

The Role of Mass Media in Public Opinion Formation and Governance By

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Abstract

The mass media is a crucial institution in any political system. Its imperativeness is discernible in its placement as the fourth estate of the realm. This work showcased the roles of mass media in the formation and shaping of public opinion in a polity with most reference to Nigeria. The work employed the use of content analysis of information of secondary data. It is argued in the work that mass media plays an importance role in opinion formation. Also, the various challenges of mass media are made known in this work. The work recommends that political bias should be relegated by mass media and that equal information system between the government and the governed should be maintained.

Keywords: Mass media, Public opinion, Government, Communication political system.

Introduction

In any political system, public opinion is indeed imperative in shaping the political behaviour of the citizenry. Not only does it shape the behaviour of the people, it also gives direction to where the pendulum of event and political activities would swing. The role of the mass media in this direction is highly noticeable and germane. The mass media has become an important channel through which the opinions of the people are communicated to the entire world most especially where mass media are privately owned and devoid of undue manipulated by the government.

This paper therefore looks at the role of the mass media in molding public opinion and its effect on the political behaviour of the nation.

Conceptual Clarification

Public opinion

The concept of public opinion has been subjected to various definitions just like every other concept in social sciences. As captioned by keys (1989: 151), public opinions are opinion “held by private persons whom government find prudent to heed and may compel towards action or inactions by such opinion”. The above explained the fact that opinions through expressed by private individuals, have great influence on the activities and actions of government.

Usually, public opinions express our political values in day to day terms. They indicate how people feel about their representatives, their institutions, their national goals. Political opinions reflect upon our ideology, our values, our conduct, our expectations (Guy; 1998: 33). To Suberu (2003: 74), public opinion represents the aggregate or collectivity of beliefs and attitude expressed by individual about political objects”. Such expressed belief, according to him, “may either indicate rejection or approval of an issue, may strongly held or not, may be stable or unstable, and may be central or marginal to an individual’s thinking or behaviour”.

It has also been argued that the formations of public policy also rest on the opinion expressed by the public. Onibonoje (2003: 189) believes that public opinion can be described as a “process of public discussion leading to the formation or disability of a public policy or mode of action by government” while Omotosho (2007: 213) was more elaborate when he asserts that “citizens express opinion base on actions and inactions of the government”. To him, whenever government does what is pleasing to the people, they express opinion in support; they equally express opinion to make demand from government. In both democratic and dictatorial systems, the

cultivation of the public opinion is a major preoccupation of the most powerful political groups. It can be said that public opinion is the cutting edge of a nation's political culture.

Public opinion not only directs government to an understanding of what citizens think about its policies and action to the benefit of the masses, public opinion enables the government to be aware of the peoples' needs and aspirations (Ayodele, 2007: 200).

Attributes of Public Opinion

Certain distinctive attributes are peculiar to public opinion in any political system. These are content, direction, intensity and stability. These have become essential qualities that any public opinion must possess. Content refers to policies with political consequences, issue, economics and social condition. Direction has to do with the value preference of an opinion and inform whether the public response is positive, negative or indifferent. Intensity of public reveals the commitment of the people on the position they have taken, the extent to which the issue is salient and how much people care about such an issue. Stability of public opinion means the degree to which both the direction and intensity of an opinion remain the same over time. It deals with consistency of people on their opinions. While some opinions are adhere to consistency, some undergone frequent shift. (Guy, 1998: 34-35). A stable opinion held by the vast majority of the people may be adopted by the government owing to its acceptability and consistency while a distorted and an inconsistency opinion may not be reckoned with.

Thus public opinion can be characterized by the following according to Janda et al (2008: 26- 127)

The public's attitude towards a given government policy can vary over time, often dramatically; public opinion places boundaries an allowable

types of public policy; citizens are willing to register opinions on matter outside their expertise; government tends to respond to public opinion and the government sometimes does not do what the people want.

Public opinion according to Janda et al (2008: 127) on important issues can change, but it is sometimes difficult to distinguish as a true change in opinion from different individuals in the way a question is worded. When different questions on the same issue produce similar distribution of opinion, the underlying attitude are stable. When the same question (or virtually the same questions) produces significantly different responses over time, an actual shift in public opinion probably has occurred.

Opinion public

In any political system, government tends to contend with many publics contrary to popular belief that a public is an indifferent mass of people. It is an incorrect and imbalance assumption to think of only one public when a reference is being made to public opinion.

As Wasby (1970: 329) submits, there are opinion leaders who are over supplied with information and thereby sustain the circulation of opinion while at the same time believed that there is attentive public and those neither interested nor does knowledgeable about issue that have to do with the public.

In the analysis of Guy l (1998: 36), issues of widespread impact such as war, inflation, unemployment, capital punishment, and universal medicine, the public will voice related opinions that are measurable as a national response but only on a relatively small number of issues does a public respond organically. Guy thereby noted that, "only special publics that are immediately affected by a particular event will likely hold informed opinion on the matter... there are many special public holding intense and

direct opinions, as distinct from the general public that hold opinion on everything.

In all, the following categories of opinion publics have been identified; the mass public, attentive or interested public and the opinion elites. The mass public comprises the mass with the largest population of 80 to 85%. They hardly express coherent opinion on issues of public importance since they are unable to influence governmental decision and policies. The reason for this is not far fetched. They lack resources and the cognitive and evaluative orientation about public policies. Notwithstanding, the mass public can never be taken for granted in government activities because it provides political stability in government.

The attentive public comprises a similar group that “follows public issues in an analytical manner and is relatively well informed, and constitutes a critical audience for discussing public affairs” (Key, 1989: 152). They are educated, well informed and have experience in handling public policies which make them important in policy formulation and political affairs. This group makes use of the mass media to articulate their opinion on political issues.

The opinion elite represents those who occupy the society’s top position of power and wealth. They exercise authority, influence, and control over resources of the society. They equally formulate policies, guide the activities and decide the significant issues of government... they also impose on the society their explanations and justification for the dominant political and economic system” (Marger, 1981: 29). The position of opinion elites, their access to technologies and the assets they have acquired allow them to function effectively (Etzioni, 1968: 113).

Mass Media

The mass media refers to channels of communication which can reach a large number of people at the same time. It is a mean of communicating or transmitting information to large, heterogeneous widely dispersed audience.

Mass media are “characterized by their massiveness or ability to communicate from single source to a large audience through a mechanical devices such as print or T.V. screen making for informal relationship between the communication channels sophisticated secondary techniques to extend communication to situation in which face to face contact is impossible, that is, mass media provide indirect (mediated) means by which the primacy of communication is carried out (Orukopayan, 2005: 198).

The mass media are commonly divided into two types which are:

- Print Media which communicate information through the publication of words and pictures on paper. Prime examples of print media are daily newspapers and popular magazines.
- Broadcast Media which communicate information electronically, through sounds and images. Prime examples of broadcast media are radio and television. The worldwide network of personal computer commonly called the internet can also be classified as broadcast technology, and the internet has grown in size so that it also qualifies as a mass medium (Janda; 2008: 159 et al).

To Plano and Greenberg (1979: 130), Mass Media is a “technical means of communication with millions of people, exemplified by television, radio, newspaper, motion pictures, magazines and periodical”. Television, according to them, is used with increasing impact of build an “image campaign” in which special techniques (contrived situations spot

announcement, editing of videotapes, and the like) are used to achieve short term shift in voters behaviours.

In similar vein, Denis McQuail (1985: 489) conceptualizes mass media as an institution. According to him;

Mass media together comprises a new institution, concerned with the production and distribution of knowledge in the widest sense of the word and have a number of salient characteristics, including; the use of relatively advanced technology for the (mass) production and dissemination of messages; the systematic organization and social regulation of this work; the direction of messages at potentially large audience who are unknown to sender and free to attend or not. The mass media institution is essentially open, operating in the sphere to provide regular channel of communication for "message" of a kind determined by what is culturally and technically possible, socially permitted and is demand by a large enough number of individuals.

Having discussed the concepts of public opinion and mass media, it is necessary at this juncture to shift attention to the role of mass media as it affects public opinion formation in the society.

The Role of the Mass Media and Public Opinion formation

The mass media has got a tremendous part to play when it comes to public opinion formation. Of all the function of the media in the political system, its influence on the opinion of citizens is of outmost importance since views and opinions of the citizenry are imperative to the development of the polity. Through the mass media, opinions on the various activities of government are expressed by individuals and associations. This accounts for why most politicians do have their own media outfit like newspaper, magazine, television and radio stations that are sympathetic to their cause. In the second republic for instance, the Late MKO Abiola's Group of

Concord Newspaper and some others such as Daily Times and New Nigerian, were megaphones of the ruling National Party of Nigeria. (Omotoso, 2007: 217).

In the same vein, Guy (1998: 32) submits that the media “acts as vehicle for the government, political party and interest groups that want to communicate their positions to the people, educating, and persuading or even manipulating their opinions”.

The effectiveness or otherwise of the mass media in molding public opinion depends majorly on the ownership of the media apparatus. With government ownership of the media, opinions are structured, moderated and manipulated by the government. The major newspapers and other media are owned and controlled by the government thereby making them instruments of political control in the hands of government or the ruling party.

When this happens, people find it difficult to express their views and their opinions taken for granted resulting in one way communication system from government to citizens. It is therefore difficult for the leadership to be criticized or its action condemned by the people through the media. This is against the tenets of mass media which is an avenue for the government to reach the people while the people are allowed to express their candid opinions about the government.

This position was substantiated by Janda et al (2008:167) when they submitted that, “When the government controls the news flow, the people may have little chance to learn what government is doing or to pressure it to behave differently”. Public perceptions on issues of importance are thus not put into consideration once they are not in consonance with the opinion of the government. For instance, electoral reform in Nigerian has been

subjected to various debates and diverse opinions have been expressed on the need to put certain machineries in place to develop the electoral system. Be that as it may, private ownership of the media has come of age thereby becoming the avenue through which public opinions are showcased. As argued by Ayodele (2007:202),

In recent times, public opinion has changed tremendous assuming visible potency. This is consequent upon widespread introduction of television, internet and e-mail. This breakthrough in breakthrough in information and communication technology (ICT) has enabled people to have easy and instantaneous uncensored access to news and events in the socio-political and economic affairs of the entire world. In additional, ICT has empowered the general to express their individual and collective views to wide audience and this has influenced people's reaction and behaviour political issues.

Nigeria has witnessed a major outstanding exception to the limited function of the media in Africa. The establishment and development of both the print and broadcast media has become a permanent feature of the nation. The print media parade arrays of independence newspapers and magazines. Some of which are The Vanguard, The Punch, The Nation, Guardian, The Tribune, This Day, The News and Newswatch magazine. These are owned by private individuals and organizations. The broadcast media also have the Africa Independent Television (AIT), Channel TV, MITV, Silverbird TV, Ray Power FM, Rhythm FM and many television and radio stations.

Private media being the viable avenue for the citizens to express their views has gained tremendous grounds in Nigeria. Peoples' preference for mass media is tilted in favour of the private media outfits. Thus, human rights activists, political commentators, political analysts, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), all takes solace in private media organizations to express their opinions about government policies. They also make use of

these to arouse peoples' consciousness and seek their support when the need arises. They enjoy uncensored opinions about governmental activities. We now have in the print media opinion pages, letters to the editors or well researched, informed articles on the current topics and in the electronics media, programmes involving panel of discussants, phone-in to air one's views (opinion, attitude and belief) (Onibonoje, 2003: 194). Focus Nigeria, Democratic license, Kakaki and other programmes have become avenue for panel of discussants on the Africa Independent Television (AIT) for citizen to express their views and Channels Television has developed programmes like Sunrise Daily, Politics Today, Face Off etc where people debate issues and finally make recommendations to the government.

The activities of private media organization are not devoid of intervention by the government. Not only were they placed under government regulatory mechanism, they are also subjected to harassment, intimidation and proscription, they are also restrained from publishing or broadcasting the information, reports or opinions that are against policies of government.

For instance, the Abuja office of the African Independent Television (AIT) was closed down under the Obasanjo's administration for beaming live the National Assembly members debate on the third term issue (The Nation, 2006 June 28). Not that alone, Gbenga Aruleba, the presenter of Focus Nigeria on AIT and Rotimi Durojaiye a senior correspondent at Daily Independent were arrested and charged for sedition for calling the new presidential jet a 'second hand plane'. (The Nation, 2006: June 28).

Whereas, "without newspaper, radio and pre-eminently television, the present political system could not work. The media are so omnipotent and all pervasive. We are often unaware of the addictive hold they exert over the attention and the message they impact in over consciousness on a whole range of matters-including politics" (Jones, 1991: 200).

Since government ownership of the media is indeed regarded as an unacceptable threat to freedom that would interfere with the marketplace of idea and result in one – way communications, from government to citizens, (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 2008: 167) private ownership of the media therefore became more popular and the most acceptable mean of political communication to avert a one- way communication system. Of outmost important to the media is their power to set political agenda-a list of issues that people identify as requiring government attention. As opined by Janda, Berry and Goldman (2008: 183),

Those who set the political agenda define which issue government decision makers should discuss and debate. Like a tree that falls in the forest without anyone around to hear it, an issue that does not get on with the political agenda will not get any political attention. Sometimes the media force the government to confront issues once buried in the scientific community, such as AIDS, global warming and cloning. Other times, the media move the government to deal with unpleasant social issues as child abuse and wrongful execution of death penalty.

Mass media constitute a powerful and pervading force in our lives. We are exposed daily to bombardment of media messages. Most of the information we receive about our community, our state, the nation and the world comes to us through the media and these views communicated to us through the media impact our attitude towards people events and problems (Malik, Aaliya, and Sabena,2015:51).

The media have done an impressive job on issues like unemployment, corruption, electoral reforms, and power outage in Nigeria. Opinions are expressed on these issues of public importance on daily basis on the pages of newspaper while electronic media are not left out in this respect. The

resultant effect of this is that government's attention has been shifted to these issues.

The establishment of anti-corruption commissions like the Economics and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) were born out of public agitation on the menace of corruption. Also, youth empowerment programmes have been put in place by the government to reduce high rate of unemployment in the nation. Such measures as National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE) etc were established to deal with unemployment problem. Thus, "media's role to act as guardian of public interest and agenda setting are among the most important roles of the media" (Simon, 2018).

Indeed, the development of internet has brought an unprecedented development to the information system in the contemporary world. Through the internet, peoples' opinion can be brought to limelight devoid of manipulation and without any editorial work. Every individual has quick and undeniable access to the internet. The internet enjoys unlimited speed and high level of connectivity. Opinions expressed through the internet can cross many international boundaries and can be accessed globally within few minutes.

Allegations of political bias in the media are common in any political system, though depending on the ownership. The mass media advance the cause and interest of few who have access to such a media outfit in their reportage. Take for instance, "it is believed that both The Nation Newspaper and the News magazine are sympathetic to Action Congress (AC) (Omotoso, 2007: 217) while the Tribune and compass are said to be sympathetic to the cause of the People Democratic Party (PDP).

On every issue, there are always divided opinions based on political party affiliation, ethnic loyalty, religious affiliation and the likes. The issue of political bias on the reportage in press has become a permanent feature of the mass media. The opinion of Muslims faithful in Southern Nigeria on the Islamic banking system are in consonance with the opinions of their Muslim counterparts in the Northern part of the country where the religion is well and fully established. In the same vein, a media organization owned and managed by a Muslim inclined individual may definitely be biased in reporting issues on the introduction of the Islamic Banking system. The opinions of anti-Islamic Banking may be suppressed in such a media outfit no matter how reasonable the opinion might be.

As Balking (1981: 1) rightly observed, without mass media, openness and accountability are impossible in contemporary democracies. Nevertheless, mass media can hinder political transparency as well as help it. Politicians and political operators can stimulate the political virtues of transparency through rhetorical and media manipulation". But when, as is often the case, public opinion is divided, elected officials can safely ignore it if they so choose (Magstadt, 206:317) and when no one really knows what the people want, how will the government be responsive to public opinion? This poser will lead to the concept of opinion poll as a relevant aspect of public opinion.

Opinion poll

Opinion poll is a method that has been designed to seek the views of citizens on a peculiar issue to determine the validity or otherwise of such an issue. This could come through questionnaire or survey sampling as a whole (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 2008: 127). When the opinions of citizens are canvassed using the opinion polling, the result of the poll is used to reach conclusion on the issue.

The media is highly recognized in conducting opinion polls. As analyzed by Magstadt (2006: 317),

In democratic states, public opinion on variety of issues is gauged and discussed freely and effort to identify the majority opinions on any particular issue are undertaken not only by public agencies but also by political parties and candidates, the media, various private organizations research institutes and inquiring scholars. To determine how the public stands on a given issue, organizations rely on public opinion polling.

There are three kinds of polling organizations which are

(1) professional organizations that conduct public opinion surveys and marketing research for both political and non political clients (2) political pollsters who usually work for a candidate or a political party and (3) media pollsters which are surveys research conducted by the electronic or print media. (Guy, 1998: 38).

The importance of the media in measuring public opinion can never be overemphasized in that “the first attempts to measure public opinion were the straw polls (unscientific samples) developed by newspapers in the 19th century. These polls, however crude, often correctly predicted the winner. On local level, newspaper, radio, and television still use straw polls today” (Magstadt, 2006: 317).

This view was corroborated by Janda, Berry and Goldman (2008) when they submitted that,

The media’s role in reflecting public opinion has become much more refined in the information age. Since the 1820s, newspapers conducted straw polls of dubious quality that matched their own partisan inclinations. After commercial polls (such as in the Gallup and Roper polls) were established in 1930s, newspapers began to report more reliable readings of public opinion. By the 1960s, the

media (both national and local) began to conduct their own surveys. In the 1970s, some news organizations acquired their own survey research divisions. Occasionally, print and electronic media have joined forces to conduct major national surveys.

Even though professional organizations and political pollsters have developed more sophisticated opinion than the mass media, the outcome of their research and the extensity of report still rest on the oars of the media. It is through the media that the collectivity of the public can be aware of the tenets and importance of the research.

In Africa, the mass media have become central and critical in shaping public opinions, presentation of such opinions to government and her agencies, setting agenda for good governance and government and aggregating conditions for public protest, public riots, and peaceful agitation etc. All over Africa, the media provide cause and justification for change of government.

Conclusion and recommendation

The mass media have become extremely important to government and politics as a means of disseminating information and influencing the citizens. It has also become an avenue through which the opinions of individuals, groups and organizations are directed to the government. The radio, television, newspaper and the internet have developed machineries to perform a better job of reporting opinions in the contemporary world most especially the privately owned media organizations. At least people can now freely express their opinions about the various activities and policies of government through the media. With the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill by the National Assembly in Nigeria, the media has been given a blank cheque in the area of information dissemination without being bias in their report and coverage of events. Nevertheless, the activities of the media are still subject to the regulation of the government both the

technical and content of the media are being regulated by the government through the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Regardless of this, the media is expected to discharge its duties in such a way that a balance is maintained between the government and the people.

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