

# Media influence on public policy assignment



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Policymaking is a political process which is affected by various social and economic factors (Hofferbert, 1974) and media systems play 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. Media systems act as the primary channels between those who might want to influence policy and the policymakers " controlling the scope of political discourse and regulating the flow of information.

Textbook policymaking follows an orderly sequence where problems are identified, solutions devised, policies adopted, implemented, and lastly evaluated (Mazamanian & Sabatier, 1989). In reality, the policy process is more fluid, where policies are formed through the struggle of ideas of various advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1991) in what has been described as a policy primeval soup (Kingdon, 1995). The policies, on which the media focuses can, and often does, play an important part in determining the focal issues for policymakers.

One of the fundamental roles of the media in a liberal democracy is to critically scrutinise governmental affairs: that is to act as a watchdog of government to ensure that the government can be held accountable by the public. However, the systematic deregulation of media systems worldwide is diminishing the ability of citizens to meaningfully participate in policymaking process governing the media (McChesney, 2003, p. 126).

The relaxation of ownership rules and control, has resulted in a move away from diversity of production to a situation where media ownership is

becoming increasingly concentrated by just a few predominantly western global conglomerates (McChesney, 1999). Obvious problems arise for democratic processes, when huge media conglomerates also fulfil the role of powerful political actors; their close links with the corporate economy are widely considered to limit their ability to investigate the government and represent all points of view (Kingdon, 1995).

Consequently, the political sphere is now being colonised by the media, and politics has begun re-orientating itself to satisfy the logic of media organisations (Meyer, 2002, p. 71). Therefore, the media are active participants in the policymaking process and the ability to stimulate change or maintain the status quo depends on their choice of subject or policy issue and how they frame it. Active investigative reporting attempts to shape policy outcomes, but this does not necessarily mean that it always represents the most successful approach for gaining policy changes (Spitzer, 1993, p. 7).

In fact, sometimes passive, straight reporting can have a greater influence on policy choices. When this occurs, media independence is largely bypassed, as the news generated depends solely on the information released (as public relations material) from legitimate news sources. For example, in the United States, White House staff routinely make 'leaks' - expressively to influence policy decisions (Davis, 1992, p. 143; Robinson, 2001, p. 948). Robinson noted that journalists regard "leaks... as indispensable to their work" and that they are aware of their use by officials in return for scoops (2001, p. 949).

The media may also influence policy outcomes through their ability to exclude certain policy options from the media, which “ sets the boundaries for ‘ legitimate’ public debate” (Borquez, 1993, p. 34). Such analyses have led many researchers to believe that the media has a powerful influence on all policy processes, while others suggest it plays an insignificant role in policy making processes; a more likely scenario is that its degree of influence varies considerably, depending on the issue (Hawthorne, 1993). This leads to the question about which policy issues will be most effected and which least effected by media coverage.

Many studies have concluded that the media has a pivotal role in shaping government’s foreign policymaking processes through a phenomena referred to as the CNN effect (reviewed by Gilboa, 2005). This effect does not refer to the sole influence of CNN on policymaking, but rather on the power of global media networks to determine political processes through selective coverage of certain issues. This is particularly important, as most of the public rely on the media for access to foreign policy information (Brown & Vincent, 1995).

Gilboa notes that: “ The [CNN] concept was initially suggested by politicians and officials haunted by the Vietnam media myth, the confusion of the post” Cold War era, and the communications revolution. Despite evidence to the contrary (Hallin, 1986), many leaders still believe that critical television coverage caused the American defeat in Vietnam. Since then, many have viewed the media as an adversary to government policies in areas such as humanitarian intervention and international negotiation. ” (Gilboa, 2005, p. 37)

To determine whether the media has the power to influence policymaking, Robinson (2000) devised the 'policy" media interaction model' (See Table 1), using the theoretical framework of press" state relations in the United States outlined by Hallin (1986). This model was applied to a number of US humanitarian interventions, which took place in the 1990s. The results showed, that critical reporting by the media with a strong pro-intervention frame had a 'strong' role in shaping the US government policies when policymakers were uncertain about their actions but a 'weak' role when government policies were already determined.

Therefore, the power of the CNN effect would seem to vary depending upon the existence of cohesive policies on foreign policy matters. In 1942 Australian Liberal Party federal president Dick Casey introduced the party's parliamentary leader Robert Menzies to a public relations technique he'd discovered while visiting the United States. Casey showed Menzies how American communications experts sold 'free enterprise' by linking it to 'Americanism' (Griffen-Foley, 2003 p. 29). A short time later the Liberal Party employed this device in a preliminary election campaign.

It commissioned radio advertorials featuring commentary by the jingoistic character John Henry Austral. Griffen-Foley describes them: 'Built around a neighbourly but knowledgeable observer, the programs, accompanied by the strains of "Waltzing Matilda", were designed to drive home the threat to private enterprise, productivity and the "Australian way" posed by Communism, socialism and the welfare state' (Griffen-Foley, 2003 p. 31). The advertorials attributed these threats to Labor policy and condemned them as foreign while advocating Liberal Party policy as quintessentially Australian.

Australianism resonates in political advertising and rhetoric 62 years later. It features in Medicare television commercials where archetypal Australians contemplate the merits of changes to Medicare policy and in the constant criticism by political leaders of their opponents' ideas as 'un-Australian'. A recent episode of Media Watch demonstrated how remarkably flawed dealings between the commercial media, reliant on advertising revenue, and politicians, keen to secure positive media coverage, can be.

Media Watch (2005) reported that an FPC Courier-owned newspaper offered candidates in a local government election guaranteed editorial column space, to be personally written by those candidates, in return for the purchase of advertising. These historical and contemporary examples add weight to speculation about the threat to fair media coverage when government policy jeopardises the profit of industries that advertise extensively and about how reporting is influenced by substantial revenue from political party and public sector advertising.

Compared to domestic policymaking there is relatively less public interest in foreign affairs, which makes it relatively easy for government policymakers to dominate the media's agenda (Manheim, 1997, p. 383). From the wide array of 'potentially interesting' international stories going on at any one time, governments can actively distract media attention away from sensitive foreign policy initiatives (of which coverage might invoke more critical public reactions) by concentrating their PR on less controversial policies.

As noted before, in cases of policy certainty within any given government, the national media are extremely unlikely to challenge the government or

focus any form of prolonged attention to the policies. Instead, as Chinese policy expert Chang believes, the media is most likely to have an influential role in foreign policymaking when debates “ spill from the closed circle over into the public domain” - which usually occurs when there is policy uncertainty within the political elites (1993, p. 24).

Despite the evident importance of foreign policymaking for democracies worldwide the media’s apparent role in ‘ manufacturing consent’ may be more easily understood, when it is considered that “ the foreign policy establishment represents the most elite group within the government” (Malek and Wiegard, 1997, p. 7). Foreign policymaking also rates low on most citizens concerns, making it easier for corporate and government policymakers to control. The same is not true for domestic policymaking, where the level of interest and diversity of voices heard by the public is much larger.

In practice though, the media’s role is still much the same, with elite domination of critical policymaking agendas. Policies that will directly and adversely affect people’s lives slip though unnoticed, with little media coverage, or never come up on the public (or media) agenda at all, due to the success of internal PR and lobbying activities (Davis, 2002, p. 175;). Even when politically sensitive stories break into the media, revealing the true extent of politicians’ conspiratorial dealings, they often seem to safely disappear (a bonus for politicians, but not democracy), barely registering on the public’s consciousness.

A recent example is the leaked ' Downing Street Memo' (dated July 23, 2002 - see [www. downingstreetmemo. com](http://www.downingstreetmemo.com)) which was first reported in the New York Sunday Times on 1st May 2005 (Smith, 2005). The minutes of this meeting revealed " that Straw and Blair had conspired to use inspections to lure Saddam into obstructing the UN, providing an excuse for war" (Medialens Alert, 2005 [27th and 30th June]) and then continued to lie about their true intentions: " war is not inevitable" (Straw, 2003) and " I hope, even now, Iraq can be disarmed peacefully" (Blair, 2003).

The Australian media also had access to the memo, but this groundbreaking story was effectively killed to all intent and purposes. The Guardian's Jonathan Freedland described how " much of the coverage has sought to play down the documents' importance"; he even went on to suggest that the primary reason for this was that the media had decided that " voters were Iraq-ed out" (Freedland, 2005). The question began to resonate- how is it possible that such an important story literally drop off the public radar?

Perhaps as Lee and Solomon surmise: " The world according to the mass media is not supposed to make sense; it is supposed to make money" (1992, p. 333). It is unlikely that small media reforms (like public journalism) will be enough to reduce the commercial and corporate imperatives driving our existing media systems (Hackett and Zhao, 1998, p. 235). Instead, a fundamental reform of the entire system is needed, together with a wider institutional reform of the very structures the media systems work within, our democracies.



This will be a difficult task, due to powerful vested interests benefiting from the status quo, including media, political and economic elites. Reforms will need to be driven by campaigns mobilising public support across the political spectrum, to enable the citizens of the world to have a media system that works to strengthen democratic principles as opposed to undermining them. This task is challenging, but it will become easier once people begin to understand the media's role in policymaking within our democracies.