

## Role of Media in Public Policy Making

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### ABSTRACT

Policymaking is a political process which 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. Policymaking follows an orderly sequence where problems are identified, solutions devised, policies adopted, implemented and lastly evaluated. In reality, the policy process is more fluid, where policies are formed through the struggle of ideas of various advocacy coalitions. The policies, on which the media focuses can, and often does, play an important role 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 the 'Forth Estate' 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. The ensuing 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Such analyses have led some researchers to posit that the media has a powerful monolithic 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, being issue based in nature.

**KEYWORDS:** media, policy making, public, role, government, corporate, relations, democracy, worldwide

### INTRODUCTION

The media acts as a powerful political actor, with its interests strongly tied to the status quo and that of other corporate policy actors, instead of the general public. Journalists and editors shape policy agendas

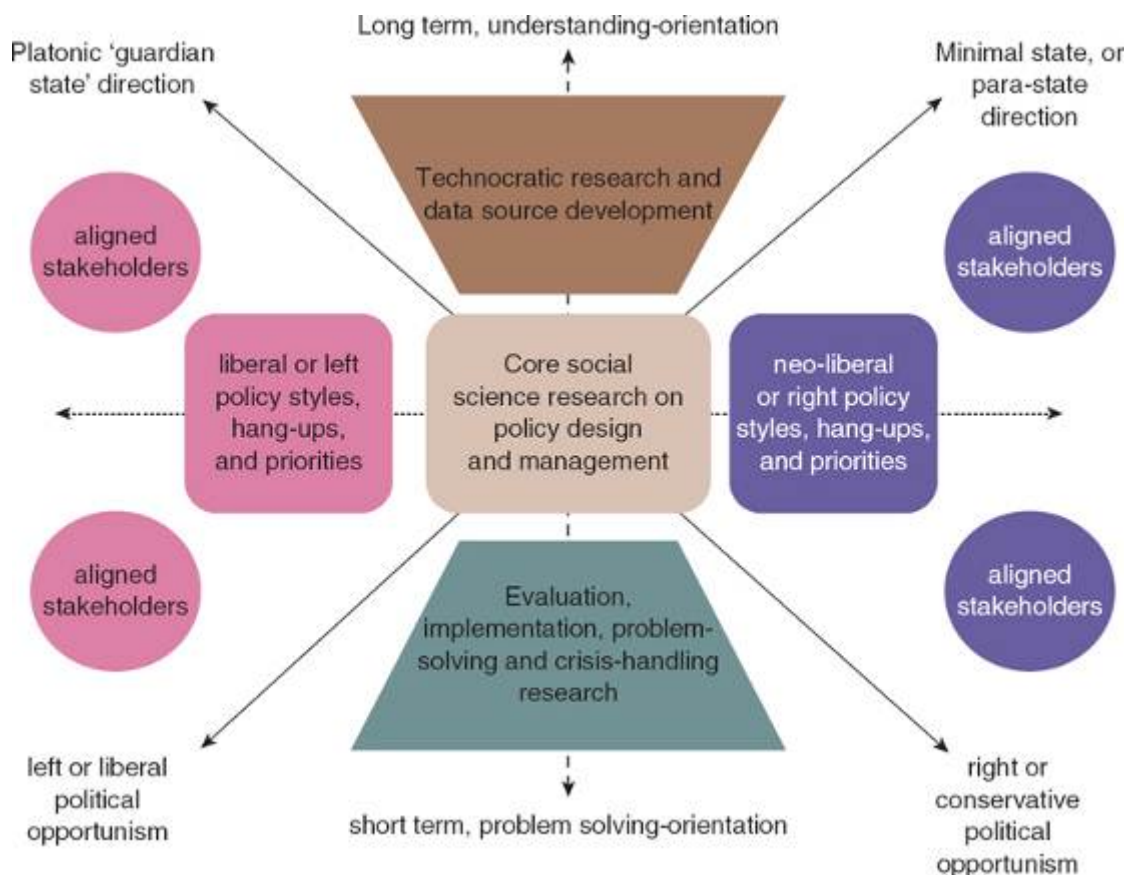
by actively filtering issues, so that reporting conforms to their dominant news values - selecting what issues are covered and which sources are used.

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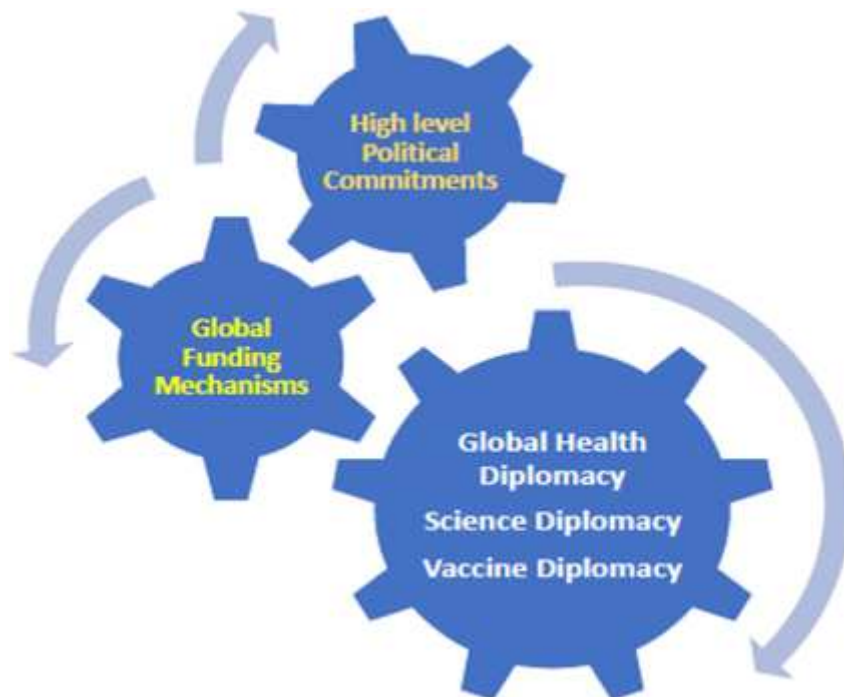
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This tends to confine policy debate to the strict boundaries of current accepted wisdoms set by the major political parties or institutional policymakers.[1,2] The conservative nature of these perceptual screens is strengthened by the media’s need for concision, which is especially dominant on television, with its appetite for sound bite politics. Creation of credible policy frameworks influence journalists in much the same way, leading them to rely on institutional actors (encountered on daily beats) who support their perceptions of a successful policy framework.

Development of such close relationships with sources is very important to the policy process, and often results in what is described as “coalition journalism”. Support for policies is also reinforced by, (1) credentialing supportive sources and disregarding opposing sources, (2) using labels to shorthand information about policies by placing them within frameworks (with their associated assumptions), and (3) by the way sources are then in a sense forced, to reflect these perceptions accepting the commonsense interpretation of these policy frameworks to protect their own reputations in the mass media. [3,4]



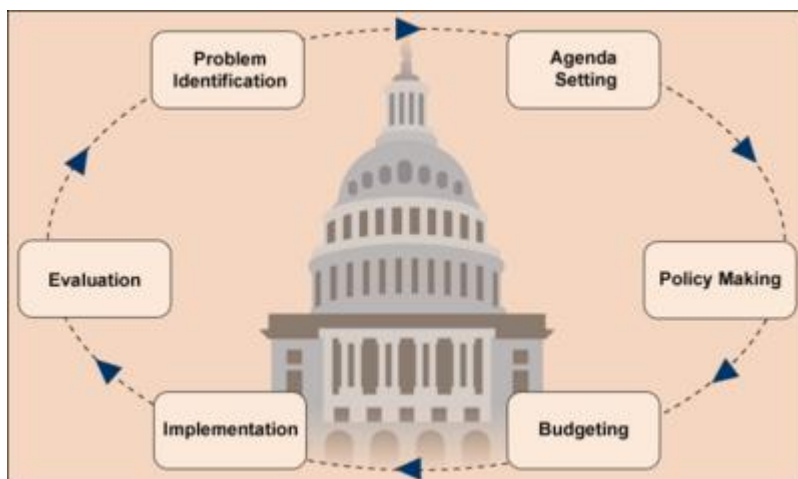
Outsider groups find it difficult to voice opinions in the media and even when they do, official sources are contacted to balance these stories to ensure objectivity. These, often resource-poor groups, are compelled to use the media as a means of gaining recognition as trusted policy actors. However, due to the media's reliance on established sources they may need to resort to different methods to capture media attention - which may cause distractions to their legitimacy, as the news may focus on a group's event and not its politics.[5,6] Media stereotypes of policies, individuals or groups can influence their respective abilities to determine policy outcomes. Furthermore, even if certain policies turn out to be successful, they may still be subjected to unnecessary reform, if their legitimacy has already been undermined in the media by the creation of negative stereotypes. Furthermore, is often difficult for citizen campaigners to reframe official policy frames once they have been adopted by the media.[7,8]



Even if the media can set the actual policy agenda in some circumstances, this does not necessarily mean that they influence policy. Political rhetoric may appear to signal media impact, but if it does little more than pay lip service to media coverage, effecting only minor policy outcomes, then to what degree has the media really affected the policymaking process

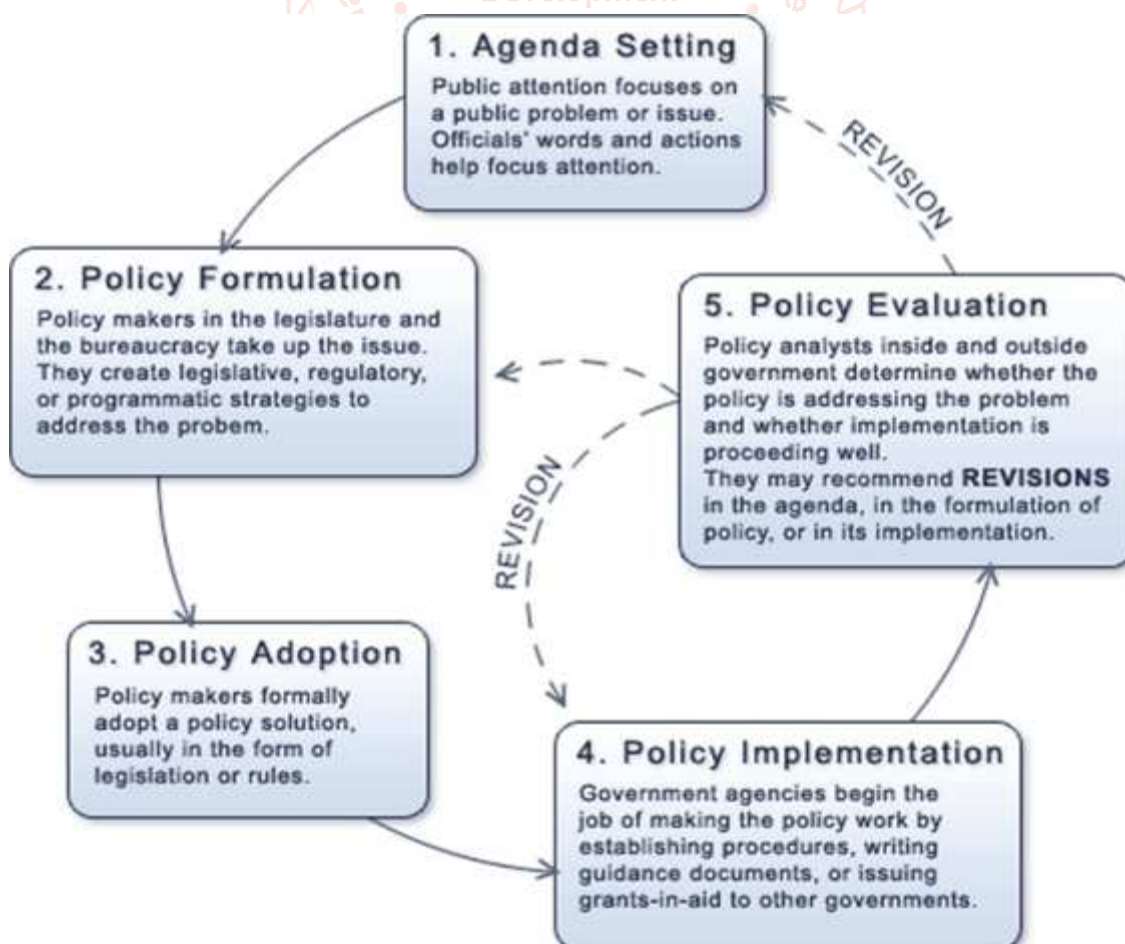
Media coverage actually has limited consequences for actual policy decisions even when policy agenda and political discussions are affected by the media. The media is important for understanding the political agenda and the framing of decisions about special or sensational issues, but normal politics and the broader policy priorities or governmental issues are largely unaffected. Media influence is strongest with sensational issues, and weakest in governmental issues, which are predominantly policy-driven. Likewise, when a policy issue is nonrecurring in terms of media coverage (a sensational issue), media power to influence public opinion (but not necessarily policy outcomes) is greater than with recurring policy coverage (which are more synonymous with governmental issues).[9,10]

In the past it was believed that the media's influence on policy occurred in a straightforward fashion, with journalists clearly separated from the governing processes. Media investigations (initiated by popular public sentiment) prompt widespread changes in public opinion, citizens then organise and collectively pressure the government, which capitulates to popular pressure and makes the appropriate public policy reforms. This simple linear model has recently been described as the 'Mobilisation Model' - while in the past it has been referred to as a 'Popular Mobilisation' or 'Public Advocacy'. This model assumes a strong democratic role for citizens in policymaking processes, a role which has been disputed by a number of political scientists who suggest that special interest groups and other political elites dominate the policymaking processes, not the public. Policymaking changes often occur regardless of the public's reaction" to active (investigative) reporting. Prepublication collaboration between the two groups (journalists and policymakers) may be the real driver of policy agendas, not public opinion. Prior knowledge of upcoming media attention often enabled policymakers to exploit negative media attention as policy opportunities. In this way, policymakers are able to manage their media coverage to maximise positive publicity for their policies.[11,12]



This symbiotic relationship, entailing active collaboration between journalists and policymakers to determine policymaking agendas has been described as “coalition journalism” and would seem to stand in total opposition to the commonly perceived adversarial nature of investigative journalism. The media has become a vital force for legitimizing governmental institutions and free enterprise. Both parties gain by participating in coalition journalism; journalists obtain credentialed information and recognition by providing an important legitimate story, while policymakers obtain publicity for their policy agendas. Perhaps the only loser is the public, who ends up losing challenging adversarial forms of journalism.

The amount of time being spent by muckraking journalists on investigative reporting is not declining. However, there is a trend towards shorter investigations which, taken together with cuts in funding for longer term investigative reporting, is placing increasing pressure on journalists to replace adversarial journalism with coalition journalism.[13,14] Investigative journalism is becoming less visible in the public sphere, as its work becomes more widely dispersed, conventional and less adversarial - staying closer to the borders of the dominant policy discourses. A further outcome of these changes is that as shorter investigative pieces are cheaper to produce, media outlets have less incentive to actively pursue policy stories for the duration of policy processes. Dominant news values, such as timeliness further strengthen such practises by working to constantly change those issues on the public agenda, preventing any form of sustained media attention to most issues. [15]



Media corporations may set policy agendas, but as the duration of policy attention cycles continues to decrease, influence of policy outcomes will be increasingly left out of reach of the public, and safely in the hands of established policymakers. So as coalition journalism becomes more institutionalised, the general public is being pushed further towards the margins of the policymaking processes, left ever more prone to manipulation from both the media and policymakers. It is easy for the media to mislead viewers regarding the success or failure of say environmental policies: creating unwarranted pressure for policymakers, who may feel the need to alter effective policies to safeguard their public standing, or preventing other policymakers from seeking solutions to ineffective policies. These media effects on politicians are amplified if timed to occur just prior to elections, especially if the politician(s) in question does not have clear public support.[16,17]

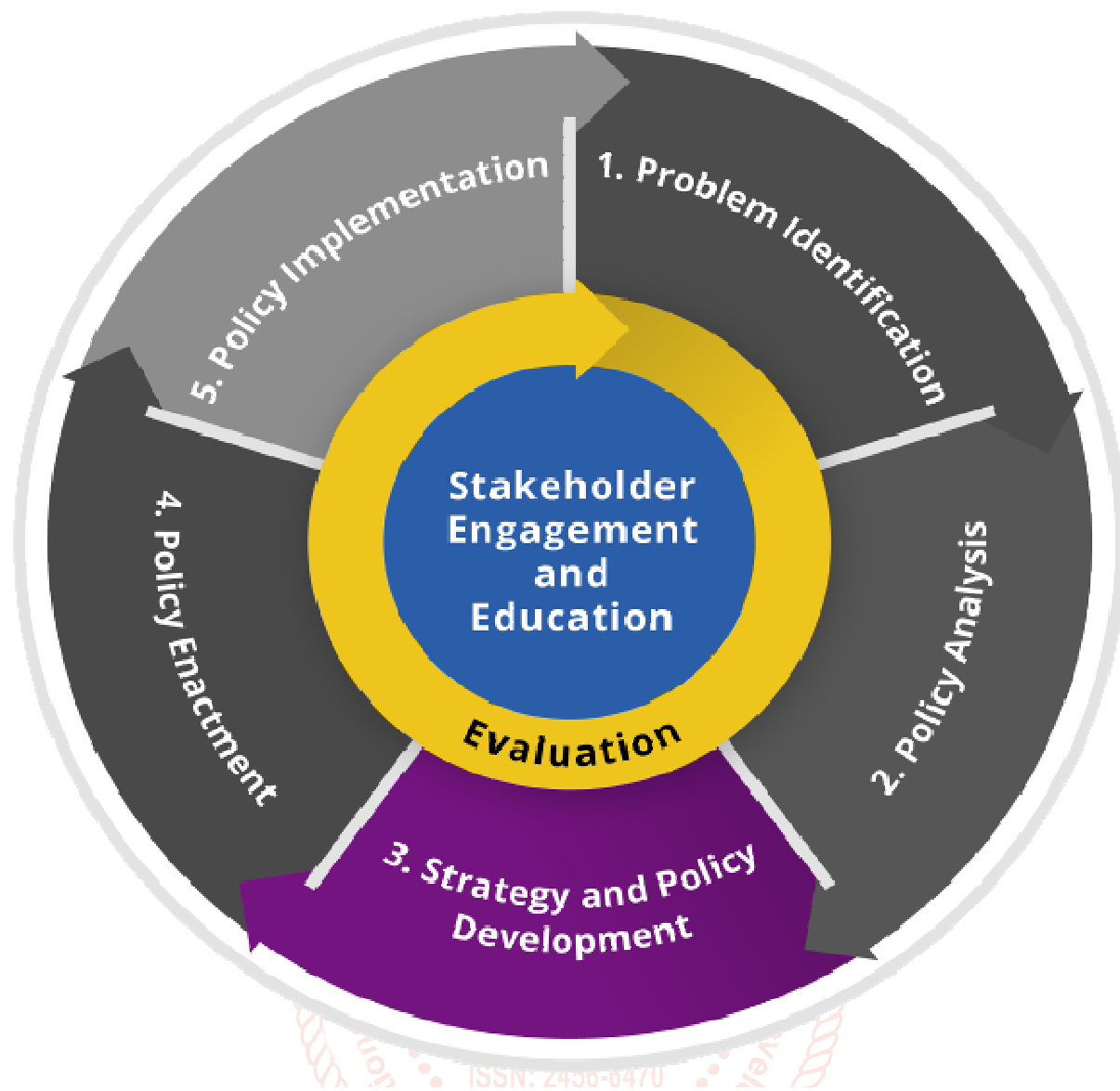
For much of the time outside electoral campaigns, the role of the media in policymaking is more connected to the manufacturing of elite rather than mass forms of consent. The primary target of media coverage is an elite audience, who can directly influence policy, and the secondary target is public opinion. Manufacturing of elite consent also seems to be the main purpose of coalition journalism which primarily serves policymakers and media interests, before the public. Media corporations, acting as powerful corporate bodies, engage with credentialed policymakers to set both policy agendas and the legitimate terms of discussion. If there is sufficient disagreement, as to the terms of the debate among major political parties, then a fierce public debate can ensue under such limited conditions (confined that is within conventional truths). However, where official opposition voices are united, it is unlikely that the media will challenge them, and policy issues will be strongly framed to support official policy positions. Founded on the principles of freedom of speech and private ownership, the media has been widely regarded as the 'Fourth Estate' of government holding the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary accountable within the democratic process.[18,19]

### **Discussion**

Labeled as the "fourth estate" in democratic societies, the media possesses a distinctive capability to influence and shape government policies. Normatively ascribed the role of a "watchdog" with a capacity to contribute to institutional change, the media holds the political elite accountable, reflects the needs of the audience, and exposes transgressions of the power holders within the democratic system. Its role thus in influencing matters related to legislation and government policies is crucial and should not be overlooked.

Media's origin is usually traced back to the French Revolution that witnessed an uprising of the press. Since then, the media has been used as a powerful tool in mending governmental policies and establishing free societies. Although it does not own the authority to "create" policies, it plays an instrumental role in exercising decisive influence over the general public's policy priorities. This is achieved by the media's omnipresent role as a mediator between the State and Society, actively participating in the public representation of policies, thereby also acting as the gatekeeper of the agenda of political discourse. Correspondingly, policy proposals are designed by the politicians anticipating the media reaction. This has increasingly strengthened the reciprocal power dynamics between the two. [20,21]

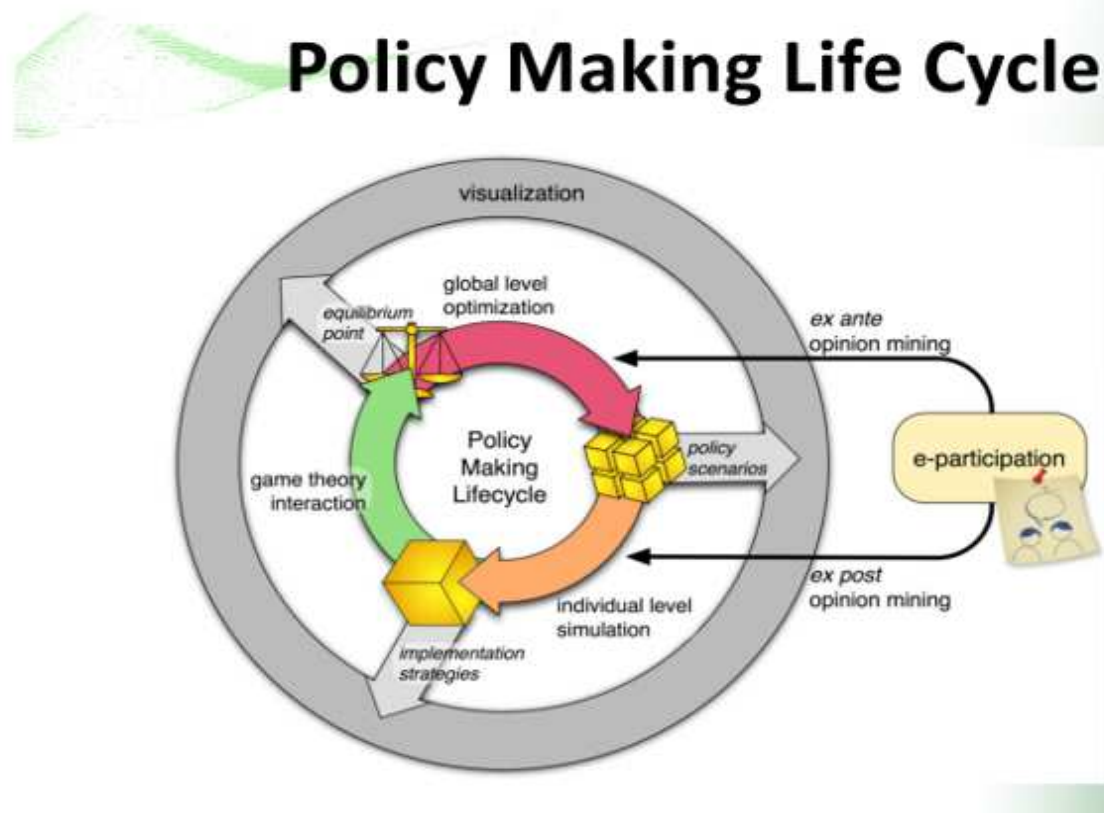
While dealing with the dissemination of government information, the media also plays the crucial role of a stakeholder in times of crisis, wherein it informs the public regarding the crisis escalation, and the news is framed through a 'self-referential cycle', that includes interactions between the media, the public, and policyholders. However, in this cycle, these parties may project their perceptions of reality onto the news. As a result, during adverse situations, Indian media lacks the independence to present critical perspectives and investigative reports.



The Indian media's coverage of the price hike that followed the 2008 global food crisis, pressurized the government into introducing targeted strategies and policies to insulate the poor and vulnerable from the price shock. Submitting to panic, the government devised various measures like food stock to be sold at subsidized rates along with a public distribution system. It curbed the escalation through the imposition of export tariffs coupled with higher domestic price support of crops. The media thus triggered some well-calibrated policy formulations that helped the domestic market remain stable and restricted the overall food inflation. [22]

Studies have also revealed the determining influence of the media on foreign policy matters. On the issue of signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which would ban all types of nuclear explosions, the political parties in India were divided on the opinions, especially when the agreement got linked with the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. India felt that the Treaty was essentially discriminatory and posed a threat to its sovereignty and so the majority opined that it should not be signed. The debates in Indian newspapers called for a rejection of the treaty, and this ultimately inspired the government's final stance.

The Delhi Gang Rape Case (Nirbhaya Case, 2012) was one of the most sensitive issues where investigative journalism catalyzed the public outrage and stimulated debates around the need for social reforms. The increasing momentum placed this case on the priority list of the Indian policy, which eventually resulted in various amendments in Criminal Law. Here, the media provided a platform to debate the existing policies and pressurized the Centre to formulate stringent laws and regulations for women. Mathura's rape case led to amendments in rape laws and a re-development of the concept of 'consent' in rape cases. The widespread dissent amongst people during the Bhanwari Devi rape case culminated in the landmark Vishakha Judgement. The recently introduced Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act significantly furthered legal recognition for transgender individuals as the 'Third Gender' under the Indian Constitution. In this manner, the media acts as the primary conduit between the public and policymakers, legitimizing the general opinion by addressing the same to the government institutions.[23]



Media effectively brings into cognizance different instances that require government intervention in the form of policies. The campaign black lives matter gained momentum as the video of Police torture on George Floyd went viral by the media. In the Indian context, this case forced Indians to introspect about the inherent caste system in society. The recent images of Kerala's elephant, that died due to the firecrackers in the fruit, reprimands the actions of humans and calls for government intervention to make stringent legislation on animal rights. The incident of the Boys Locker Room has forced the government to materialize the laws on cyber-crimes concerning juveniles. The images of the dilapidated plight of the migrant laborers circulated by the media have led the governments to introduce reforms in the labor laws.

The existence of an independent and impartial media that exercises journalistic objectivity is fundamental to the consolidation of democratic societies. Countries like India, that thrive on diversity, also regularly witness differences of opinion(s) between the public and political parties, concerning policy issues. In such cases, the media can get biased and present information in an increasingly obscure manner, through the crafting of political spectacles and distorted versions of reality, which may have pernicious effects. To substantiate, the extent to which the Indian media covers international issues is considerably limited, wherein it showcases a restricted interest in covering the latest developments in Sri Lanka and the Islamic World as compared to other regions.[24]

During the 1984 Sikh riots, the released data and images had discrepancies. Rather than providing authentic reportage, the Indian media, heavily censored by the State, resorted to transmitting selective information, thus engineering ambiguity about the situation. Many legislations were passed like the National Security Act, 1980, the Punjab Disturbed Areas Ordinance, 1983, The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1983, however, no attempts were made to closely examine the causative factors. Instead, the editorials increased hostility between Hindus and Sikhs through citing instances of misinformation.

During the Gujarat riots in 2002, it is claimed that the media inflamed communal violence by circulating the dreadful images of the event. PUCL has also reported some distorted and fake reporting of the instances to blame Muslims as the perpetrators. Alternatively, when the Muslims were the victims of various crimes, the attackers were left unnamed. Such situations expose the prejudiced nature of the media.

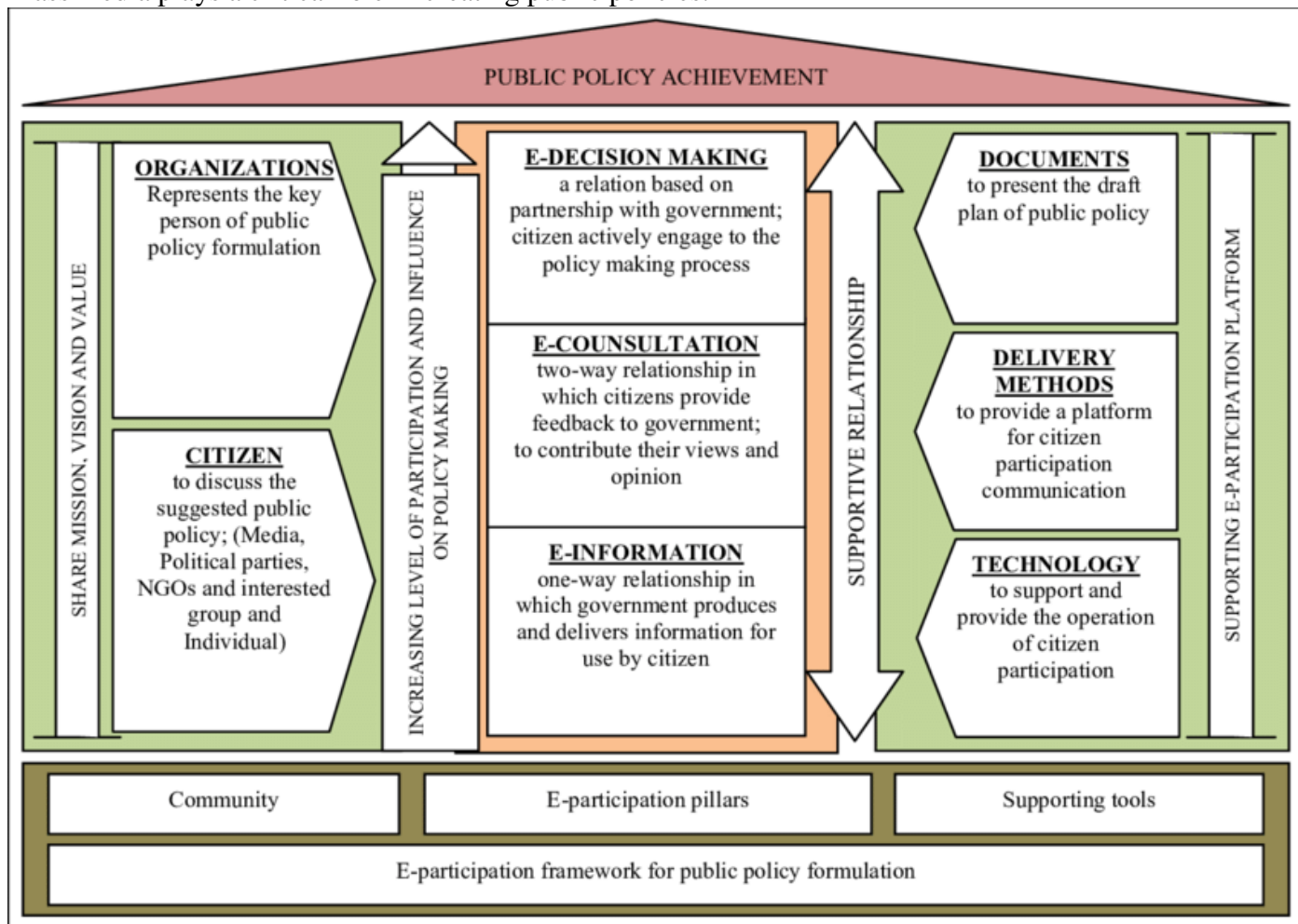
The influence of the media on politics in some cases is not one-sided. The Pulwama Attack witnessed a war-encouraging brigade of people storming social media to express their stance, while the other side condemned such an outlook. However, this had negligible effect on the government, which chose to maintain secrecy under the garb of national security. This instance best substantiates the reciprocal power dynamics between the media and politics.

The government’s accountability towards policy action increases manifolds relatively in a situation where media circulation and public pressure is higher. For instance, the legal discourse around rape and sexual assault cases in rural areas are tremendously low, despite villages reporting a relatively higher number of cases, as compared to urban areas. This is a result of low media coverage along with social stigmas attached to rape, haunting the survivors from filing FIR. The reach of the government to bring reforms in villages thus remains circumvented.

The media plays a crucial role in accelerating policy debates through increasing public awareness and initiating dialogues, thereby helping set the policy agenda. With its investigative faculties, it holds the potential to alter the course of policies by bringing the problem to the attention of the public, hence, playing an important role in expanding the scope of politics. Understanding the nature and magnitude of media effects on policy issues, thus, becomes an increasingly important endeavor.[23]

**Results**

Mass media plays a critical role in creating public policies.



It has a significant contribution in providing government and policy makers with useful information and people’s sentiments through public opinion broadcast. Meanwhile, mass media help the policy makers to successfully carryout and implement the planned public policies by creating public pressure and monitoring. This paper analyses the role of media as a bridge between the government and the people, as an intermediary source to keep the democratic system on track. Media points out and broadcasts various public issues and encourages people to raise their voice. Such public concern then is brought to the notice of policy makers, political and social agents. This brings change in policy or results in formulation of new public policy. Moreover, media

plays a role of watchdog and keeps surveillance on implementation of such policy. This way media helps prevent corruption and pushes the government towards successful achievement and implementation of people friendly policies. There is an immense capacity in media to bring development in society if it persistently follows the professionalism and ethical codes. There is opportunity of utilizing the efficient apparatus of mass media to mobilize people regarding public issues like Health and Education and promote public participation in finding solution to these problems through opinion building, leading towards effective public policies

It has been outlined ten media functions in the policymaking process, which are listed below: (i)



Anticipating problems in advance of public officials, (ii) Alerting the public to problems based on official warnings. (iii) Informing the public of the stakes the competing groups had in solving problems. (iv) Keeping various groups and the public abreast of competing proposals. (v) Contributing to the content of the policy. (vi) Deciding the tempo of decision making (vii) Helping lawmakers decide how to vote. (viii) Alerting the public to how policies are administered. (ix) Evaluating policy effectiveness. (x) Stimulating policy reviews. The media can profoundly impact policymaking in times of crisis. It can speed up the policy process, bypassing internal consultation and open policy dialogues, and potentially leads to a reactionary solution without any roots in evidence. Policies resulting from such influence by the media might lead to unintended consequences. They might even contradict the initial effort of protecting the welfare of the targeted population due to poor targeting, corruption and excessive intervention in the market.[24]

Agenda-setting is the first step of the policy process. It specifies the state's problem and emphasises the government action to intervene with the focusing event. There are two types of agenda in constructing the public problems: the political agenda and the media agenda. The political agenda is usually debated and discussed at the parliamentary level, while the media agenda is found through the media diary. Both agendas play an important role. However, their coverage is minimal. First, in the election campaign, the media channelled the manifesto from politicians to the potential voters. Second, they highlighted the previous issues or contributions of the electorate that was not directly seen. Third, media influence the weight of voters' choice on selected issues to be the focusing event. Fourth, access to media empowers the voters and enhances their benefits from the government programs. Media could influence the agenda-setting process in many ways. The media attention and the behaviours of political actors affect the legislative outcome. The relationship between politicians and media is complex, and undeniably, the politicians need the media as a prominent political agenda-setter. It is known that the media reported everything that occurred in the community to the public. The reportage was done daily or weekly, thus framing the issues significantly. On the other hand, the media can also do an investigative journalism method to arouse the public's attention on an undercover issue to become a policy. In addition, the media can shift the policymakers attention to a problem or a focusing event. Also, it could urge the policymakers to decide on a policy, amplifying debate in the parliament on the focusing problems, putting

pressure on the legislators and influencing the direction of the decision and the behaviours of political actors. The policy formulation stage in the policy process is a stage that encompasses the creation, identification or borrowing of proposed options or alternatives to resolve and improve public problems. It involved developing a suitable and acceptable proposed course of action, often called alternative, proposal or option to deal with public problems. Through the media, the public gain information and learn how the government policies will affect them and the government in turn gain feedback and response on their policies and programs. Thus, media often act as a primary conduit between parties who want to influence policy and policymakers, controlling the scope of political debate and as a conduit that regulates and controls the flow of information. media also plays a role as a medium for global and local actors to pressure domestic policymakers towards a certain direction by giving expert opinions in media reports. The experts or think tanks act by releasing reports, publishing opinions, or establishing a special task force that provides evidence-based solutions channelled through the media. These actions, in turn, influence the policymaker to formulate immediate policies to counter the immediate crisis, remove fear and protect their electoral turf. In 2007, during the food price crisis hits India, the vibrant press environment openly held the Indian government as the one who was responsible for the food price hike. This pressure forced the Indian government to formulate targeted policies to reduce the negative impact on the population. For example, the enforcement of export curbs and export tariffs, the higher domestic crop price supports, the periodic release of food stock through public distribution, and food subsidies. However, these measures were seen as ad hoc policymaking to safeguard the domestic farmers and consumers against potential economic impact, further affecting government popularity.[25]

### Summary

1. Classic approaches to politics and elections assume at best an indirect effect of media on policy making. Media may influence voters by priming or framing certain issues, but these effects are likely to be limited.
2. Adopting a vision of media as an actor, with its own rules and dynamics, allows for a more nuanced perspective of media influence.
3. Beyond media, issues have a life of their own, with historical and cyclical elements codetermining their visibility and perceived importance over time.

4. The timing of politics also determines media's potential influence on policy making: an overloaded agenda may limit that influence.

In democratic settings, governments do not usually control the flow of information, but they benefit from a certain form of ascendancy in the public space. When it comes to reporting, media naturally pay more attention to incumbents and those that exercise authority. Government officials tend to use and abuse this privileged position to limit the scope of conflict and to pick the conflicts and prime the policies that are the most rewarding, electorally or in terms of more short-term popularity.

Analyzing changes in media coverage of policy making could help address questions about the growing knowledge gap and its consequences for policy-related mobilizations. The knowledge gap may weaken the propensity to mobilize among the less politicized. At the same time, studies on social movement organizations tend to show that mobilization has become simpler and less costly. We have much anecdotal evidence of the role of social media in mass protests, but we have little knowledge of the average effect this has had on policy-specific mobilizations. It would be interesting to know if certain issues benefit more from the new possibilities, e.g., the environment or gender equality. It is not clear that social media mobilization benefits long-standing issues such as wage bargaining, as these are less likely to go viral.[22,23]

How do ongoing changes affect elite preeminence in media agenda setting? Put differently, if the changing media landscape has affected the possibilities and strategies for media outsiders, what about insiders? Logically, if conflict is more easily socialized and the scope of conflict more easily expanded, it should become more difficult for incumbent administrations and political leaders to keep control of the media flow. Government officials remain a privileged media source, though, and it is also to be expected that governments and other political actors invest heavily in mastering the challenge of social media. Some attention has been paid to how authoritarian governments use social media to manipulate public opinion and debate

### Conclusions

In summary, we want to know how governments communicate about policy making in the digital age. The hybrid media system is multilayered, and a host of policy battles may be fought in parallel, as several possibly contradictory logics are at work. However, we need good case studies on important political battles and the role of social media. The pandemic that hit the world in 2020 provides numerous possible

opportunities to further our knowledge about the relations between policy and media in the digital age.

When are policy making processes more vulnerable to media influence? This comparatively old question requires new research and new theoretical perspectives. It would benefit, as explained in the section titled Governing, Policy Making, and the Rise of Social Media, from a strengthened dialogue between media and policy scholars. While battles over the scope of conflict certainly remain central, the very definitions of scope and attention need to be rethought in the context of a radically changing media landscape. Moreover, while these processes were not well understood before, the rise of social media is adding new questions and puzzles to old ones.[24]

Last but not least, future research will have to make decisions on how to study the three-or-more-way interactions between media, politics, policy making communities, publics, and other stakeholders. Advances in text mining and machine learning techniques, aided by the growing online availability of all political statements, provide abundant new opportunities to do more fine-grained and over-time analysis. At the same time, it is paramount that in-depth case studies continue to unearth the mechanisms underlying processes of changing media-policy interactions.[25]

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