MEDIA INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT POLICY-MAKING: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated media influence on government policy-making as well as its role in shaping public opinion and political decision-making. This study was anchored on Behaviour theory and the Rational choice theory. The focus group discussion design was adopted for this study and respondents were randomly selected from the communities in Owerri municipal. Findings of this study revealed that the mass media positively influence the opinion as well as set the agenda for discussion in the society. Further findings revealed that government at all levels should continue to utilize various social media platform as highly influential medium for mass mobilization. This study concluded that the media plays a vital role in shaping the opinion of the general public on government policy-making process and development agenda cannot be over emphasized. This study therefore, recommended that these government policy-making decisions should be transmitted more even in local dialect to enable better understanding of these policies by people in rural and urban areas.

Keywords: Government policy-making, media influence, public opinion

Introduction

The mass media, no doubt, is potent in the spread of innovations and mobilization of the people for a particular course, of nation benefit. It means that the media can be a potent tool in the mobilization and education of the people, on the need to participate in the actualization of a cause (Anorue et al., 2011). They sum it up when they note that, "some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kind of people under some kinds of conditions (through some kinds of channel) "have some kind of effect". The media, in this case the broadcast media (radio and television), in performance of their various duties in society, have not been left out in the efforts in shaping publics' opinion and political decision-making.

Media exposure and usage have a significant impact on shaping views, attitudes, and behaviours among media users. The frequency of communications or media content to which individuals are exposed and the extent to which they retain that information is referred to as media exposure (Coyne et al., 2019). Media plays a crucial role in influencing people's perceptions and behaviours by disseminating information, raising awareness, and providing education. It facilitates communication among individuals and enables them to gain insights into various global, social, and environmental concerns (Huang, 2016; Iheanacho et al., 2021; Okoye et al., 2022).

Moreover, media exposure fosters feelings of promotion and generates perspectives that foster certain behaviour. It is no doubt that the internet, television, and newspapers are the most commonly utilized channels for obtaining information about international topics such as climate change, natural disasters, and pandemics. Media coverage emerged as the most influential source of knowledge concerning large variety of subjects (Wei et al., 2014; Emetumah et al., 2023). The media to which people are exposed significantly shapes their beliefs, opinions, and actions, substantially impacting their comprehension varieties of issues.

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 have 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 (Jumbo et al., 2022).

Over time it has also been argued that the formations of public policy also rest on the opinion expressed by the public. It is on this ground that Owolabi, (2019) asserts that public opinion is a "process of public discussion leading to the formation or disability of a public policy or mode of action by government". Owolabi further explained 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, 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.

It is against this backdrop that the researchers to examined the influence of the mass media on government policy-making in Owerri Metropolis, Imo State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to;

i. Investigate the level of exposure of Owerri municipal residence to mass media.
ii. Evaluate the perception of Owerri municipal residents towards government policies projected through the mass media.
iii. Examine media effect on government policy-making.

Literature Review

Happer and Philo (2020) examines the impact the media has in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. Drawing on findings from a range of empirical studies, findings across these areas show the way in which the media shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects. Further study revealed that the media also severely limit the information with which audiences understand these issues and that alternative solutions to political problems are effectively removed from public debate. This study concluded that both traditional and new media play a vital role in public information and development.

In another study by Owolabi, (2019) which investigated and 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. This study therefore, recommends that political bias should be relegated by mass media and that equal information system between the government and the governed should be maintained.

Chi-Horng, (2023) carried out a study exploring the influence of public perception of mass media usage and attitudes towards mass media news on altruistic behavior. The results revealed that media exposure, credibility, and social influence were critical factors that influenced individuals' perceptions of mass media news, with media exposure having a more significant influence. This study concluded that perceptions and attitudes were positively associated with altruistic behaviour, and attitude was found to mediate the relationship between perceptions about mass media news and altruistic behaviour.

Abu, (2023) carried out a study which purpose was to analyse the role of social media in shaping public opinion and its influence on economic decisions. This research uses a qualitative method. Data collection involved literature review and social media content analysis, focusing on opinion patterns and their influence. Reliability and validity were emphasised through triangulation and participation of secondary source participants in the analysis process. The study results show that in a digital age characterised by the central role of social media, it can be concluded that social media has a significant role in shaping public opinion and also influencing economic decision-making. Through social media, individuals and groups can interact with each other, share information, and participate in discussions that shape collective views on various issues.

Another study by Remoortere and Vliegenthart (2023) aimed at evaluating the influence of mass media on the popularity of politicians. To measure the influence of media on political success during routine periods, this paper links popularity polls to media coverage of individual politicians. This study revealed that media visibility has an impact on popularity. This media effect is especially important for MPs seeing that the function of higher-ranking politicians already affects their popularity without media visibility. A significant effect is also found for tone on popularity scores. This study concluded that negativity bias in which negative news affects the popularity of politicians, whereas positive news does not make a difference.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Behaviour theory and the Rational choice theory

Rational choice theory contends that political behavior is best explained through the application of its supposedly "value-neutral" assumptions which posit man as a self-interested, purposeful, maximizing being. Through the logic of methodological individualism, assumptions about human nature are treated as empirical discoveries. The central argument is that by assuming that self-interest is an empirically established component of human nature, rational choice theory supports and perpetuates a political life which is antithetical to important tenets of normative democratic theory. Rational choice theory offers an incoherent account of democratic citizenship and produces a political system which shows a constant biased against political change and pursuit of the public interest.

The relevance of this theory to this study is that if the citizens of Nigeria will do away with tribal sentiments and elect credible leaders who will institute good policies that will eventually result to desired development in the country at large

On the other hand, the behaviour theory assumes that the behavior under investigation is under volitional control, that is, that people believe that they can execute the behavior whenever they are willing to do so. This concept represents the extent to which people believe they are able to perform the behavior because they have adequate capabilities and/or opportunities or are lacking in these. In general, the models have proven to be useful in understanding the behavior, with important contributions of perceived behavioural control.

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This theory is relevant to this study because as the media projects government policies to the general public, the masses still have the right to interpret and express their opinions in the policies they've been exposed to.

Methodology

Design: This study adopted the focus group discussion design which entails group interview of people with similar interest. Tegan, (2023), explained that focus group as bringing together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting.

Population: From the five (5) villages in Owerri municipal, two 2 opinion leaders were randomly selected from the villages; Amawom, Umuororonjo, Umuonyeche, Umuodu, and Umuonyima. i.e. 10 opinion leaders were interviewed as a group.

Instrument: The focus group guide was used for data gathering.

Analysis: the analysis was done using discussion building technique

Data Analysis

Analysis from the discussion revealed that most people of Owerri municipal have access to the mass media channels and they are highly exposed to the media contents. This implies that residents of Owerri municipal harness the various media platforms which include the radio, television, newspaper and even the social media handles of these platforms.

Analysis from the group discussion revealed that most respondents have a positive perception of government policies being aired and published in the various mass media platforms. Although a few percent of the respondents are of the view that the implementation of these policies to bring the desired outcome is where lies the problem. Respondents also expressed that government must see the need to maximise social media platforms are many Nigerians now rely on SM for information. This implies that the government must continue to harness the various media platforms as their aid in acceptance of government policies and shaping the opinion of the masses.

Data of analysis from the group discussion reveal that majority of the respondents are of the view that the mass media generally have a have a positive influence on residents of Owerri municipal as it has in no little way shaped their opinion positively towards accepting government policies. This implies that for as long as the government continue to utilise these platforms, people will continuously be abreast with government policies which will in return promote trust for government.

Discussion of Findings

Analysis from the discussion revealed that most people of Owerri municipal have access to the mass media channels and they are highly exposed to the media contents. This implies that residents of Owerri municipal harness the various media platforms which include the radio, television, newspaper and even the social media handles of these platforms. This finding is in consonance with that of Chi-Horng, (2023) whose study explores "the influence of public perception of mass media usage and attitudes towards mass media news on altruistic behaviour". It found that media exposure, credibility, and social influence were critical factors that influenced individuals' perceptions of mass media news, with media exposure having a more significant influence. This study concluded that perceptions and attitudes were positively

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Conclusion

Amidst the controversies surrounding the media space it is indeed no doubt that the media play a vital role in shaping the opinion of the general public on government policy-making process and development agenda cannot be over emphasized.

Recommendations

In line with the results, the following recommendations are put forward

1. This study recommends that the public should continue to utilise these mass media platforms to stay abreast with government policies-making.
2. This study recommends that government at all levels should see the need to maximised social media platforms as a tool for mass mobilisation and public enlightenment.
3. This study therefore, recommend that these government policy-making decisions should be transmitted more even in local dialect to enable better understanding of these policies by people in rural and urban areas.

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