

The Role of Media in Policy Formulation and Implementation In Uganda: Challenges And Way Forward

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ABSTRACT:- The role of media in shaping the nation's policy processes is uncontested. As the "fourth estate", media provides the public with the shock absorber position on the state procedures by as acting as the watchdog for the masses. Outside the nutshell, not at all times does the media (both public & private) act in good faith towards the public and this brings contestation to the public on whose news to watch between the two players. As the contestation continues, technology has greatly disrupted the user consumption of news by availing social media platforms that are online enabled and this has made the traditional platforms out fashioned in the information age. Therefore, this paper discusses ways through which the media can ably retain diverse consumers, explains challenges facing the media sector and points out solutions and way forward for both the state and media entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Media, Policy formulation, Policy implementation, private V^s public media and social media.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current information age, media is used to delineate both the traditional media channels (Press, Radio & TV) and communication and technology enabled platforms (Mobile Phones, Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Youtube).

Traditionally, the roles of media include; (1) providing information regarding external environment on local, regional and international levels, (2) leading locals on a right and correct path, (3) wholesome entertainment (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2020).

Media is a powerful tool in mending government policies in establishing democratic society. Although it doesn't own the authority to create policies, it plays an instrumental role in exercising decisive influence over the general public policy priorities. Mass media also plays a critical role in creating public policies by providing government and policy makers with useful information and people's sentiments through public opinion broadcast. This is because, media points out and broadcasts various public issues by encouraging citizens to raise their voices. This eventually helps policy makers to embed public concerns in the policy framework which best shapes the quality of final draft (Kamran, 2020).

As a watchdog for the public on government operations, the media keeps surveillance on how policies are implemented and this achieves: accountability, transparency, awareness and sensitization, and communication. This helps in exposing of unfit practices like corruption and this helps in checking government performance which in turn increases development in the country. Mass media helps to efficiently mobilize people regarding public interests like health, education and economic environment by promoting public participation in finding solutions to the available challenges through building public opinion leading to effective public policies.

The policy formulation process has 5 stages including;

1. Agenda setting
2. Formulation
3. Legitimization and adoption
4. Implementation
5. Evaluation

Though the media doesn't necessarily influence all the stages of policy making either directly or indirectly, it exerts pressure depending regarding the policy and as a matter of fact, many policies have been recalled even before being tabled in parliament due to media reports (Hafidz et al, 2021)

As an actor in policy cycle towards reaching and influencing a wide range of people, the media is central to inform masses though at times it tends to amplify such information in any cases they side with the government or the public and this brings the contestation between diverse players. As a matter of fact, the traditional media because of its narrow reach and delayed availability has been greatly swallowed by social media since its fast and covers the entire world in just seconds nonetheless it's hard to control and regulate due to lack of professionalism and this has increased greater chances of fake or distorting news.

The media has strong position to influence political elites and policy makers directly since public opinion is heavily influenced by exposure to elite and media disclosure. Policy matters are subsequently affected by media discourses hence a reciprocal relationship between the two (political elites and policy makers).

As a matter of fact, the role of press in society mainly in developing countries has advanced during government campaigns: (a) advocacy of a cooperative role for the press in nation building and development, (b) role of press as a catalyst for social and political change. This has positioned the press in society as a fundamental organ that educates instead of entertaining, maintains social stability than racial harmony and aids in economic development and nation building (Baratuaj & Aravindh, 2016).

BACKGROUND

The public's expectations of the media industry have shifted greatly with the influx of technology. This growth in technology has provided more access to both live and on-demand coverage. Audiences are now consuming media and news, not just on their TV, but on all devices and platforms in a variety of formats.

As a result, the challenges of mass media are difficult to downplay. The media is tasked with creating various forms of content. Media content needs to be strategically built to be consumed differently based on the device the viewer is watching it on. Content which works well in one format, such as long-form for television or Netflix, doesn't necessarily work well on mobile or social where users expect more snackable content. Becoming mobile and social friendly is now a necessity to stay competitive and keep viewership strong.

Additionally, from a news media perspective, the public now expects constant coverage and news updates in real time. Media outlets therefore need to provide around the clock coverage and have professionals manning the news desk at all times. The media is therefore tasked with providing access to important news

information and analysis about the world, as well as top entertainment content, quickly and effortlessly for viewers, presenting media professionals with an array of challenges.

As a matter of concern, there's always a contestation amongst the public on which news to look out for which brings a contestation regarding trust between public owned and private media outlets in society. Understandably, public media tends to side with state in form and substance while private owned media sides with citizens to actively intervene in the competition for shaping public opinion (Cerbino & Belotti, 2020). In turn of events, there has been a convergence between both private and public media outlets in distribution, production and print because of bad economic times in a shared cost arrangement and this has reduced the variety of voices expected from press systems. This has lessened the sheer number of independent and competitive players in the market (Jackson & Mary, 2020).

The public media has been used to carryout state propagandas and at many times trying as much as possible to suppress opposition opinions by denying them presence and fair representation in cases of building points of view. This has caused much resentment from the public to focus on private media which in many cases is balanced. At times of low political sophistication, illiberal attitudes and support for incumbent are associated with greater relative trust in government media from the citizens (Mohler & Sighn, 2011). This happens where the policies and debates are not necessarily power centric that the state can be much interested.

The private media is credited for promoting irrelevant broadcast that focus natives on non-essential issues especially live broadcasts, entertainment programs and sponsored adverts that are serving their sponsor's interests than the public due to over reliance on sponsorship funding. That has created a vacuum in sensitive areas like agriculture, education and entrepreneurship which are critical for national development. This has made the public to rely on public Medias for empowerment craft that educates them to better their lives. As a point of emphasis, private media houses can hardly air un sponsored programs for a long time due to their money centered mindset.

This is because, the extent of media basically depends on two variable: the mobilizing character of government and the size of the advertising market. Therefore, media bias is greater where the state ownership of the media more likely when the need for social mobilization is large. On the other hand, large advertising market reduces media bias in both state and private media, but increases the incentive for government to nationalize the media (Scott & Konstantin, 2008).

The desire for private media to attract advertising sponsorship from both government and private companies has resulted into "puppet situation" where wrong doings are not exposed due to fear to lose out on the advertisement fees which ideally runs private Medias. This has eventually made it difficult for the private press to rigorously carry out their watchdog roles as well as cross checking both government and private companies' policy processes.

As a result, the general public has turned to online platforms (bloggers) as the source of dependable, reliable and trusted sources of information as well as sources of breaking news. As a result, social media has changed historical media policy making and implementation trends because of limited capacity with exploration of greater variety of outlets, changing technology trends and less control by government (Crossman, 2020). This is evidenced in Uganda where the state closed Facebook for 2 years since 2021 election but the masses still accesses it by leveraging of the usage of VPN where the government has no control unlike with media houses which they have closed over and again in cases of state repression (BBC, 2021). Apparently, the government instituted social media tax internet tax in order to limit social media usage in the country. (The Guardian, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2018)

Private media houses face insoluble hindrances partly because, they have got to be trusted by the masses to be influential and profitable and this propagates democratic environment which is not always the case especially in Africa and developing countries. This has greatly created the westernization of programing on such stations which is aimed at telecasting and publishing foreign content due to strings attached aid and pressure from foreign powers in order to address their interests (Jimmy, 2015). Therefore, for Africa as a continent to realize its regional integration, news content must be designed by Africans for Africa environment and this calls for a paradigm shift from media managers and practitioners to focus their interests on addressing native issues (Didiugwu, 2013).

II. METHODOLOGY

The paper focused on reviewing of relevant secondary documents and literature basically from low developed countries where the functionality of Media is greatly influenced by state.

III. CHALLENGES FACING MEDIA AND WAY FORWARDS

3.1 Challenges

Lack of professionalism. The media sector has been infiltrated by majority of non-journalists which has made it complicated to exercise lawfully presentation and deliberation. This has increased defamation tendencies mostly in entertainment and showbiz programs which has in turn led to litigation of the media houses leading to suspension of such programs and presenters. This is attributed to media tendencies to exaggerate issues in order to attract more audience or advertisements. Of course, media outlets need a certain level of market and commercial orientation, and should take into consideration that audiences also like to be entertained (Swiss Agency for Development, 2020).

Lack of independence. The media sector has played partial position because of economic environment especially recently with social media pressure where consumer trends have drastically changed and the only way of survival is to rely on state and advertisement as evidenced in countries where democracy levels are low. This is common especially in times of campaigns and violent conflict. In such cases, the media can have a tendency towards nationalist or partial coverage and/or are to take sides for example, where the media supports a given candidate in an election, opinion polls are positioned to the very candidate with no support data.

Media capture. Governments tend to control media reporting especially where human rights are violated, corruption tendencies are high and general democracy levels are wanting in order to protect its image before the world. Ultimately majority of the media outlets are infiltrated by spies who report to government in case serious stories are under investigation or already printed.

Any support to independent media systems might affect the interests of powerful elites. Some media outlets or organizations are even directly abused by their owners for political or business objectives. This has seen the state outs shadow the opposition in visibility and presence by technically dominating debates, refusing opposition to appear of media platforms or even switch such media stations off in case the opposition figures are hosted.

Imbalance/ dominion of debates. The new approach facing media power houses is the imbalance of debates where the composition is mostly 80:10:10 for government and opposition and civil society respectively. That way, the government agents dominate all programs due to higher numbers than opposition and to make matters worse in most cases, the government agents are prior given topical discussion set up while the opposition and civil society are left to urge and reason onset with the intention of tainting a picture that the government agents are all round knowledgeable than their counterparts. This has made it hard for the media for provide balanced coverage and visibility at all times.

Security and safety of journalists. Having experienced journalists and panelists is one thing while ensuring their safety another. In most cases, many such media personalities have been killed or their lives threatened in countries where the level of press freedom is so low and the government is restrictive that any negative comments from the media propagates public information about bad state wrong doings. This makes journalism complicated leaving propaganda as the only way (Grossman , 2022).

Political ownership of private media. Some media houses are owned by politicians and this is evident in Uganda. This makes it difficult to avail balanced content and more so host panelists with diverse opinions than the owner. Consequently, such stations are not only influenced but propagandists who all the time aim at pushing and covering government scandals (Minnie, 2007).

Financial challenges. These include high cost to procure high end equipment in this era of changing technology trends, limitation on foreign ownership and absence of media development funds to assist media entrepreneurs. This has made it complicated for community media houses which has forced majority to close. For example in Uganda, media outlets like Entail, Rumor and WBS TV are no more. This is worsened by poor pay of staff that leads to poaching of staff, massive layoff and litigations.

IV. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

Training staff on ethics and technical aspects. There is a great need for media houses and the sector at large to maximize training of their staff on matters of ethics and technical expertise so as to benefit on standard performance, this will reduce on litigation levels associated with defamation as well as exaggeration of issues.

Support journalism school. The government, donors and civil society organizations should empower journalism school to equip students with requisite knowledge especially research and investigative journalism so that only reliable news are presented to the masses. This will increase public trust in the media profession.

Business management and sustainability. Media houses need to be trained on how to develop business plans in order to improve the overall performance of the companies. This includes training in new technology for example real time broadcasting. This improves efficiency and reliability.

Support from political will. The political will should provide the media their constitutional rights to exercise their oversight role in the befitting environment so that fairness is exercised. This includes training security operatives on the safety of journalists.

The media fraternity should form a uniting association. This will help them to safeguard their member's interests especially during hard time. In order to survive in a small market in a country where the state newspaper is the major competitor, small private media houses can establish consortia, pooling resources and negotiating collectively. This helps in cost reduction and safeguarding sector interests from state and donors infiltration.

Obtaining hybrid model. The media houses needs to operative a combination of models in order to satisfy diverse consumer trends. For example, Facebook live news, you tube can easily satisfy working class who barely have little or no time to watch TV but have access to smart phones and internet. This makes consumption easier and timely. Hybrid models can combine private ownership with substantial community involvement

Managing competition. The media industry must act quickly and avail user friendly experiences so as to beat competition. This includes up to dated coverage, fashionable content and easy to use. This is well achieved by Netflix which has changed the rules of the game due to easy usability combined with unique content. To stay relevant, news outlets and media entertainment companies must continue to innovate and personalize their offerings to their viewers. They need to have clear social media and strategies.

Building trust. Media houses are bound to be trustworthy only if they want to capture a massive attention. With the influx of fake media and fake news available and making headlines, media outlets must also look to establish credibility with viewers. Misreporting the facts or misrepresenting what was said can be the end to a reporter's career and hurt the network's credibility overall. With politics more divisive than ever, networks need to be especially cautious and do everything possible to gain public trust and keep it for long term sustainability. This divisiveness has also led to unwavering followings, with viewers on the far-right and far-left remaining allegiant to the networks and news coverage that feeds into their personal values and political beliefs. Individuals who watch NBC, CNN and Fox News are likely choosing their preferred network based on its coverage and sticking with it. It's harder than ever to gain new viewership or pull someone over from one network to another (Chazzan, 2023).

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