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## THE MASS MEDIA IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION

UWEM UDO AKPAN, PhD

### Abstract

This article examines the relevance of the mass media in the making of public policy. It posits that the mass media play an important role in public policy formulation in the process of discharging their institutional functions. The article distinguishes the categories of policy makers, examines the characteristics of public policies and also addresses the factors that could enhance the media's role in public policy making.

### Introduction

The mass media are the nerve centre of information flow in the society. This places the media in a position where they affect relations among the different sub-systems in the society. Media influence, including the effect on the process of governance, may be direct or indirect, unintended or intended. This is achieved through the media's discharge of institutional and social functions. Burgoon and Rufner (1978, p.352) list four institutional functions of the media: "to *inform* the public through surveillance of society; to *interpret* this information through commentary intended to persuade; to provide *entertainment and recreation*; and perhaps most important from an institutional perspective to *earn a profit*, which enables the media to discharge these other functions."

McQuail (1987, p.71) classifies media purpose in society into information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilization. The mass media are believed to cast their influence on the diverse segments of the polity, including

the process of governance, through the discharge of the above functions. In this media-centred view of society, the media are assumed to be a power base and, to a great extent, dictate or influence the behaviour of their audience. This position presupposes a relationship between political actors and the mass media, and underlines the contributions of the press to the political process. It is on this platform as articulators of interests and mobilizers of social power that the mass media are seen as a vital part in public policy formulation in the polity.

### Institutional and Non-institutional Public Policy Formulators

Cahn (1995) uses the terms *policy actors* or *players* to refer to individuals or groups that are involved in public policy making. The usage pre-supposes that policymaking involves more than those traditionally identified with policy formulation. Cahn divides these policy actors into two categories: institutional and non-institutional actors. The institutional actors, so called because they have been established law, include the legislature, the president, governors, executive agencies and the courts. The non-institutional actors consist of the mass media, political parties, interest groups and political consultants.

### The Nature of Public Policy

Scholars have severally defined public policy. Hence, it does not have one composite definition. Each definition, however, contributes to the total explanation of the concept. Thomas Dye, on his part, defines public policy as "whatever a government chooses to do or not to do" (cited in Okereke, 1998, p.2). Public policy is here pictured as being in the realm



of government. It could be action or in action. Frederick, Davis & Post (1988, p.183) also link public policy to government: "A public policy is a plan of action undertaken by government to achieve some broad purpose affecting a large segment of the citizenry."

Anderson (1979, p.3) sees public policy generally as "a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern" (cited in Okereke, 1998, p.2). In narrowing down what public policies are, Anderson says they are those policies developed by governmental bodies and officials, an action that could be influenced by non-governmental actors or factors. Also emphasizing that public policy situates within the context of government, Okereke (1998, p.3) says "public policy refers to those definite acts or actions of government geared toward the fulfillment of the obligation of government on the citizens...."

### **Characteristics of Public Policy**

1. Public policy is developed by government bodies or officials. It is formulated by authorities in the political system, and these authorities are equally recognized by most members of the political system as responsible for public policy.
2. Public policies are purpose - or goal-oriented rather than chance or random behaviour.
3. Public policy is government action on a problem and what it intends to do about it in future.
4. Public policies are aimed at public interest. All leaders justify their policies with appeals to public rather than specific interest.
5. They could be negative or positive - positive when it takes the form of overt government action aimed at tackling a problem, and negative when it resolves not to take any action.

6. Public policy is authoritative and legally binding, and has a potentially coercive quality.
7. Public policy is intrinsically conflictual (Eminue, 2005), because it is often a result of interplay of political forces.
8. Public policy has both intended and unintended consequences.
9. Public policy is, ideally, responsive to the needs of the citizens, according to the realities of the day, with much flexibility, firmness and sense of purpose.

### **How the Mass Media contribute to Public Policy**

The power of the mass media is intrinsic in their function as articulators of interests and mobilizers of social power for purposes of action. Thus, the media often assume the role of a guide and, according to McQuail (1977, p.90), they "can attract and direct attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favour those with power and correlatively divert attention from individuals or groups." Taking the point further, the mass media can point a searchlight in a particular area of public policy for policy makers to consider, be it in the area of problem-identification, problem-solving or diversion of attention from individuals, groups or issues. In doing this, however, the mass media consciously or unconsciously give some issues differential treatment, sometimes favourable, and, at other times, unfavourable. Media treatment would then confer status on policy issues. Cahn (1995) argues that the mass media help to define social reality and influence policy outcomes.

Graber (1995) states that people are vulnerable to media influences because of the way they (the media) process information. First, they trim down the abundance of news to manageable proportions. Second, people use a processing strategy to extract limited amounts of information from news stories into an existing body of knowledge. According



to Graber (1995), individuals recreate reality in their news information to make up for the lack of background and context in the news stories. Cahn (1995) states that another way that the media influence policy outcomes is through *priming*. He defines priming as the selective coverage of certain events, and argues that media-focus on events increases their salience ratings.

Because the mass media can serve as a channel for persuasion and mobilization, they are able to wield public opinion to influence policy makers in government as to the direction of public policy in the polity. As McQuail (1987, p.3) avers:

The mass media are a power resource - a means of control, management and innovation in society... They provide a location (or area) where, increasingly, the affairs of public life are played both nationally and internationally. They have become a dominant source of definitions and images of social reality for individuals, but also collectively for groups and societies...

Newbold (1995) believes that television in particular is able to influence the audience through cultivation - a situation in which the viewer is subjected to a slow, cumulative effect, depending on the intensity of his or her exposure to the values and world representations on TV. Gerbner (1969, 1995) had earlier made this point. He notes that viewers' perceptions of society, social structure, gender roles, etc. are congruent with, and modelled on, the highly skewed representations of things on TV. Television cultivates consciousness, it tells us about what is good or bad in the society; it is a symbolic system that cultivates and regulates perceptions. Television is seen as a source of powerful effect where it acts as a stimulus; and the audience responds in terms of behaviour, attitude and opinion, albeit over

elongated periods of time and viewing exposure. Thus, Gatlin (1995, p.21) speaks of "the power of the media to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not:...to establish certain political agendas for social attention and to contain channel or exclude others."

Through high-quality, thoughtful comments and debates on public issues, the mass media play a key role in supporting good policies and building decent societies. Aside from supporting public policies on their own, the mass media also create broad-based support for good policies. McCawley (2003) argues that sometimes policies fail, not because they are not good policies, but because there is lack of public support for the policies. He maintains that support for public policies is generated mainly by the mass media, and well informed persons achieve this through discussions of policy issues. Otten (1992, p.112), writing on the effect of media attention on health policy in the United States, quotes one health consultant to drive home the importance of media attention: "Ten thousand-watt klieg lights turned on a situation focuses the minds of policy makers very fast."

Conscientious reporters in the media, often alerted by whistle-blowers or advocacy groups, have for years exposed badly run public institutions or the failure of such institutions to enforce existing regulations or discipline incompetent officials; government policies have changed as a result. How are the mass media able to affect policy? Otten (1992) says policy makers often get their information on a problem or its urgency from the press even if the press is not itself digging up the information but simply conveying it from an advocacy group, a research organisation or the general public. The public media are thus an irreplaceable mechanism for moving a problem to solution. It takes the media to legitimize a problem as an



issue of public concern.

By making input towards public policy formulation, the mass media fulfill their function of correlation where new events are explained and interpreted through columns, editorials, commentaries, and news analyses. Through correlation, the mass media set priority and signal the relative status of events. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place.

From their input toward policy formulation, the mass media set the agenda both with the topics they present to the audience and how the information on those topics is presented. According to O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders & Fiske (1983), the media, by so doing, focus attention on a defined and limited set of selected issues. The implication is that those issues that have not come on the agenda of discussion in the media may be ignored because they are assumed to be of less importance. If the mass media adjudge issues as important, it is likely that the public, of which the policy makers are an integral part, will also adjudge those issues as important. By focussing on some policy issues and ignoring others, the mass media are involved in gate-keeping, ensuring that some issues are either allowed through or turned back at the editorial gate. It is important to observe that through their selection, exclusion, emphasis and de-emphasis of some policy issues from debates, the mass media continually highlight policy issues that tend to really matter. Wittingly or unwittingly, rightly or wrongly, policy makers take such policy issues to be of great concern to the public and the public makers themselves.

### **What defines Mass Media Contributions to Public Policy Formulation?**

Powerful as the mass media appear to be in affecting the behaviour of public policy formulators, there are factors that circumscribe or enhance the mass media's ability to generate acceptable, reliable policy input:

#### **Independence**

The mass media's ability to affect governance and the public depends largely on their relative degree of independence. Gurevitch and Blumler (1977, p.23) regard this as very crucial. They note that "the central issue in the relationship between the media and political institution revolves around the *media's relative degree of autonomy* and to what extent and by what means this is allowed to be constrained." Therefore, if the mass media operate within a political system that does not allow the media the freedom to operate, it is unlikely that they will make policy input into the process of governance. The political system should acknowledge and value public opinion to enable the media to express diverse viewpoints.

#### **Access to Information**

It is inconceivable that the mass media can perform their role as non-institutional policy makers if they do not have access to relevant information that will in turn guide their policy advocacies. Budge-Reid (1999) believes that making a sustainable policy that is not subject to informed public debate is rarely sustainable. Hence, he says the mass media should be at the heart of policy making, reflecting and communicating debates. Sound, publicly debated policy making, according to Budge-Reid, requires:



- good, accessible information on issues; analytical capacity;
- capacity to communicate analysis among the public; and
- capacity of the public to communicate their perceptions.

Access to information is more guaranteed if journalists have access to the political gladiators. (Boyd-Barret, 1995). To be convincing purveyors of reality, journalists must get as close as they can to the sources of events. Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, p.109) corroborate this position. In their words: "Journalists cannot perform their task of political scrutiny without access to politicians for information, news interviews, action and comment."

### Roles Relationship

Journalists, as the Fourth Estate of the Realm, are in a role relationship with political gladiators. The depth or intensity of this relationship does affect the willingness, the capacity or the drive by the mass media operatives to make input toward public policy formulation in a society. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995, p.109) explain the nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists: "The mass media offer politicians access to audience through a credible outlet, while politicians offer journalists information about a theatre of presumed relevance, significance, impact and spectacle for audience consumption."

Each side to the prospective transaction is in a position to offer the other access to a resource it values. To that extent, therefore, "the recurring interactions that result in political communication for public consumption are negotiated, not by unsocialized individuals, but by

individuals-in-roles whose working relationships are consequently affected by normative and institutional commitments" (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p.119).

This functional approach explains the behaviour of journalists and policy makers by locating them in their respective organizational settings, where their roles are chiefly defined and performed. Role-anchored guidelines provide models of conduct in the business of policy makers and journalists in their relationships or interactions. Besides, "communication behaviour", according to Blumler & Gurevitch (1995, p.112), "is *normatively prescribed* involving *legitimated* expectations and actions. This suggests that the capacity of the participants to exchange resources or exercise influence is constrained by the guidelines pertaining to the roles they perform."

Thus, journalists cannot, without great risk, offer policy suggestions that lie outside the authority of the roles. Likewise, policy makers will tend to avoid a behaviour vis-à-vis the media that would be construed to breach their role prescriptions. By implication, therefore, "exchange and the tussles of mutual influence are normatively bounded" (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p.112). Hence, according to the scholars, a shared framework of news values that determines both who and what are treated as news worthy regulates interactions between journalists and public policy makers. Therefore, the mass media function to maintain the different structures in the society, hence any input that is likely to jeopardize the survival of the existing structures is unlikely to be put forward by the mass media.

### Agreement with Existing Policy Proposals

Public policy makers are not passive recipients of whatever media content come their way. According to Dowse and Hughes (1973), government is not always responsive to public opinions. Response depends on the issues. Akpan



(2006, p.183) notes that when the media content "tends not to be in agreement with the policy formulators' proposals, it is likely that such input is out-rightly rejected or is not given consideration as much as it would have been were the policy input to be in agreement with the proposals already made by the policy formulator." Sometimes, as Dowse & Hughes (1973) have said, the policy makers engage in tilting the balance of media discussions in favour of their proposals in what is known as *opinion management process*. Thus, as Akpan (2006, p.183) explains, "where ... media input is at variance with already established policy proposals, the formulators may actively canvas their position in the mass media in order to convince both the media practitioners and the audience members who depend on the mass media for some of their information needs... This suggests that at all times in the policy making process, the formulators are ready to defend their position, particularly when such a position has received undesirable comments in the mass media."

### Conclusion

Public policy takes place in the realm of government. It is a government action on a problem or what it intends to do about it in the future. It is an act by institutional policy makers. However, the action of the institutional policy makers is sometimes mediated by the activities of non-institutional policy players such as the mass media. The media provide the platform as articulators of interest and mobilizers of social power for the discussion of issues, the results of which may be vital input into public policy.

In spite of their power and importance in affecting the direction of public policies, the media may be constrained in this function by their relative independence, access to information, agreement of the media's proposals with already existing policies as well as roles relationships.

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