INFLUENCE OF NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS ON POLICY FORMULATION IN AKWA IBOM STATE

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ABSTRACT

The influence of editorials on policy formulation is one which needs to be constantly analysed. Where the media has the power to influence its environs, this influence can sometimes be subjective and self-serving. To this end this study was on the "influence of newspaper editorials on policy formulation in Akwaibom State". Anchored on the agenda setting theory of the press, this study adopted a survey research design. For the data collection the questionnaire severed as the instrument because it complements the research method adopted in this study. The population of this study was a total of 44respondents, which comprised of all senior officials of the State Government Ministry who occupy positions not less than that of an Assistant Director, involved in policy-making. Using a census of the total population, data collected for this study was analysed using table distribution and simple percentages. Findings from the study showed that media through editorials and other reports are actively involved in the monitoring of government policy and its effects on society and that policy makers sometimes result to the media to generate feedback on policies made within the state.

Keywords: I*nfluence, editorials, policy formulation, MDAs, government.*

Introduction

According to Ladipo (2018), the concept of MDAs - Ministries, Departments and Agencies is one of the most important ones in understanding how the government works. It is especially crucial for countries like Nigeria, Ghana or Malaysia, where MDAs are their own special entities. These Ministries, Departments, and Agencies in Nigeria are public organizations used by the government to bring their programmes and initiatives to fruition. It consists of thousands of public and civil employees whose sole task is to implement the policies adopted by the people in charge of the country. Thus, the responsibility for the well-being of the Nigerian population mainly lies on their shoulders. Bearing this in mind, it becomes necessary to understudy factors that influence this body. One of such factor is editorial.

An editorial is a corporate voice or position of a media organization on any given issue of public interest (Alozie, 2009). it is considered as a critical evaluation, interpretation and presentation of significant, contemporary events in such a way as to inform, educate, entertain and influence the reader Okoro and Agbo (2003,p. 125). Hoffman, (2007, p.113) defines editorial as "a statement of opinion from an editor or publisher about you and your business". In harmony with the above, Iyorkyaa (1996, p.14) defines editorial as a journalistic essay which attempts to: inform or explain; persuade or convince; and stimulate insight in an entertaining or humorous manner. Spencer, in Iyorkyaa (1996, p.14) viewed the subject matter as "a presentation of facts and opinion in concise, logical, pleasing order for the sake of entertaining or interpreting significant news in such a way that its importance to the average reader will be clear".

According to Duyile (2005, p. 63), editorials are the "opinion of the newspaper simply written for the understanding of readers, leading them to take decisions on the issues being discussed". Throwing more light on the issue of editorial, he explains that editorials are explanatory texts, the opinions of the newspaper on any topic. They are comment or an argument in support of a particular policy, an action, or an idea whether expressed or latent. Hence, editorials influences and addresses all issues. They stimulate debate and dialogue over policies. Where this is the case, it becomes pertinent to understudy the exact level of influence that these media sector holds on MDAs in Akwa Ibom State.

Statement of the problem

From time to time, the media makes suggestions to the government on the policies that should be formulated for the benefits of the citizens. The media tries to use its powerful tools to communicate to both the government and society on policies that promotes good governances. The mass media poises as a powerful tool of communication especially in policy formulation and adherence. It is used in positive ways to help promote these policies and dissolves policies that are harsh and unattainable.

Despite this progress, some scholars have argued that the media only promotes policy that affects them and not the public and that policy makers do not listen to media reportage before making policies. If this is the case, how then do media influence policy formulation? What roles do media play in formulation of government policies? To what extent do media influence government policies in a state? What factors influence the choice of media by the policy makers?

Research Questions

This study premises on the following research questions:

1. What is the level of editorial readership among policy makers?
2. What is the role of editorials in policy formulation
3. How does editorials readership among policy makers influence policy formulation?
4. To what extent does editorials readership among policy makers influence policy formulation?

Literature review

Relationship between editorials and government policy

Early discussions of the relationship between the mass media and public policy making centred on the idea that the mass media occupy a role of liaison between citizens and governments (Siebert et al.,1956). First, the media cover issues that are prioritized by governments and elites. Next, media representations of these issues stimulate public discussions that help to crystallize individual opinions on these matters. Finally, the media collect individual opinions to represent public opinion that policy makers rely on for feedback on their own performance while learning about issues that matter to the public. Later on, as research on the media-policy link became primarily the domain of agenda-setting research (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Researchers have come to realize that a direct, symbiotic link exists between the media and policy agendas. That is, policy makers tend to infer the public's stand on issues from the media agenda (Linsky, 1986).

Empirical studies

Babu, Aggarwal and Chen (2017) in their paper opines that news media do not only inform the public about policy changes; but also help to build public opinion with a serious potential to influence the policy-making process, especially during times of crisis or an emergency. During the global food price crisis of 2008, international and domestic press reported extensively on the crisis in the form of news reports, analyses, expert opinions, and interviews with key stakeholders.

In the paper, they compare media coverage by news publications in four developing countries Bangladesh, China, India, and Vietnam and explore its linkages with policy responses. Their discussion focuses on the role of media in the emergency policy-making process in selected countries during the time of the global food crisis from 2008 to 2012. Through this paper, they attempt to connect the media's role with empirical evidence from daily newspapers in study countries and the timing of policy making during the ensuing years of food price crisis.

More so, they draw comparative lessons from the role media played in stabilizing food prices. Political systems in the country, they argue, determine the extent to which media can influence policy making; identify policy problems and stakeholders during crisis; provide policy options to policy makers; and play the role of a policy evaluator. Their discussion proves useful for international and national policy-making bodies to understand media coverage during the crisis as well as inform media practitioners as to how their counterparts in different countries covered the crisis.

Aelst (2015) carried out a study in his book chapter titled, Media, political agendas and public policy. The study reviewed research on the influence of the media on legislation and public policy.

After reflecting on why politicians react to media coverage at all, the study mainly focuses on political agenda-setting, but also goes beyond this to come to a broader view on the role of the media in the policy process. In order to do so, the study takes a close look at how media define, frame and amplify issues or constrain the political agenda and how this affects political decision making. Aelst argues that the media link together relevant actors including the public and make it possible that they respond to each other on a limited number of core issues. In addition, the media have the ability to force politicians to react and take a position in such a way that they can accelerate or rather decelerate the policy process.

A further study by Srivastava (2009) discusses how media is involved in all stages of foreign policy formulation processes and that political leaders consider the media in its national and international aspects. Moreover, the paper argues that this double-edged media environment is considered mainly in the publication, or media management stage. The involvement of the media in this decision-making process is complex. This information is processed through various image components and then the policy or decision- formulating process is set in motion.

Of concern, media advisors and PR professionals participate in the process; officials consult with them and consider their advice. Past studies of foreign policy decision-making neglected to deal with this complex role of the media. They described the media for the decision-making process. Actual reality demonstrates that this perspective minimizes the place of the media and therefore it should be dealt theoretically as well as in applied research case studies using a more complex approach emphasizing the crucial role of the media in foreign policy.

The paper develops and presents a framework for the analysis of foreign policy decision making which tries to compensate for some of the flaws of existing models in the field, incorporating the complex processes of media input into decision-making, as well as reflecting the role of the press and TV in the formulation stage of policy-making.

Schulz (2013) in his article on Foreign policy processes in Media Journal; says the media have long played a minor role in the study of political communication. According to Schulz, there is a broad consensus that the media is the central mediating actor and primary conduit between political decision-makers and the public. However, the media's influence on foreign policy remains contingent across various processes and phases of foreign policy making; it is dynamic and multi-directional.

Yanovitzky (2002) study also supports the proposition that intensive periods of media attention to issues are instrumental in attracting policy attention to public problems that are low on policy-makers 'agendas while creating a sense of urgency among policy makers to generate immediate, short-term solutions to public problems'. The findings also suggest that this impact is likely to be contingent on several key factors. For one, the degree of the media-policy association seems to vary over the life course of the issue on the media agenda. The impact of media attention on policy making is strongest at the beginning of the media issue attention cycle. Once media attention decreases in intensity, related policy outputs decrease as well and gradually shift from ad hoc solutions to long-term solutions for the problem. Other key factors involve the specific characteristics of the issue at hand and particularly impinge on the likelihood that increased media attention to issues will actually result in policy actions rather than increased policy attention alone.

Considering that the public sphere is essential for the legitimacy of foreign policy making, there is a demand for further research on the media's performance in the making of foreign policy. Based on secondary research, this paper proposes an analytical framework for the systematic analysis

of media–foreign policy relations by integrating foreign-policy context conditions as a research variable. The framework is based on the assumption that the role of the media varies across diverse foreign policy contexts depending on the intensity of governmental involvement in foreign affairs. The intensity is distinguished according to three dimensions: no involvement, indirect involvement and direct involvement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory. Propounded in 1968 by McCombs and Shaw, this theory is of the view that the media may not tell us what to think about; but the media certainly do tell us what to think about. Thus, the Agenda Setting theory is premised on the assumption that the messages carried by the media can influence the actions of the media consumers.

The way the media shape messages to their readers, listeners or viewers determine how these people will see the world. Dominick (2005, p.475) quips that the Agenda Setting Theory literally gives the media audience a list of things that they must consider or act upon. He explains that the media achieve this in two ways: by *framing* their messages and by *agenda building*. By *framing,* the media tell the people how to think about an issue that is given. By agenda building, the media plays up newsworthy issue to arouse public attention and action. The Agenda Setting Theory as hereby used explains that the media influences government in policy making and how feedback from the media affects governmental policies. This is so because the media can pre-determine what issues are seen or regarded as important at any given time in society.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research method. For the purpose of this study the researchers deployed questionnaire for data collection because it complements the research method adopted in this study. The study involved Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) in Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria. The population of this study therefore comprised of all senior officials of the State Government Ministry who occupy positions not less than that of an Assistant Director, who were involved in policy-making. These include, Commissioners, Permanent Secretaries, Directors, Deputy Directors, Assistant Directors, General Managers and Directors-General available in the state secretariat. There are a total of twenty two ministries in Akwa Ibom state according to data from the state secretariat in the state. The study analysed opinion from both the commissioners and assistant director as they were the best to ascertain the effect of this editorials on the policies within the state. This made a total of 44 respondents. Data collected was analysed using the frequency distribution table and simple percentages.

Data presentation and discussion

After administering the questionnaire, only of 35 copies were duly filled. Some of the directors as at the time of this research were unavailable to respond to the questionnaire that was distributed. The analyses of the valid ones were done using the frequency distribution table, and Simple Percentages. Here under are the details of data analysis based on the research objectives/research questions. However, for the sake of comprehensibility, the data presentation and the discussion of relevant findings are merged together.

Table 1: Role of media in formulation of government policies and developmental programmes

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Media aids in setting of agenda for government policy formulation in a state.	Very Often	11	34.37
	Often	16	50
	Not Often	3	9.38
	Rare	2	6.25
Media serve as feedback mechanism that helps policy makers in policy formulation.	No	3	9.38
	Yes	20	62.5
	Sometimes	5	15.62
	Not sure	4	12.5

Source: (field, 2020)

The roles of media in formulation of government policies and developmental programmes as ever increasing is no longer a thing of debate, as Otugo et al (2015), found out in their study that 92% of their respondents claim the media has great influence over government policy formulation. This concurs with this study as 84.37% of the audience ascertain that media aids in setting of agenda for government policy formulation in a state. On the account of feedback, 62.5% affirms that the media serve as feedback mechanism that helps policy makers in policy formulation while 15.62% claim that they do but not always, 9.38% says they don't and12.5% of the respondent are uncertain. From the above analysis, it can therefore be suffice that the media feedback mechanism strengthens policy makers in decision-making. This goes in line with Naidoo (2011), who is of the opinion that the media promotes governmental policy formulation.

Table 2: Policy makers in the State Government consider media suggestions in policy-making

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Policy makers design schedules to monitor media reports that can help in policy formulation.	No	6	18.75
	Yes	19	59.38
	Sometimes	4	12.5
	Not sure	3	9.37
Policy makers keening follow media contents related to their job than those that are at variance with their department.	No	10	31.25
	Yes	15	46.88
	Sometimes	4	12.5
	Not sure	3	9.37

Source :(field, 2020)

Having established the fact that media plays a vital role in policy formulation; the next thing is to find out the attitudes and responsiveness of policy makers to suggestions made by the media. The table above, first, shows that policy makers design schedules to monitor media reports that can help in policy formulation. Secondly, this research found out that majority of the respondents pay keen attention to media contents related to their job than those that are at variance with their department was assessed. To this end, this work affirms with Tobi (2008), that policy maker's take meaning efforts to consider the opinion and suggestions of the media is policy formulation. This strategy places prominence on the media as it commands a high level of interactivity and individualization.

Table 3:   Extent to which media influence government policies in a state

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
How often do policy makers pay attention to media agitations on policy?	Never	4	12.5
	Sometimes	5	15.63
	Often	3	9.37
	Very often	20	62.5
What is the frequency at which policy maker pay attention to topical issues on the media?	Very large Extent	16	50
	Large extent	13	9.37
	Very little extent	0	0
	Little extent	3	5.63

Source :(field, 2020)

This table shows the relationship between the media and policy makers. From the above table, there seems to be a strong relationship the media and policy makers as most policy makers pay attention to issues postulated in the media. From the data above, the study reveals that media sets the agenda for the society by influencing policy making and formulation in a state. This further indicates that the media through editorials and other reports are actively involved in the monitoring of government policy and its effects on society. Policy makers also result to the media to generate feedback on policies made within the state as the media provides possible solution on policies to be made, corrected and established.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The media is a unique part of every society. As every society is unique so is the media. It is clear that the media and local media in particular, play a central role in resolving and setting agenda for which policies are made. Consequently, the government, policy makers, society and all other organisation including media agencies must all consider how to interact with the media on how to create policies that will accommodate everyone.

This will require more sensitivity and awareness on the part of the key media houses and journalists in the dimension of editorial writings and news publication. Hence this study recommends the following:

i. Media houses and journalists should take up the promotion of good policies especially ones that encourage participations and resolution.
ii. Journalists should harness the potentials of the social media to mobilise citizens to participate in policy promotion and diplomatic negations with the government and other societal stakeholders.
iii. Government and policy makers should ensure proper follow up on issues published by media bodies.

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