
MEDIA, THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GOVERNANCE: DOES MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL DECISIONS LEAD TO 'GOOD' GOVERNANCE?

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In this essay, Chloe Dawson provides an in-depth analysis of the media's role within the political economy. Dawson begins by discussing the hypodermic needle theory and agenda-setting theory as models for understanding the effects of media. Dawson then uses empirical studies involving US relief spending, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, and the UK MP expenses scandal to demonstrate the effects of media priming and framing. Throughout this essay, evidence is provided to support Dawson's final conclusion that the media plays a crucial role within the political economy in promoting good governance

Introduction

From the inception of the newspaper in the 1700s to the invention of the Internet, media has rapidly evolved into an instrumental feature of modern life. While a wide array of literature surrounding the significance of media in the political economy exists, Snyder & Strömberg (2008) describe how the "Empirical evidence of the effects of media coverage is scarce." This scarcity can be attributed to empirical challenges, most notably the endogeneity of media coverage to many outcome variables, and the requirement of exogenous variation to evaluate the impact of media (Snyder and Strömberg, 2008). However, despite this scarcity, the empirical and theoretical literature that does exist unequivocally concludes that media has a significant effect on the political economy, as media frequently shapes the agenda of public discourse.

'Good governance is defined explicitly by the United Nations, who declared that it must be accountable, effective, transparent and responsive, and must 'Assure that corruption is minimised.' (Sheng, 2009). The central focus of

Hypodermic Needle Theory

The hypodermic needle theory, a strong effects model, was the first model to conceptualise media effects - the theory argued that the effects of media were immediate and direct (Lim & Kim, 2007). This theory centred around the concept that mass media overpowered its audience who were ill-informed and easily influenced by media. Therefore, a direct and uniform effect of media on citizens existed, as citizens were identical and responded to content in identical manners. This theory clearly emphasised the significance of media in political decisions. The importance of public opinion meant politicians often directed policies towards favourable opinion, which according to this theory was in turn influenced by media. However, this theory is widely rejected today; media effects are no longer assumed uniform, as people discuss opinions and have some agency in deciding what to believe.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The strong effects framework fundamentally re-emerged from the 1970s. Modern strong effects frameworks account for individual differences and contextual factors influencing the impact of media exposure, which makes the framework more accurate than the original hypodermic theory. The 'agenda-setting' theory is prominent in the theoretical literature. McCombs (2007) explained this theory in the context of public agenda; due to constraints (often time-related), media directs attention to a few select topics regarded as 'newsworthy', and over time, these topics become a priority in public opinion. Media, therefore, determines which topics are deemed most important for any given day. While media does not necessarily tell viewers what to think, it does tell them what to think about. Media essentially weights information and helps direct public attention to particular issues, which in turn can set the tone for policy action and influence governance (Wolfe & Jones, 2013). This theory fundamentally relies on the fact that policymakers place great significance on public opinion as policymakers regard media coverage as an indication of public opinion and will therefore direct policy towards media-covered issues. Based on this theory, policymakers should direct more attention to events extensively covered by media and hence more known to the public. However, conclusions regarding media's influence on governance remain somewhat ambiguous utilising this theoretical framework. The Agenda-Setting theory is empirically supported by Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) and Durante and Zhuravskaya (2016).

According to the theory of agenda-setting, disasters covered in media, and hence more prominent to the public, should receive more attention from the government than those with less coverage. Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) provided empirical evidence to justify the theoretical literature for agenda-setting by analysing U.S. relief for natural disasters. The endogeneity of news coverage posed an obstacle for Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) as news coverage and relief could be correlated. To overcome this challenge, Eisensee and

and Strömberg (2007) as news coverage and relief could be correlated. To overcome this challenge, Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) utilised two instruments for the availability of newsworthy material. Firstly, the dates of the Olympic Games - a significant media event uncorrelated with politics - and secondly average daily news pressure (the median number of minutes the top three stories in a day received in a broadcast, averaged over forty days following a disaster). The negative correlation between news pressure and relief provision depicted how a disaster was less likely to receive U.S. relief when there were many other important events in the media. This demonstrates the importance of media agenda-setting in political decisions - the amount of news coverage a disaster received was fundamental in U.S. policymakers' decision to grant relief. This also illustrates the significance policymakers place on public opinion, as political decisions are based upon the extent to which voters are aware of a disaster.

Durante and Zhuravskaya's (2016) analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also demonstrates the importance of media agenda-setting in political decisions. As Israel sought to minimise negative publicity due to concern about global opinion, Israel could utilise media agenda-setting to their advantage. At times when there were many important events, U.S. media should place less weight on Israeli attacks in Palestine and hence negative publicity for Israel should be minimised. Durante and Zhuravskaya (2016) supported this prediction with empirical evidence. Durante and Zhuravskaya (2016) overcame empirical challenges related to the endogeneity of media by utilising instruments for 'news pressure' achieved through the creation of a list of pre-determined large events, both political and sports, expected to dominate U.S. media. These pre-determined events were uncorrelated with Israeli attacks and strongly related to U.S. news pressure. With exogenous variation in news pressure caused by these events, the far-reaching impact of media and agenda-setting on political decisions could be illustrated. Durante and Zhuravskaya's (2016) find that news pressure had a significant effect on both the timing and severity of Israeli attacks. Israel seemingly strategically timed attacks - particularly those with many casualties - when U.S. media was distracted in order to limit news coverage of these attacks and in turn, minimise negative public opinion. This illustrates the importance of media on all political decisions, even those related to military action. However, one must question the external validity of this study, as it ultimately depicts a very unique conflict.

The previously discussed studies lead to questions regarding good governance which must be addressed. Should U.S. disaster relief not be awarded solely based on severity? Results of Eisensee and Strömberg's (2007) study are open to interpretation. On one hand, the U.N (Sheng, 2009) emphasised the importance of, "Producing results that meet the needs of society," in good governance - media allows U.S. policymakers to provide relief to disasters most important to the U.S. public. However, one must consider the international responsibilities of government. Shouldn't the US government grant relief to disasters most in need of aid, rather than those deemed most important by

media? The subjectivity of these questions leads one to conclude that these studies support the role of media in ensuring good domestic governance but cannot advocate for the media's role in producing good international governance. Moreover, Durante and Zhuravskaya's (2016) suggest that media may actually reduce accountability as Israel can escape negative publicity by strategically timing attacks. On the whole, this analysis is incorrect. The absence of media would undoubtedly result in more frequent attacks, as all negative publicity would be eradicated and hence, without media accountability would be reduced. Therefore, we can still confidently conclude from Durante and Zhuravskaya's (2016) study that media does lead to good governance as overall it enhances accountability which is a key feature of good governance.

Media Priming

The concept of 'media priming' is crucial in explaining media's impact on political decisions. Rokos-Ewolsen and Carepentier (2002) explain how media priming is the impact that the content of media exerts on actions and judgements related to the content discussed. Priming is particularly relevant when assessing media's impact on the public judgement of politicians. Priming and agenda-setting are significantly intertwined and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) described how 'By making some issues more salient (agenda setting), media can shape political considerations people take into account when making judgements about political candidates (priming).' Therefore, issues that are extensively covered by media are weighted more heavily by citizens and utilised as a standard to evaluate or make judgements on politicians. Media priming, together with agenda-setting, impacts voters' judgements which influences election outcomes - which in turn impacts politicians' behaviour and hence, influences governance.

The UK MP's expenses scandal demonstrates the impact of media priming in political behaviour. Media priming means that issues covered extensively by media will strongly influence voting decisions. In the case of widespread corruption, extensive media coverage of an MP's misappropriation should result in punishment by voters in elections, and if politicians anticipate loss at the next election, they may choose to retire or resign. Larcinese and Sircar (2012) exploited the following features of the expenses scandal to conduct their analysis: MPs operate under identical rules, there are explicit measures of corruption as the Legg Report published monetary measures of each MP's misappropriation, and the crisis' unexpected nature (details were leaked by a 'mole', consequently MPs did not anticipate that their actions would be circulated in media). Empirical challenges related to difficulties measuring media coverage were apparent in this study. Larcinese and Sircar (2012) utilised two variables to measure media surveillance of each MP involvement. Firstly the number of newspaper articles an MP's name appeared beside the word 'expenses' in three months following the scandal, and secondly monetary measures of misappropriation determined by Legg Report. The importance of media priming in political decisions regarding politicians' behaviour was clear; a positive

correlation between news coverage of the scandal and the probability an MP left parliament and a positive correlation between news coverage and the decision of an MP to retire was found. Both of these correlations can be attributed to extensive news coverage leading to anticipation of election defeat by candidates.

Would MPs have misappropriated funds had they known their actions would be circulated in media? Most likely not. Media can therefore deter corruption by increasing accountability, and, given the positive correlation between media coverage and retirement, we witness how media can help remove corrupt politicians from power. According to the U.N. (Sheng, 2009), 'Accountability is a key requirement of good governance,' and, corruption must be minimised for good governance. Also, the necessity of media in providing transparency of the government is demonstrated here. The U.N. (Sheng, 2009) states that information must be 'freely available'. In the case of the MP expenses scandal, without media, voters would have been unaware of MP's involvement in the scandal and transparency of the government would have been severely reduced.

Media Framing

The concept of media framing is instrumental in explaining media's impact on policy. Media framing refers to the ability of media to choose words or images to influence how the public interpret content (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Tewksbury & Scheufele (2009) explain how media framing can exert a significant influence on an audience's beliefs, behaviour and attitude. Media framing can alter the way citizens interpret political decisions, which shifts political opinion which in turn impacts policy decisions. Media framing can also be advantageous to politicians, particularly when media outlets are dependent on financial aid, and the prospect of utilising media framing for political advantage can influence political decisions.

Strömberg (2004) depicted the effect of framing on political decisions, notably the allocation of public spending, and demonstrated how media framing can result in better governance. The introduction of radio offered an ideal setting to study media and public spending. Exogenous geographical variation in media was exploited, as radio access was uneven across the United States, and the introduction of radio coincided with the launch of the New Deal. As radio implementation was at the discretion of the governor of a county, and hence radio relied on governors for funding, radio helped governors by reporting successful work to enhance their popularity. The prospect of framing offered incentives to governors to implement better policies for their electorate.

To overcome issues of endogeneity of radio access, Strömberg (2004) utilised two instrumental variables for the share of households with radios; firstly, ground conductivity (the ability of radio waves to travel through the ground) and secondly, woodland (the share of a county's land that was woodland,

as physical obstacles altered the ability of transmissions to travel through air). Both of these instruments were correlated with access to radios, but exogenous to relief spending (Strömberg, 2004). Strömberg (2004) supports the theoretical literature with empirical evidence demonstrating the importance of media framing in political decisions; a positive correlation between radio ownership and relief spending for a county existed. This depicts how politicians who had the opportunity to utilise media framing to their advantage, i.e., those with greater radio access in their county, worked harder and implemented better policies. Therefore, as media can incentivise officials to work harder and produce better policies, leading to better outcomes for citizens, this study depicts how media results in better governance. Without media accountability, the responsiveness and effectiveness of the government would be reduced.

Opposing Evidence

However, to form a measured conclusion, we must address the rare situations in which media does not lead to good governance. Yanagizawa-Droft (2012) depicted the dangerous potential of media through a study of the Rwandan genocide, where media, specifically the RTLM radio, was utilised as a propaganda medium. When available for propaganda purposes, media can impact political decisions related to minorities, in this case, state attacks as RTLM radio encouraged violence against the Tutsi minority. The significant impact of media on political decisions regarding violence and minority attacks was evident. However, one must critique this study as it did not account for factors such as historical ethnic animosity or civil war, which may have influenced findings. Regardless, collective violence was significantly increasing in radio coverage, and ten per cent of the killings can be attributed to RTLM broadcasts (Yanagizawa-Droft's, 2012). Clearly, media unequivocally did not lead to good governance in this case. As the U.N (Sheng, 2009) explained good governance requires, "Full protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities." The impact of media on political decisions can, therefore, given the correct setting, be catastrophic. However, while such cases are key to assessing media's influence on policy, it must be noted that this case is largely unique to this situation, and similar scenarios are at best uncommon.

Conclusion

The significant impact of media on political decisions has been demonstrated throughout this paper, and a clear analysis of the mechanisms through which media impacts political decisions has been shown. Media affects political decisions of all types - those related to politicians' retirement and resignation, strategic military attacks, public spending, international relief and even state-sponsored mass murder. The relationship between media and good governance is perhaps more subjective; however, this paper has demonstrated that on the whole, media does lead to good governance and is a necessary element of society. It has been illustrated how media reduces corruption, removes

corrupt officials, increases accountability and transparency, and results in policies that enhance the welfare of citizens. In conclusion, media helps promote good governance and is, therefore, a crucial part of the political economy.

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