

Influence of News Media Contents on Policy Makers

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Abstract: *The research explores the influence of news media content on policymakers, using Indexing Theory and the Cascade Model to provide an empirical basis. Policymakers were interviewed, and the resulting data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The study found that media content has a significant, multifaceted impact on policy-making, particularly during the agenda-setting phase. Policymakers noted an increasing trend of media interactions affecting their decisions. While media attention can shape policy priorities, there is also a concern about the sensationalism prevalent in Pakistani media. Policymakers believe that if this sensationalism can be regulated and brought under control, the media could become a more credible and valuable source of information. This would enhance its role in contributing to sustainable governance. The study highlights the dual role of media as both an influencer and a potential partner in governance. Further research is recommended to delve deeper into these dynamics and to develop strategies for leveraging media influence constructively. The findings underscore the importance of understanding media's impact on policy-making and the need for a balanced approach to media consumption and regulation to support informed and effective governance.*

Key Words: News Media Content, Policy Makers, Influence on Policy Makers, Policy and Media, Media Influence

Introduction

Media, ever since its inception, has been phenomenal in creating bridges between individuals and entire communities by acting as a means of communication to the masses. It has proved to carry tremendous strength to influence the opinions, sentiments, and thoughts of people, especially after its conversion from a supply-oriented market to a demand-oriented market with a steady increase in content producers and consumers. These persuasions can be attributed to media interventions and can be highly effective in enacting policies, particularly through bringing to light issues that are of public interest (Lancaster & al, 2010). The emergence of the use of social media by citizens of all countries, regardless of their demographics, is now being monitored by most governments as it possesses the ability to help citizens organize and fuel political actions (Soares & Joia, 2015).

In a political and social context, a free and vibrant media creates a platform that disseminates necessary information to the masses, particularly regarding the socio-economic and political circumstances, ultimately paving the way for democratic participation (Hudock, 2003). Similarly, it can also fuel fears and challenges to government agencies for their ability to impart social and political concern at a rapid pace, long before governments have the time to mobilize or direct action due to the mass synchronization of the citizens of the state (Shirky, 2011; Rafiq et al., 2024).

Media Influence and Audience

Media influence plays a huge role in many aspects of human lives, including the views, beliefs or even the knowledge of the individual based on the topic being shown on the screens. Due to an increase in the number of consumers of media, it is expected that the overall influence of mass media as a whole will

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increase greatly over the years, making it one of the primary sources for people to rely upon for information regarding their cognitive needs.

Interestingly, while media has played a significant role in improving the awareness levels of the masses, it could also have an unpredictable and adverse influence on both the community and the general population, often creating situations that can be difficult to mitigate or address. This improvement in cognitive and political awareness can lead to the swaying of public opinion, bringing contemporary issues into the eyes of policymakers who are often users of social media themselves. At the same time, as the policymakers are aware of the implications of disagreeing with public opinion in the form of losing important votes, they aim to keep their policies aligned with what they see on social and traditional media, leading to media affecting the very fundamentals of how a country is run (Biswas, Ingle, & Roy, [2014](#)).

Media and Policy Making

When it comes to policy-making, media could play a huge influence on the entire community, particularly in a country like Pakistan where institutions of democracy and state administration are still in their nascence. For millions, as with many other developing countries, it is the only source of information when it comes to state functions and political developments (Anam, [2002](#)). It has been observed in numerous studies that as people consume media, they can be influenced by the political content they are witnessing, leading to a change of opinion that is translated into action by policymakers all over Pakistan, often rising to power and glory using the tide of public opinion harnessed from media (Gionis, Terzi, & Tsaparas, [2013](#)). Furthermore, when these policymakers interact with each other and their followers in the media, it can lead to a unique democratic form of governance that facilitates and incorporates the agenda and opinions of the public into their mode of governance (Khan & Shahbaz, [2015](#)).

Effective policy-making demands that processes and institutions of any state produce results that not only meet the needs of the society while utilise the available resources to their maximum efficiency for the betterment of its subjects. Media helps and effectively smoothens this process by informing people about these resources so that public opinion can help decide the best for the citizens of the state (Rafiq, Qaisar & Butt, [2022](#)). Likewise, in a digital sense, as people engage and interact with each other and policymakers around them using social media, they nurture a sense of political engagement that can boost the public-state coordination during the process of policymaking as well (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, [2012](#)).

The Media and Its Potential to Influence Policy Makers

However, the media cannot in itself alone ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of all the institutions of the state and only help keep different departments and administrators on alert by reporting cases of inefficiency and other related vices in the system, ultimately preventing bad governance while ensuring that legislative assemblies continue to produce policies that are effectively suited to the needs of the people. It essentially provides two different yet important functions for policymakers, firstly by serving as a source of information and secondly by acting as a public arena where political agendas are pitted against oppositions to win the hearts and minds of citizens (Walgrave and Aelst, [2006](#)).

One of the primary reasons why media performs such a role for policymakers is due to its dual function as described by Van Aelst and Walgrave ([2016](#)), one as a source of information and secondly as its potential as a public arena. Information is critical for policymakers to work efficiently in their daily lives, as they are creating and devising policies to cater to the needs of potentially millions of citizens (Baumgartner & Jones, [2014](#)).

Interestingly, despite the application of various theories regarding the influence of news media on policymakers, all scholars are confident in sharing the academic belief that news media is followed with great interest and zeal by political parties and policymakers alike (Van Aelst and Walgrave, [2016](#)).

As discussed above, policymakers gain information from the news media around them, but for the policymakers to be noticeable in the public or for their agenda to be shown to their community, they need to be the object of the news coverage, acquiring personal media coverage and attention that can be used to translate words, promise and beliefs into action (Van Aelst and Walgrave, [2016](#)).

Literature Review

Media and its presentation of the world around us have played a significant role in altering our perceptions regarding it and how the audience witnesses and interconnects different social phenomena with each other. It is clear that media has the strength to influence us all in a multitude of ways, ranging from both adverse and positive ways, most of them majorly unpredictable. The following literature review will ascertain the influence media carries on our lives and how it may influence the concept and phenomena of governance, as it is of particular concern to the deliverance of quality governance and administration for the people of Pakistan.

Quantitative surveys conducted by Fawzi (2017) revealed that most administration officers, members of the German Parliament, researchers and most officers affiliated with policy-making perceived that media had the potential to influence almost all stages of the policy-making process. The article highlighted the role of media during the times of regular and routine policy-making processes, revealing how policymakers are influenced by the news media across various stages, beginning from the agenda setting stage to the implementation stages (Fawzi, 2017).

Similar results have been observed in content analysis of related media sources and articles as well. In Mwangi (2018), it was observed that when media coverage and attention were intense and driven by incidents, policymakers were influenced to take swift action, ultimately affecting the overall process of policymaking. In the context of developing countries with limited government surveillance and reliable sources of news, the media acts as an excellent narrator of events and sentiments to the policymakers, letting them know what to talk about or include in their discourse (Mwangi, 2018).

Figenschou, Karlsen, Kollveit and Schillemans (2019) observed that where decision-making by policymakers in public bureaucracies is conventionally guided by formal procedures, rules, and evidence-backed reports to secure fair and impartial decisions and policies, the latest studies have revealed them to be highly mediatized. In a bid to understand how media attention and coverage can influence political and policy outcomes, a mixed method was used by the researchers by assessing the perceptions of civil servants with both surveys and in-depth interviews. It was revealed that media possessed the potential to influence agendas and decision-making in both institutions and ministries as the policymakers find themselves to be highly receptive to public opinion emerging from the media. As media pressure and public opinions collect regarding contemporary concerns and issues, policymakers take note of the issues, and swift action often follows their notice (Figenschou, Karlsen, Kollveit, & Schillemans, 2019).

The phenomena of mediatization were similarly observed by Stromback and Aelst (2013) in their article "Why Political Parties Adapt to the Media: Exploring the Fourth Dimension of Mediatization", where it was observed that political actors and people alike have started relying heavily upon media to the extent that politics is now believed to be mediatized (Stromback & Aelst, 2013).

It was observed in a systematic review titled "A systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policymakers" by Oliver *et al.* that over the recent years, the information that is being brought to policymakers has become more technical and intricate, even when presented by the news media (Rafiq, Kamran & Afzal, 2024). It was observed that access to quality and improved evidence could help policymakers generate better policy outcomes, suggesting that the influence of evidence can be both a barrier and a facilitator (Kathryn, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman, & Thomas, 2014).

A quantitative content analysis conducted by Korthagen (2015) revealed that the rising increase in the influence of media in the process of governance can be attributed to many positive influences, such as increased accountability and transparency; it has also been observed that commercial interests can cloud and dumb down political reporting, adversely influencing policy decisions and public opinion (Korthagen, 2015).

Nisbet and Fahy (2015) observed that news media can use their influence and position to influence policymakers as well, especially if they contextualize and evaluate knowledge present within them from all relevant stakeholders. At the same time, they can also help bridge gaps between other political parties, ruling policymakers and the citizens, crossing all established ideological and physical divisions present between them. Similarly, they can also promote an encompassing and overarching policy-making process



that requires the inclusiveness of all necessary stakeholders, suggesting that media influence on policymakers can be vital for effective and sustainable policymaking.

Schillemans and Pierre (2016). Actors in most modern governance positions have changed their behaviours to respond to media pressures and have dedicatedly altered their routines or practices to stay in a positive light under the media to ensure seamless operations. Likewise, they are highly receptive to the opinion of the media regarding their performances and policy decisions, and everything that is highlighted in the light of media is given more substantial attention than other policy agendas (Rafiq, Khadim, & Afzal, 2023).

Walgrave and Dejaeghere (2016) observed that the amount of information present in a political sphere is overabundant and seemingly infinite, leaving policymakers bombarded with tons of information that makes the decision-making process inherently complex and intricate. Hence, politicians need to be selective in the data and information that they are receiving, especially when it's from news media where there is an excessive influx of information, striving to stay on top of the excessive torrent of information that is bombarding them (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2016).

The Indexing theory, popularly known as the “indexing hypothesis”, is concerned with the press-state relationship in the context of news content. The indexing theory predicts that the news content regarding public policy and politics and its portrayal would resonate with the parameters of the discourse and debate present within the political elites. Hence, when political entities, actors and policy makers express agreement on any given topic that is of public interest, the news coverage would naturally shift to show their agreement. Likewise, when political entities express their disagreement on any issue, the news media would naturally reflect their disagreement, changing their coverage accordingly to reflect the debate. Similarly, any issues that receive greater political attention and arouse greater debates would be covered in a wider sense, whereas issues of minor political interest would not receive similar attention.

In contrast with the indexing model, the cascade model covers many deficiencies and presents a more significant and intricately dynamic illustration of the interrelationship between the government, political elites, news media, and public opinion. The Cascade Model predicts that the interrelationship and the interactions between the media, the frames presented by the media, the political elites and the public create a unique environment that is not controlled by a single actor but with the interactions of multiple actors (Rafiq, Afzal & Kamran, 2022).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study at hand are:

- To understand if news media contents influence the policymaking process and policymakers.
- To explore and understand to what extent news media influence policymakers and the policy-making process.
- To understand what kind of policy-making (political, social or economic) is influenced by media content most of the time

Research Questions

The research would deal with the following research questions:

- Does news media content influence the policy-making process and policymakers?
- How much does news media influence policymakers and the subsequent process of policy-making?
- Is there any significant type of policy-making (political, social or economic) that is influenced by media content?

Methodology

The methodology of the research is qualitative in nature; hence, the use of “in-depth interviews” was selected for the collection of data. Qualitative research design is “a research method that uses flexible questioning.” (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

In-depth interviews included a list of questions which were used to find and extract specific information from a certain group of people. As the research requires accurate and detailed information to understand the influence of media on governance from the people who are in a decision-making position in the government, in-depth interviews were conducted to allow interviewees to share their perceptions and understandings regarding the concerned research questions. The data collected from the interviewees was later interpreted and analyzed using descriptive analysis, allowing the researcher to deeply explore the phenomena.

The sample of the research was bureaucrats and ministers of the Punjab government, and choosing the region of Punjab would help the researcher get diverse opinions and different perceptions about the influence of news media content on policymakers.

The tool utilized for the collection of data from the respondents was the “Self-Administered Interview Questions list”, which consisted of both structured and specific questions. The in-depth interviews consisted of a set of 12 specific and properly structured questions, which were asked to all the ten respondents being selected, and their answers were recorded and later analyzed (Rafiq, Iqbal & Afzal, 2024).

Results and Discussion

In total, five bureaucrats and policy makers were approached for interviews and all five interviews were considered as usable and relevant to the research. Their identities were kept anonymous to ensure that they would answer the interview questions without the fear of any breach of confidentiality and trust. As they were officers serving the state, their demographics were of little concern in understanding the influence of news media on policymakers and, hence, have been exempted from saving time and space. The following themes were identified:

Media and Its Influence in Setting Agendas

The following theme aimed to discover if the media had been carrying any significant influence on the process of setting agendas from the eyes of the policymakers who are creating policies. The following table summarizes how the policymakers viewed the role of media in setting agendas.

Table 1

Interview response regarding media's role in setting agendas

| Media plays a role in the setting of agendas | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Agreed | 20% |
| Disagreed | 20% |
| Neutral | 60% |

According to the table, we can see that 20% of the policymakers agreed with the theme while the same number disagreed with them as well. However, 60% of the policymakers expressed a neutral stance regarding it, citing certain reservations in the context of the theme. There could be a number of reasons why each group of policymakers expressed their opinions in the way they did.

If we are to analyze how the policy maker who affirmed the theme expressed his opinion:

“Yes, it does help in setting agendas, particularly regarding policy-making in most avenues.”

This could stem from the individual policymaker’s interactions within the institution that correlate with interacting with the public and devising policies that ultimately come into effect for the general public. In such a case, having media reports to gauge the perceptions of the public could be of significant value. The media’s influence in allowing policymakers to understand what concerns the public the most could make it vital in setting up agendas.

Whereas, in the case of those who did not conform with the theme, a closer analysis could reveal clear answers.

“To me, the media influence is nothing but an abstract idea.”



Here, we can see how the policymakers shun the idea of media influence on the agenda-setting process as a mere abstract idea, with further details highlighting how the agenda is always set using empirical discussions, facts and logic, all of them devoid of the emotions and sensationalism that is often seen in media. Such thoughts could also conform to institutions of departments where there is a limited scope of empathy and cold logic is applied, requiring policymakers to rely upon facts and logical arguments instead of media attention or coverage.

For the respondents who expressed neutral opinions, there could be a number of implications as well. In the words of a policymaker:

“Well, it depends upon the topics and concerns presented in media. If they are logical and related to the welfare of the public at large, then they can be considered by most policy-makers devising policies for the welfare of the society.”

These policymakers explained the influence of media on the process of policymaking and policymakers in general as circumstantial, depending on the socio-cultural context of the problems and the maturity of the media presentation towards the issue. In the case of sensitive issues, the respondents were of the opinion that media can be considerably helpful in setting the right agenda by addressing the priorities of the policymakers.

The Increasing Trend of Media Interactions

The following theme was meant to discuss the increasing and emerging trend of media influencing and interacting in the sphere of policymaking through interaction with the policymakers. The following responses were observed within the interviews and have been laid down in the table below.

Table 2

Interview response regarding the increasing trend of media interaction with policymakers

| Increasing Trend of Media Interaction with Policy Makers | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|---|--|
| Agreed | 100% |
| Disagreed | 0% |
| Neutral | 0% |

According to the table, we can see that all of the respondents were of the opinion that the interactions between the media and policymakers have increased over the recent years, leading to a gradual increase in the sphere of their influence. All 100% of the participants expressed their agreement with the subsequent statements.

“Media is no doubt the 4th pillar of the state and is being watched as the watchdog of our society and state.”

The role of media has been identified as the 4th pillar of the state, requiring the need of state officials to remain connected and affiliated with the interactions of media as well. As the media takes upon itself the role of presenting the contemporary issues and concerns of the public to the rest of the country, it has become vital for them to interact with policymakers to gain their opinions and perspectives regarding these issues, particularly when the government is expected to perform or deliver effective remedies to the public.

“On one hand, such cooperation and interaction may be helpful in the dissemination of government’s point of view, progress and relevant information to the masses; however, on the other hand, overexposure with media can give birth to issues like interference by media in day to day affairs of the government.”

However, the respondents also expressed their concerns regarding the role of the media as well. One of the respondents did acknowledge the fact that while the media is paving the way for better dissemination of the official government narrative to the people, it is also true that this is leading to regular interference in the work of the government by the media, leading to difficulties in the conduction of official duties as media keeps hammering throughout the entire process.

Similarly, the emergence of this trend has led the respondents to believe that people have gained more interest in current affairs, leading them to remain more vigilant in front of the public.

“Due to this, the implications are people are more aware and that there is an increased focus on current affairs.”

The world of today is much more mediatized than before, leading to more media engaging and interacting with various sources of media in their daily lives. As a result, policymakers, in a bid to improve their engagement with these audiences who are now greatly focused on the affairs of the country, start using the media themselves.

The Credibility of Media

The following theme was concerned with the credibility of media to policymakers, aiming to understand if the information that is present in the media is being deemed reliable and credible by policymakers around Pakistan. Media has slowly emerged to become a major source of information for the individuals of the contemporary world as more and more people turn on their TVs and connect to the internet to get to know the world around them. From the respondents, the following answers were collected.

Table 3

Interview response regarding the credibility of media

| Credibility of Media | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Agreed | 60% |
| Disagreed | 20% |
| Neutral | 20% |

From the results, we can see that 60% of the policymakers were of the opinion that they found the credibility of media to be a just statement, whereas 20% of the participants believed that media could not be deemed as credible. Furthermore, another 20% of the policymakers did not hold any affirmative opinion. Rather, they kept themselves neutral. The policymakers, while discussing the credibility of the news media, discussed two certain aspects of the question. One was how the logic of Pakistani media towards the generation of sensationalism and controversial headlines makes it overlook the importance of fact-checking in the wishes to get a headline before the competition does. This has led to an increasing distrust towards the potential of media as a credible source of information. Especially when it is about sensitive issues on the media channels, most policymakers expect that the media is speculating rather than stating accurate and factual statements regarding certain phenomena.

“The information being given out on the media is generally found to be credible. However, when it is about sensitive issues, it is expected that a lot of speculation is being found of media channels, leading to swaying of opinions.”

However, as is evident from the table, more policymakers were in favour of the credibility of media stating that the information that is found through media channels can be deemed credible and can help direct policies and government attention.

“Yes, sometimes the information really happens to be helpful. The issues that are raised on social media especially gain more interest in the eyes of the policy-makers. Examples of this include the recent motorway rape case.”

Such an approach to media by policymakers can lead to influencing administrative decisions. In the coming days, it is expected that media is likely to emerge as a tool of strategic communication, organizational structure and related mass communication by the government. Most changes in the government ministries are driven by political actors and government think tanks, leading the way to active policy change. However, as competition emerges and more media channels streamline the quality of their content to remain more valuable to their consumers, it is likely that the influence and credibility of media will increase.

“Nowadays, we see that there are well-versed and conversant journalists who deeply research and rule out the odds in order to report fact-based news to the audience.”

So far, despite the fact that media has gained significant authority as one of the primary and fastest means of spreading and dissemination of information, policymakers are still considerably reluctant to deem it credible as the sole source of information for policy making, in contrast to the public belief that media can effectively change policies.

“As a whole, I believe that the quality of the information provided by the media to the policymakers has increased over time, but still, it cannot be solely used as a credible source of information.”



This emerging trend of media in terms of credibility has gained much interest from policymakers, and many governments are working to incorporate healthy and sustainable state-media relationships. The results from the research substantially add to the existing literature regarding the increasing influence of media in the spheres of policy-making. However, not all results are consistent with the trend of research, as a few policymakers have discredited the strength and credibility of media owing to an illogical approach towards issues in order to gain ratings and viewers.

“No, I still think of Pakistani media as an incredible source due to the lack of logical approach and overwhelming sensationalism that biases it.”

Formal Contacts within Media

Earlier, it was believed that the media acts as a watchdog over the state and must exist completely independent from the influence of the state. However, it is also inevitable for the state and the media to maintain a cooperative and synonymous relationship that helps them work in unison. The following theme was meant to understand how policymakers interact on a personal level with media organizations or with media persons through the maintenance of contacts. The respondents gave the following answers during the interview, as tabulated in the table below.

Table 4

Interview response regarding maintenance of personal contacts

| Maintenance of Personal Contacts | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Agreed | 60% |
| Disagreed | 40% |
| Neutral | 0% |

Media serves to provide societal feedback to the governments, acting as a means to find the public reaction and response to their policies. In a way, it also allows them to gauge the opinion of the public towards any matter as well, using that feedback to frame further policies that concern the public interests. At the same time, as media allows the public to voice out their concerns as well, they can use the platform to channel their thoughts and opinions towards the respective policy maker that is concerned with providing a solution to what the public demands. In accordance with this thought, over 60% of the policymakers that were interviewed agreed to the fact that they maintained formal contacts within the media organization.

“I think we need media in any form to back our work or open it in a public debate so as to seek the societal feedback and impact as whether what to add more to make its acceptance more to the masses.”

However, not all policymakers share the same interests and interactions with media professionals, maintaining little to no contact with media beyond their official capacity. Interestingly, it is speculated that the interaction of a policy maker with media in his or her official capacity is limited to the nature of their position and department that they have, with many departments that are related to direct public service entailing more contacts than others.

“Personally speaking, I do not maintain any contacts within the media organization for any such interests, not for myself, neither for my institution.”

Having effective communication channels with media organizations and personnel allows policymakers to communicate their agenda to the public that they intend to serve. In case of lack of proper communication, the public would simply lose interest in the role and significance of policymakers as they would seemingly fade away from their minds if they're not seen in the public or through various means of news. During policy-making, one of the more important elements is the delivery of performance as it needs to be acknowledged by the public to ensure smoother operations, and the media is readily helping the policymakers in achieving that.

“Yes, over the recent years, it has become mandatory to maintain the interaction with media organizations as it helps you in delivering performance, one of the critical aspects of policy making.”

Media Attention and Policy-Making

The following theme was meant to analyze if the phenomenon of media attention has the potential to influence the process of policy-making. In the contemporary world, what is being shown in media gains attention in the eyes of the public and the policymakers. It has been observed how parliamentary speeches contain reference to what the media is delivering to its audience and how policymakers readily strive to conform their policies as close to public opinion as possible. The primary question here is whether media attention is influencing the process of policy-making in Pakistan or is it just an illusionary idea that media has the power to influence the flow of politics and serve as a watchdog over political entities and governments themselves. To understand so, the respondents were asked regarding the question, and their answers have been tabulated below.

Table 5

Interview response regarding media attention and policy-making

| Media Attention and Policy Making | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Agreed | 60% |
| Disagreed | 40% |
| Neutral | 0% |

When it comes to the process of policymaking, it is important to understand that it is a multifaceted process with multiple levels of involvement by various stakeholders and factors. One of these steps is the setting of the agenda by the policy makers. It is the point where public opinions are taken into consideration and put against the priorities of the policymakers to be translated into legislative and administrative action. In this regard, 60% of the respondents believed that media attention on any particular topic could lead to it being considered within policymaking.

“In fact, we also want the attention required to be shaped as such so that the public feedback is ascertained as whether the direction of work has gone right or it requires more efforts to be acceptable to our target audience.”

Policymakers are of the opinion that media attention allows them to gauge the direction of their work and the feedback from the citizens, particularly the target audience of the act being considered or undertaken, in order to smoothen the process of policymaking for the future. By knowing what the public thinks or wants, better policies can be drafted that pave the way for better socio-cultural and economic change for the society. However, not everyone shares similar sentiments regarding the phenomenon and people from many different departments may have different perceptions regarding the issue of media attention.

No, I don't think that it affects in shaping of the policy discourse. We do listen to it, but by the time things are disclosed, they are almost already finalized.”

As mentioned above, such differing thoughts could indicate a different mode of operations by the government body or simply disregard the public opinion due to the nature of the policy being drafted by the policymakers. It could also indicate the fact that most policymakers might find the information being supplied to them by the media unreliable owing to the sensationalism of the Pakistani media.

“I am not of the opinion that media attention has that capability. However, it is highly circumstantial and media does have the potential to create social and cultural change.”

Media Attention and Sustainable Governance

Sustainable governance stands to promote an encompassing and overarching policy making process that requires the inclusiveness of all necessary stakeholders. Research has suggested that media influence on policymakers can be vital for effective and sustainable policymaking. Therefore, the avenue of a knowledge-based approach by journalists and news media organizations can be incredibly influential in promoting effective and good policy-making in the country for the influence they carry on the policymakers. The following theme was described to ascertain the above-mentioned phenomenon in the eyes of the policy makers of Pakistan. The following responses were observed.

**Table 6**

Interview response regarding media attention and sustainable governance

| Media Attention and Sustainable Governance | Mentioned by % of Policy Makers |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Agreed | 60% |
| Disagreed | 40% |
| Neutral | 0% |

It can be seen from the results that a majority, around 60%, of the policymakers were of the opinion that media attention does contribute towards sustainable governance, owing to the ability of unbiased media to provide information and dedicated public opinion.

“I am of the opinion that we must consider media attention and presentation of issues to be a vital element to sustainable governance, institution building and policy making.”

Policymakers, as the main proponents of policymaking, have a dire need to have access to public opinions and sentiments in order to understand what policies are needed and what is not. At the same, having the ability to gauge the perceptions of the public towards already existing laws or newer policies can help policymakers set the stage for future policies as well. Hence, if the media is deemed as a credible source by the policymakers, they can play a vital role in paving the way for sustainable governance as all stakeholders would have an equal opportunity to contribute towards the process of policy-making.

“Yes, it can play a vital role if media continues to maintain its credibility for policymakers, not as a mere tool to be used by people and lobbies with media contacts. If it manages to do so, it can play a vital role in sustainable governance.”

However, not all of the policymakers are of the same opinion, with 40% of them stating that they do not agree with the notion that media can contribute towards sustainable governance. To their eyes, media is far too sensitive and sensational for policymakers to be considered as a viable source of information that can be used to set agendas or contribute towards sustainable means of governance.

“The issue with media attention is that it is reactive in nature. It does not follow topics or present topics which are futuristic. So, it is more of current news or post analysis format but it in no way contributes to sustainable governance and policy making because it does not focus its debate on important matters which can influence the future.”

Hence, we can see that policy makers have a multitude of opinions and views, with each to their own rationale. However, one thing is certain: policymakers are being influenced by media and the news content being shown, and this influence is of a multifaceted nature.

So, we can see that policymakers, when interviewed, expressed a number of opinions that, when compounded together, allow the researcher to understand that media is influencing policymakers, especially when it comes to interactions with the media. Interestingly, policymakers were of a mixed opinion that media played a balanced role in the setting of agendas and communicating with the public during the process of policymaking, depending upon the nature of their work and the problem.

Conclusion

Politicians in Pakistan have started using media to gauge their performance as well. Whenever a policy decision is taken, one of the most critical steps to its execution is public opinion and favour for the decision, with decisions with poor reception having a likelihood of being shelved. At the same time, policymakers depend on media to translate public opinions for them in the form of consumable news content, allowing them to have better insight into what they should be carrying out in their domain to ensure that their support is retained in the public and the public receives what it is looking for, effectively letting news content become the medium between the public and the process of policy-making.

After the research data had been collected, it was subjected to thematic analysis from which results from drawn. It was observed that there was a significant influence on the policymakers when they were viewing media channels. At the same time, the approaches taken by the result were multifaceted. Policymakers believed that they played a balanced role in the setting of agendas by policymakers,

depending upon the nature of the problem as well as the nature of the work of the policymakers in question. Officials who are placed in positions where there is more interaction with the public experience a stronger need for media and news interactions, owing to the nature of their jobs. Similarly, departments that operate with limited attention to public opinions and concerns have little to no interaction with them or news media organizations, with them feeling the least influence in contrast to the above-mentioned departments.

When it was about the increasing trend of media interactions with policymakers, all of the respondents were in agreement with the fact that policymakers are having greater interactions with the media and news organizations, suggesting the existence of an increasing trend. The policymakers have identified media as being the 4th pillar of the state, one that services the role of watchdog over the other pillars of the state. Due to this change in the position and status of the media within state machinery, the need for state officials to remain connected and affiliated with the interactions of media has drastically increased as well. As the media takes upon itself the role of presenting the contemporary issues and concerns of the public to the rest of the country, it has become vital for policymakers to interact and engage with them on a daily basis, particularly when the government is expected to perform or deliver effective remedies to the public.

The policymakers, while discussing the credibility of the news media, discussed how the logic of Pakistani media towards the generation of sensationalism and controversial headlines makes it overlook the importance of fact-checking in the wishes to get a headline before the competition does. Due to such unethical practice, it has led to an increasing distrust towards the potential of media as a credible source of information by policymakers. Especially when it is about sensitive issues on the media channels, most policymakers expect that the media is speculating rather than stating accurate and factual statements regarding certain phenomena. However, in the cases where the media has established itself as a credible source, the influence has been remarkable. This emerging trend of media in terms of credibility has gained much interest from policymakers, and many governments are working to incorporate healthy and sustainable state-media relationships.

During policy-making, one of the more important elements is the delivery of performance in front of the public, as the performance of the current government needs to be acknowledged by the public to ensure smoother operations, and the media is readily helping the policymakers in achieving that. The policymakers have established that having effective communication channels with media organizations and personnel allows them to communicate their agenda to the public that they intend to serve. It was also formally acknowledged that in case of lack of proper communication, the public would simply lose interest in the role and significance of policymakers as they would not actually know about the minds that run behind policymakers.

Lastly, policymakers, as the main proponents of policymaking, have a dire need to have access to public opinions and sentiments in order to understand what policies are needed and what are not. When questioned if they believed that media could play a role in sustainable governance, policymakers agreed to the statements. Hence, if the media is deemed as a credible source by the policymakers, they can play a vital role in paving the way for sustainable governance, as all stakeholders would have an equal opportunity to contribute towards the process of policy-making.

Recommendations

The study proposes certain suggestions for future research in the domain of understanding the influence of news media on policymakers, which are as follows:

- Adopting a quantitative approach to understand the differences in the perceptions of policymakers and the influence news media carries on them based on the nature of their work and relevant departments, something in-depth interviews and quantitative research are unable to process.
- Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted using written open-ended questionnaires, leaving certain elements of the perceptions of the policymakers unexplored. Further research could explore the phenomenon in physical and detailed interviews.
- It could be impactful in categorizing the policymakers being observed on the basis of their official capacities and departments, as the influence of news content is subjective to the individual's workplace policies.



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