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Introduction

Media refers to the various venues for messages meant to be consumed by a large audience. As a source of vital information, the media is charged with the responsibility of educating, informing and empowering the public.

Consequently, the media has had significant effects on politics in most countries. The effects of media on politics can either be positive or negative. These effects are determined by a number of factors which include but not limited to media regulation, relationships between politicians and the media and the quality of journalism. This paper seeks to highlight how media influences the political process.

The Positive Effects of Media

Educating the Public on Government Policies

The mass media has always provided the public with relevant information about the policies the government intends to implement. This has enabled the public to understand the impacts of such policies on their lives. During presidential campaigns, various presidential hopefuls use the media to highlight the policies they intend to implement if elected. Consequently, the public has been able to make the right voting decisions by comparing and contrasting the policies proposed by each candidate. Public policies associated with significant effects on the citizens are usually evaluated by the public before being implemented. The mass media provides the platform for analyzing or evaluating such policies in order to achieve consensus.

Promoting Accountability

The media has always played a critical role in enhancing transparency and accountability in the political process and governance in general. Through investigative journalism, the media exposes corruption within government cycles and the political leaders involved. Politicians associated with corruption are likely to lose their jobs if the media exposes their corrupt deeds in public. This is based on the concept of the powerful effect of media which implies that the impact of media messages on politicians' reputation is significant and immediate. The media has always been on the forefront in evaluating the extent to which the politicians deliver their development promise to the public. This has resulted into accountability and transparency in the government.

Facilitating Public Debate on Political Issues

The mass media provides an effective platform for discussing important political issues especially during policy formulation.

The debates are meant to obtain the public's opinion on the political issue at hand. Through the mass media, the citizens are able to express their views on various policies or political decisions taken by the government.

Incorporating public opinion in policies and political decisions has helped to restore public confidence in the government. This has led to political stability and harmony.

Enhancing Democracy

The mass media has made significant contributions in enhancing democracy especially in developing countries that were earlier governed by dictatorial regimes. By pushing the government to allow the citizens to exercise their

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freedom of expression, the media has enabled the citizens to air their political opinions. The mass media has been used by citizens and interest groups to campaign against ineffective governments. This has been achieved through media messages that seek to activate the public to vote against ineffective regimes. Interest groups and reformists use the media to strengthen pro-democracy values that are popular in the country.

The media has also been used to achieve vote conversion. The civil society has always campaigned against corrupt governments by using the media to shape the voting patterns. This means that they focus on encouraging supporters of the leaders they are opposed to shift their support to better leaders. Consequently, the politicians have been forced to promote democracy in order to be reelected.

Negative Effects of Media on Politics

Determining Political Agenda

The mass media determines the issues to be considered by the public as important by concentrating on particular problems and ignoring others. This means that when the mass media focuses on a given issue, the issue becomes a priority of both the public and the government. However, such priorities are changed the moment the media shifts to a new issue. Thus the media's attempt to shape voters' perspective on political reality has always been biased.

The political process in a democratic situation involves identifying the issues that are of great importance to the citizens. The process of identifying such issue should involve widespread participation. However, this has not

been possible since the media unilaterally determines the agenda in regard to public discussions. This undermines the spirit of democracy and leads to the prioritization of political issues which may not reflect the felt needs of the public.

Lack of Objectivity

The information obtained from mass media in most cases is the product of those in power. In most cases, the journalists depend on the information they obtain from government sources or from politicians instead of conducting their own investigations.

Such sources might not be reliable and gives the politicians a chance to influence public opinion. In some instance, the journalists are manipulated by the politicians. Thus they only report what is in the interest of those in power. This not only leads to biased reporting on politics but also encourages corruption, lack of accountability and impunity. By giving the ruling class a great control over the information that forms public opinion, the media weakens the public's power over the political process. Instead of highlighting the plight of the citizens, the media has become a tool for perpetuating the political interests of the ruling elite. In the last decade, the media has been found to work together with the government. Consequently, the media only criticizes the government when they are in conflicts.

The government and the journalists decide on what should be in public knowledge or otherwise. This has led to poor governance and public ignorance on government affairs.

Understanding of Political Issues

The manner in which news is framed determines the way the citizens understand the causes as well as solutions to political problems. Owing to the fact that electoral accountability forms the basis of representative democracy, the citizens should be in a position to identify those responsible for socio-political problems. However, the media systematically sort out the issues to be prioritized and avert blame from the ruling class by presenting news as a fad without context. Most media houses engage in episodic news framing. This means that their news reports highlight only specific cases or aspects of political issues.

However, some media companies embark on thematic news framing by reporting political issues in a general perspective. Episodic framing highlights major political issues. Thematic framing on the other hand provides collective evidence.

Those who watch episodic news reports are not likely to consider the government responsible for the social problems. For example, a news report on poverty in a particular area may be blamed on the laziness of the poor.

Those who watch thematic news reports are likely to blame the government for social problems. For example, news report on a countrywide poverty rate is likely to be attributed to poor governance. This means that the media can use its reporting styles to influence the publics' perception of socio-political issues and how such issues can be solved.

Thus if the media collaborates with the government, the later can manipulate its subjects to accept its policies even if they are not beneficial.

Civic Literacy

Under normal circumstances, the media is expected to facilitate civic literacy by providing a forum whereby the public and the prospective leaders can share views on political issues. However, the media has misused its role in facilitating civic literacy by monopolizing the process of determining the way political issues are to be discussed during elections and how the candidates should present their views. This means that the media has alienated the public from the civic literacy process.

Thus the public is systematically losing its control over the democratic process.

Conclusion

The mass media is a source of information meant to be utilized by the public to make vital decisions. As a source of information, the media has the ability to influence public opinion.

Besides, it influences the socio-political decisions made by the public. As discussed above, the media has significant effects on politics in US and other countries. Despite its significant contributions in promoting democracy and enhancing accountability, the media also has negative effects on the political process. In order to maximize the positive effects of the media on politics, the media should be independent and objective.

Besides, it should focus on involving the public in shaping the political agenda.