on all policy processes, while others believe it plays a little role.¹⁰ Findings of this study highlights the respondents concerns regarding media bias and its alignment with political interests suggesting that media engagement with specific departments may lead to partiality even "blackmailing" of officials. It further lay emphasis over media's focus on ratings and audience attention resulting in media bias and potentially compromising professional integrity. Respondents emphasized the need for nonpartisan and objective criticism over sensationalism to foster positive outcomes for national prosperity.

The research explored the extent to which media can alter government opinions and the findings suggest media's genuine role is to find what the government is going to tell the public without modifying it according to their own interest. On the contrary the media conglomerates in Pakistan acquire information about the policy of the government and then just modify it or scandalize it according to their own interest, according to the trust of political parties they are serving or even in certain cases according to the interest of the non-state actors. Furthermore, the findings indicate that lawmakers consider media narratives while devising policies. This recognizes the media's role in constructive criticism and public opinion expression. Thus, it can be concluded that media portrayal of policy subjects leads to significant amendments in policy formulation.

⁹ Borquez, "Newsmaking and Policymaking: Steps toward a Dialogue."

¹⁰ McCombs and Shaw, "The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas."

Another aspect of responses stated the media's ability to cultivate and construct reality is the key element of our social reality, media as the gatekeeper probes and constructs problems and that signals the state to play its role of the mediator. Responses varied from stating that the media's role is kept limited and not considered due to its tendency of pursuing foreign agendas and its deviance, the state does not allow absolute freedom to intervene due the ethical decorum. Data suggested that the level of transparency that media has constructed between the state and public indicates that no policies or proposals are advanced unless there is a public approval from it.

Role of traditional media in policy formation

This research emphasized on authentic and verified information obtained from print and broadcast media before taking a policy decision. Traditional media continue to hold significance in the eyes of public sector officials and are considered primary sources of information thus, it is trusted and valuable source of information for policy makers in public sector. In addition to this, findings of the research implied that traditional media is the standard forum through which the officials engage information and perceive public opinion. In this regard certain departments have a dedicated wing oriented specifically to monitor news channels to identify public issues. By closely monitoring traditional media outlets, policymakers can stay informed about societal problems and public sentiments, thus effecting policy decisions. A notable practice identified in this research reveals appointment of an official spokesperson within departments, who convey official statements to the media, ensuring that the departments perspective is accurately represented and the narratives are error free. This helps maintain transparency and clarity in communication between policy makers and media. This study also highlights some challenges related to traditional media which encompasses its potential role in propaganda for political elites and shift towards sensationalism and entertainment. Despite these challenges, traditional media's wide access across various socio-economic demographics in Pakistan makes it as an important communication tool for policymakers.

Social Media's role in policy formation

Social media has caused a decline in the gatekeeping role of traditional media through citizen journalism and free flow of information.¹¹ Another advancement through social media is its ability to freedom of expression, provides opportunities of direct political participation, improves the electoral process and increases political accountability in authoritarian countries and emerging democracies. However, an emerging democracy like Pakistan, where social media trends are surging and accountability conditions are destitute. It is highly justified to investigate the role of social media towards political accountability.¹² This study explored the contribution of social media on problem identification in regards to policy. Results indicated that social media is a forum which explores a multitude of dimensions related to communal problems. Officials believe that social media has led to more rapid acknowledgement and response of complaints. Respondents believed social media has led them to recognize where most of their segmented population existed and through handles like facebook and twitter, active participation is recognized by the public. The flow of information is free; hence the marginalized areas are being discussed and being pressed

¹¹ Gilardi et al., "Social Media and Political Agenda Setting."

¹² SADIQ, "SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER IN PUNJAB PAKISTAN."

for government intervention. Even departments who are not projected to address problems from social media previously have seen a shift of dynamics of the medium's effectiveness and are potentially foreseeing it as the next formal medium due to its personalized capacity.

Other factors indicated that the role of social media is controversial by stating it as a double-edged sword. It was discovered that social media can contribute more than comprehensive facts and information required to inspect a problem in the society but it can also spoil the socio-religious fiber of the state. That is largely due to misinformation and dissonance, which are associated as major two attributed substances of social media and more than positive, it has exhibited negative impacts in our society. Respondents stated that problems are exaggerated due to its lack of accountability and regularity. Data from this theme revealed that the current government's system is dependent on the press and broadcast e.g if there is a problem being transcribed on the television then the Government is compelled to take action but also determines social media as the torchbearer in the context of problem identification and the dissemination of information.

Public consensus in policy formation framework

Previous studies suggested that the public opinion has a significant impact on policy formation, and salience increases the impact of public opinion; that the impact of public opinion remains strong even when the activities of political organizations and elites are taken into account; that responsiveness has not changed significantly over time; and that the generalizability of the conclusions is limited.¹³ This research attempts to explore the extent of public participation and ways to develop a framework which can further engage more public consensus. According to the respondents of this study, the political apparatus cannot be changed in subject to policy formulation. They stated that the members of the house are the representatives of the public, its one way or another the same apparatus being exercised in a democratic system and thus, these representatives are tasked to cater the demands of their public by recognizing the problems that surface the grassroot level of their communities by using bottom down approach. The local bodies are formed only to be tasked with the duty to propose solutions to the problems of the people and communicate the message to the national representative so they can exercise their right to appeal to the state for relevant legislation and lawmaking. Policies are formulated by the ministries, divisions and civil bureaucracy. They take into account the ambit of lawmaking and the laws that constitute them accordingly. No policy is formed beyond the ambit of the law and neither can it contradict the law. But if those laws and policies are idealized through the lens of the public and include their substance, only then a balance can be acquired between the state's translation of public opinions.

Other responses added that the media can pivot the effectiveness of state initiatives and policies which further transforms and alters the process into a more favorable opinion of the public. Findings also stated that while the parliamentarians as the public representatives have access at their designated authorities, they remain no longer public centric. They tend to pursue their personal goals instead of social objectives. Either these parliamentarians pursue their own agendas or the political agendas of their party. The only nonpartisan agenda they abide by are the advocacy campaigns which require moral conditioning of these politicians. Moreover, it was suggested that social media could be a viable option for public feedback for many departments in order to evaluate

¹³ SADIQ.

their agendas or comprehend their narrative. However, social media lacks the institutionalization and structure. Consequently, if flow of information is regulated on social media forums making public participation an integral part of policy making an effective implementation of law and order can be ensured. Another aspect of lack of public consensus is the segmented population and diversity of opinions. Different stakeholders have different interests and the Government has to cater all in fair share.

CONCLUSION

Media plays a significant role in any democratic society; hence it's recognized as the fourth pillar of the state but variation in responses conclude that it has the intent to mislead policy formation. The state in this case should not rely on what issues are being stressed by media or pressed by public opinion, the policymaking has to be swift in a manner that there should be initiatives taken by the government in its potential resources which could fill in the gap between the state and public. It can be argued that lawmakers seek public approval through media and require media's assistance to pursue initiatives but if it only remains at the extent to entertain or spread hysteria then it is a helpless cause. Considering the influence of media on the apparatus of policymaking, the mediums share their respective distinctiveness. It is of a relief to discover that social media has deprived the gatekeepers of information who relied on controlling broadcast and print but the argument that social media misleads or does not account for relevance is baseless. Recent explorations and problems were all discovered through the social media rant and hype, senior journalists and officials stating the fact that it does not contribute to the merits of information is disappointing. Moreover, public opinion's triumph is reflective on social media as compared to traditional which absolutely has deviated from its purpose. The statements that justify the parliamentarians as the anchors of the public are outdated, people tend to express mistrust to assembly halls and demand their own addressal on forums. Keeping in context the public's role as the major stakeholder in policy areas, social media should be instrumentalized as the people's anchor while devising their insights in policy formulation and evaluation.

Recommendations for Policy formation

In order to ensure public participation in transparent policy formation, following recommendations can facilitate policymakers.

1. Include both traditional and social media platforms by curating channels for public discourse in order to institutionalize public engagement in policy and legislative formation.
2. Public awareness regarding policy formation should be enhanced. In this regard, national programs can be initiated that focuses on citizens awareness and education on policy formation. These can act as an instrument to enhance media literacy among the public thus, ensuring effective participation of citizens in public discourse.
3. By recognizing the role of social media as a key platform in problem identification, public engagement in the form of feedback can be embedded in policy formulation and evaluation stages. A bottom-up policy can be adopted in this context to ensure grass root level involvement by citizen and various communities in the policy formation process.
4. Clear documentation and public dissemination of policy deliberations and decisions can promote transparent and accountable policymaking.

5. Investigative journalism should be encouraged by supporting media outlets in performing their role as a public watchdog without fear of retaliation. This will hold the policy makers accountable thus ensuring critical analysis of policy proposals.
6. Media channels should be regularly monitored regarding their responsiveness to public opinion on policy issues. Policy initiatives can be supported only if a sense of ownership is fostered among the public which can be expressed through policy responsiveness.
7. Include nonpartisan and objective reporting standards in order to ensure unbiased media coverage of policy issues. Guidelines and practices can be implemented that ensure diverse range of perspectives in media coverage of policy issues.

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