

OPINION OF POLICY MAKERS AND JOURNALISTS ON THE ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS IN PUBLIC POLICY MAKING IN PUNJAB

**Muhammad Usman Khan*

Abstract

This paper looks at the role of newspapers (print media) in public policy making in Punjab which is the most populous province of Pakistan. Public policy guidelines come out as an important preliminary point for setting the agenda of the government for the development of economic and social sector, therefore in what way the newspapers sway the process of public policy making is the query because they offer a medium through which politicians and government officials communicate their promises and intentions and get the feedback from the public. In view of this role of newspapers, interviews of policy makers and journalists are carried out in this study. The research questions for this study are 1) 'Do newspapers influence public policy making in Punjab?' and 2) 'Do newspapers act as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues in Punjab? The results of this study claim that newspapers do act as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues and influence public policy making in Punjab.

Keywords: Punjab, public policy, newspapers, policy makers, journalists, government

Introduction

The public policy making process has become multifaceted especially in this information age with the growing number of stakeholders becoming aware of their right to take part in the policy making process. For every policy choice the fundamental necessity is the availability of facts and information concerning the matter to be addressed. The policy makers are at advantage of having right to use classified and unclassified documents but they still have the need of feedback from other stakeholders particularly the general public. The general public being the principal stakeholder in any public policy decision lacks information and comprehension regarding the public policy issues. The media has a critical role in providing that information and comprehension to the general public in a manner which is effortlessly absorbed by them and this is done by providing all viewpoints concerning a particular public policy issue. Likewise media gives feedback of the general public to the policymakers and if policymakers act in response to the public and the public responds to the

** Public Policy and Media Researcher, School of Media and Mass Communication, Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan*

media then understanding the degree and nature of media's sway on public opinion is very important. The role of the media in determining public view and opinions concerning public policy issues which obviously influence policymaking needs to be investigated particularly in a developing country like Pakistan which faces massive challenges in the governance arena.

Newspapers are an important part of mass media, this study explores the role of newspapers in the public policy making in Punjab which is the most densely inhabited province of Pakistan, with roughly 56% of the country's total population (Government of Punjab, 2010). Punjab is the most developed and affluent province if compared with other provinces of Pakistan. Punjab's capital Lahore is considered to be the hub of political, economic, cultural and administrative activities. Punjab is the largest contributor to the national economy of Pakistan; its share in Pakistan's GDP was 59% as of 2010 (Government of Punjab, 2010). In particular it is central in the service & agriculture sectors of the Pakistani economy and is also recognized as the bread basket of the country as agriculture is the most significant sector of its economy which even supplies raw material for country's main exporting sector; textile. Being the most populace province it has large pool of semi-skilled and skilled manpower. Punjab's education and health sectors are more developed than other provinces (Government of Punjab, 2010). Due to the passage of Eighteenth Amendment in the Pakistani constitution, provinces have become more autonomous in legislation and public policy making particularly in social sector, therefore the public policy making process in Punjab has become more demanding. The chief minister being the head of the provincial government governs the province with the aid of his cabinet and the provincial bureaucracy. According to the constitution, the provincial governor is the representative of the federation and the provincial assembly legislates on the provincial subjects.

Literature Review

The news media's agenda-setting sway is not restricted to the preliminary stage of fixating public notice on an overt subject matter. The media also affects the subsequent stage in the course of communication, our indulgence and standpoint on the matters in the news. The media coverage of subject's facets and importance on these

various facets makes a substantial distinction in how public categorize that predicament. As a result media's potential to affect public opinion turns out to be very distinctive. Newspapers offer quite a few clues about the salience of the subjects in the daily news – major story on first page; added front page presentation, full-size captions, etc. Thus, the news media for public's contemplation could set the agenda (McCombs, 2002). There are a number of prevailing and dominant lobbies in the developed as well as in the developing world who manipulate the media through their economic clout in order to use media in swaying government policies in their support. This could be explicated by the theory of political economy of mass media which states powerful group, individuals, multinationals, establishment etc. use media to advance their political and economic goals, aims and objectives (McQuail, 2005). Similarly, those working in the media are able to mold public opinion which results in swaying public policy by giving importance to one specific issue and paying no attention to the other, this could be explained by the agenda setting theory which states that the news media have a huge sway on audiences by their selection of what stories to regard as newsworthy and how much importance and space to give them (McQuail, 2005).

People, who have the pattern of watching more TV news, reading more newspapers, using the net, and paying attention to campaigns, are more knowledgeable, believing the government and giving their inputs. The proof enthusiastically supports that the public is not just compliantly responding to the political communication being offered to them, in an unassuming stimulus-response blueprint but as a standby they are critically and vigorously scrutinizing, throwing away and taking into consideration the information being offered to them (Norris, 2000). A media organization could be picky in what subjects it covers, what aspects of the issues it takes account of or omits, in what manners facts are presented and in what way they are remarked, this all covers issue bias, facts bias, framing and ideological stand bias. The question is “can news make policy?” this means that by printing a news story could a news editor sway government policy? Such actions of the media organizations could be best explained by agenda setting theory, both media reporting and policy may well be driven by political agendas (Pratt and Stromberg, 2010). Printed newspapers are attributed to increase the

range of public matters, events and concerns their readers are mindful of. The style in which printed newspapers are presented is considered to allure readers into reading the substance of the newspaper as they might not have been engrossed before (Schönbach, de Waal and Lauf, 2005). Public policy making is not plainly a technical undertaking of government but it is a comprehensive interactive course which is influenced by many sorts of socio-political, economic and other environmental factors. These environmental factors that shape the policy outline lead to the peculiarity in policies and sway the yield and impact. Owing to the incidental variances, public policies for instance economic policy of the developed world noticeably differ from those of the developing world (Osman, 2002).

In Pakistan the process of policy making is so far not deep-rooted and institutionalized, a bit it is 'politicized' and 'bureaucratized' missing rules, principles and standard actions for policy blueprint and formulation. Groups entailing president, prime minister, cabinet, bureaucracy, courts, media, military, business elite and donors influence and affect policy-making in Pakistan. When there is a change in the government most of its policies are discarded, therefore fail to realize declared aims which lead to timidity in the market. Regarding policies in Pakistan there is a lack of purpose, meaning and sense of direction. (Waheed, 2001). Upright policy (economic, education, health etc.) entails those who are outside the government in policy making process. This includes inviting those who are the relevant stakeholders of the policy, outside experts, and individuals who are to put into practice the policy. Media is an apparatus which articulates the stance of stakeholders on any given policy issue (Curtin, 2000). The media has a dual role as a conduit for Government's stance and a primary opinion maker. Media's discourse along with Government's own use of verbal communication which is judgmental becomes a part of the political and media message (Mulvey, 2010). Generally five major contributors could be identified in decision-making on important policies in any market economy; which are (1) Bureaucrats, (2) political parties, (3) pressure or special interest groups (4) government ministers and (5) the head of Government (Khan, 2003). In any egalitarian system such as American government, communication takes place to carry out the information requirements of a

democracy, to support people to make erudite choices, and to deliver a mechanism for accountability of public agencies (Horsley et al, 2010).

Research Methodology

Research Questions

RQ1 Do newspapers influence public policy making in Punjab?

RQ2 Do newspapers act as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues in Punjab?

Qualitative technique of in-depth interviews was used to probe not just what, where, when but most notably why and how newspapers impact policy making in Punjab. For this reason, smaller but focused samples were required, rather than large samples. Qualitative methods have the benefit of permitting more diversity in responses as well as the ability to adapt to new developments or issues throughout the research process itself. Interviews were conducted to gather data by questioning the sample.

Sampling

Twenty policy makers concerned with economic, education and health sectors in Punjab and five journalists (media professionals) were selected by using purposive sampling technique.

Following is the list of twenty policy makers interviewed for this study. These policy makers have worked or are working in the health, education, economic, finance, planning and development sector of the Government of the Punjab.

1. Mr. Junaaid Iqbal Chaudhary (Respondent 1)
Designation: Former Secretary, Government of Punjab.
2. Mr. Shahid Khan (Respondent 2)
Designation: Former Secretary, Government of Punjab.
3. Mr. Shafiq Abbasi (Respondent 3)
Designation: Former Secretary, Government of Punjab
4. Mr. Bashir Malik (Respondent 4)
Designation: (Former) Deputy Director, Agriculture Department, Govt. of Punjab
5. Mr. Anwer Syed (Respondent 5)
Designation: Former Secretary, Government of Punjab
6. Mr. Shahid Rashid (Respondent 6)
Designation: Former Secretary Health, Government of Punjab
7. Mr. Muhammad Aslam (Respondent 7)

- Designation: Secretary Schools Education, Government of Punjab
8. Mr. Tariq Amin (Respondent 8)
Designation: (Former) Deputy Director Education, Government of Punjab.
 9. Mr. Zeeshan Anjum (Respondent 9)
Designation: Former Deputy Director Health, Gov. of Punjab
 10. Mr. Zia Khan (Respondent 10)
Designation: Former Member Punjab Public Service Commission
 11. Mr. Khalid (Respondent 11)
Designation: Chief Research and Development, Planning and Development Board Punjab
 12. Dr. Mohsin (Respondent 12)
Designation: Deputy Secretary Health
 13. Mr. Nazar Mehmood (Respondent 13)
Designation: Health Standardization Section
 14. Mr. Sohail Raza (Respondent 14)
Designation: Deputy Director Punjab Education Sector Reform Program
 15. Mr. Ziaghab Abbas (Respondent 15)
Designation: Deputy Secretary Finance
 16. Dr. Shahid Ameen (Respondent 16)
Designation: Deputy Secretary Health
 17. Mr. Salman Ali (Respondent 17)
Designation: Deputy Director Monitoring and Evaluation, Punjab Education Sector Reform Program
 18. Mr. Rana Ubaid (Respondent 18)
Designation: Deputy Director Punjab, Punjab Education Sector Reform Program
 19. Mr. Nisar Qamar (Respondent 19)
Designation: Director Finance (DG) Chief Minister's Secretariat Punjab.
 20. Mr. Muhammad Ali Ammer (Respondent 20)
Designation: Deputy Secretary Chief Minister's Secretariat

Following is the list of the journalists (media professionals) interviewed for this study:

1. Mr. Najam ud din (Respondent 21)
Designation (current or former): Editor (Content Quality)

- Name of the Organization (newspaper): Daily Times
2. Mr. Wajahat Masood (Respondent 22)
Designation: Former Editor
Name of the Organization: The News, Daily Mashriq, Weekly Hum Shehri
 3. Mr. Shabbir Sarwer (Respondent 23)
Designation: Reporter, City News Editor
Name of the Organization: The Post and The sun
 4. Mr. Zaman Khan (Respondent 24)
Designation: (current or former): Bureau Chief
Name of the Organization: The Muslim, Frontier Post, The News
 5. Mr. Hussain Naqi (Respondent 25)
Designation: (current or former): Editor
Name of the Organization: The News, Lahore

Following are the questions asked from the policy makers:

1. How public policy is made in Punjab?
2. Are newspapers a source of information about public demands for policy makers in Punjab, please explain?
3. Are newspapers a tool to gain public support for public policy in Punjab, please explain?
4. What are the challenges faced by policy makers in Punjab while dealing with a newspaper which is critical of government policies, please explain?
5. Are Urdu newspapers more influential than English newspapers in shaping public opinion about Punjab government's policies, please explain?
6. Do you think in a democracy, a free media is essential for framing transparent public policy, please explain?

Following are the questions asked from Journalists (media professionals):

1. How public policy is made in Punjab?
2. Are newspapers a source of information about public demands for policy makers in Punjab, please explain?
3. Are newspapers a tool to gain public support for public policy in Punjab, please explain?
4. Do you think newspapers should provide guidance to the Punjab government for formation of public policy, please explain?

5. Are Urdu newspapers more influential in shaping public opinion about Punjab government's policies, please explain?
6. Do you think newspapers provide adequate space for readers feedback on public policy issues in Punjab, please explain?

Research Questions

After the analyses based on the responses of the policy makers in Punjab and Journalists (media professionals); let us try to answer the 'Research Questions' of this study:

RQ1: Do newspapers influence public policy making in Punjab?

Newspapers play an important role in giving prominence to many public issues. Respondent 10 said that "newspapers highlight society's problem and issues which come into government's notice. If the government is serious in addressing public issues then newspapers are a constructive source. Whether bureaucracy takes them seriously or not still newspapers keep on highlighting the issues", Respondent 4 agrees with Respondent 10. Respondent 11 said that "newspapers have a role of providing information. In every government department, newspapers' clippings are recorded and given to the departmental head. The policy makers take a look at what news is important and relevant to their department which includes public grievances. All the latest news comes from the press and all high officials read them specially the page where the in-depth analysis of various issues is published." Respondent 16 said that "newspapers are in every office. The press clippings are collected and are used as a source of information for administrative secretaries. Newspapers may also give wrong news and it can create panic. Newspapers can manipulate policy makers for their own vested interests." Respondent 1 said that "the print media reporting is becoming professionally elaborate and investigative. The quality has gone up because of the likelihood of being challenged before the courts. It has placed the burden of being accurate upon the print media. The newspapers are used for assessing the public demand which they voluntarily offer to the readers/policy makers."

Respondent 2 said that "the newspapers have a reasonably strong position in highlighting the requirements or short falls of the policy to an extent. Regarding sensitive subjects like curriculum development etc., the newspapers are often used by the critics etc. and valuable inputs come forth through this channel". Respondent 19 said that "The

newspapers are a source of information about public demands for policy makers. The newspaper provides information regarding key aspects of public policy, which assist the policy makers in making public policy". Respondent 3, Respondent 8, Respondent 9, Respondent 13, Respondent 20 and Respondent 24 agree with Respondent 19. Respondent 21 said that "newspapers are a source of information for policy makers in terms of letters to the editors, stories that are properly researched, components of the stories how people or section of the population thinks about issues of public concern".

Respondent 6 said that "when the media raises a great deal of hue and cry and when there is opportunity for personal benefit, then policy makers seem to react." Respondent 1 said that "some newspapers try to sensationalize the issue while the others are pragmatic. The higher echelons in the government, both political and bureaucratic feel vulnerable to adverse reporting. The reports are therefore scrutinized thoroughly and carefully on being reported. Such matters are often taken into account to remedy the situation and draw inferences for the future policy." Respondent 2 on the issue of some newspapers being critical on the government policies said that "In such cases, the policy makers often come under pressure as they are handicapped for want of an equally potent opinion forming system. The government has to be extra careful for not making any mistake. The situation can be partly remedied through projecting the correct version through other newspapers or electronic media."

Respondent 21 said that "Newspapers role is that of an opinion maker and a bridge between the government and the public." Respondent 22 said that Pakistan "is a country with very low literacy rate and threatening scarcity of trained professionals, media's role becomes critical to inform decision makers about the imperatives of public policy and its short/long term consequences on the economic and social lives of the people." Respondent 23 said that "media as the fourth pillar of the state is bound to guide. It is a mirror of the society, it reflects what is happening in the society and it also monitors, for instance what are the short comings in the public policy initiatives of the governments."

It can be said that newspapers are a big source of information regarding the public demands for policy makers and also helps them in making the right decisions as they facilitate in voicing the concerns of

the public and also conveying the viewpoint of the policymakers to the general public. Newspapers put information into the policy making process, in this way newspapers influence public policy making in Punjab.

RQ2: Do newspapers act as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues in Punjab?

Newspapers are used as an information channel. It is not necessary that they present true facts but they are important to mold public opinion. According to Respondent 12, “newspapers are a tool for not just public support but for seeking ideas as well, they send feelers and then the public reaction is measured. They can get the impression how public is feeling about the policy. The government can adjust the public policy accordingly.” Respondent 20 agrees with Respondent 12. Respondent 2 said that “the public policy document comes into being through the joint efforts of the policy planners and the resource providers. At times compromises have to be made on account of strong demand from certain areas for political reasons. In such eventualities, the newspapers often put up the public outcry to attract the attention of the policy maker to adopt more rational course of action.” Respondent 6 agrees with Respondent 12 and Respondent 2.

Respondent 8 said that “a policy, be it for the collective interest of those in power or for the genuine cause of service to citizens, can see its true fate of either success or failure, by the number of people whose attention it manages to fetch in the process of its making. Public support or discontentment is frequently reflected in newspapers and if a particular policy becomes the “talk of the town”, it means that the policy makers are on the path of mobilizing public in favour or against the subject at hand.” Respondent 11 said that “when any department work on a report and make it public newspapers become very important to disseminate this. The report through newspaper, other than various means is shared with the stake holders such as academia, business community, professionals and the general public. The department also invites media for public lecture to project the government policy. The department also prepares press release and hands it over to the media which informs the public about the government of Punjab activities in the arena of public policy.”

Respondent 10 said that “newspapers project issues in such a way that they become tool to gain public support. Newspapers can mold peoples’ opinion in favor of specific public policy”. Respondent 13 agreed with Respondent 10. Respondent 15 said that “newspapers are used as information channel. It is not necessary that they present true facts but they are important to mold public opinion.” Respondent 17 agrees with Respondent 15. Respondent 16 said that “Government of Punjab buys the space in newspaper and then uses it as a tool to gain public support or mold it in its favor. It spends tremendous amount of money on advertisement no matter the work on ground has been done or not but it spend a lot on its projection.” Respondent 24 agrees with Respondent 16. Respondent 25 said that “newspapers are a tool but unfortunately they are used for vested interests of the powerful segments of the society. They have been spreading sensationalism, they are not edited professionally, editors do not have editorial authority as it is with the owners of the big media houses whose goals are to concentrate more political clout and wealth. They have failed to discharge their responsibility to the people. There is a huge professional vacuum in newspapers organization.” Respondent 18 said that “definitely newspapers can mold public opinion, public policy initiatives can be highlighted by the government advertisements.” Respondent 4, Respondent 9, Respondent 3, Respondent 5 Respondent 19 and Respondent 23 agree with respondent 18.

When it comes to Urdu newspapers which have much higher circulation and readership than English newspapers, they tend to be more accessible to the public, hence, more influential in shaping public opinion about government policies in Punjab. For this very reason the government also gives priority to Urdu newspapers to project its success and achievements. Respondent 10 said that “Urdu newspapers are read by common man who does not know English. Because (Urdu newspapers) they are more circulated hence their effect is more on the opinion of the public as compared to the English newspapers. People at the grass root such as shopkeepers, carpenters and barbers read Urdu newspapers and discuss them. English newspapers are read by the elite which is in minority. Politicians take pulse of the people by reading Urdu newspaper.” Respondent 4, Respondent 12, Respondent 14, Respondent 16, Respondent 17, Respondent 19, Respondent 20 and Respondent 24

agree with Respondent 10. Respondent 11 said that “Urdu newspapers are more sensational, English newspapers are more serious and given in-depth analyses which are done through proper research but still one cannot underestimate the influence of Urdu newspapers on the public opinion”.

Newspapers can become more effective if they cover both sides of the story related to public policy issue. It should give more space to public feedback as it gives to the influential and powerful segment of the society. Respondent 23 said that “feedback is not enough for instance it is given through op-ed pages city pages (survey reports) and comments from the various segments of the society on a particular public policy issues like electricity bill hikes. Letters to the editor is the biggest source of feedback. English newspapers give more space to the public feedback as compared to Urdu newspapers. Now the medium of internet is used by newspapers where feedback is given through the feature of blogging.” Respondent 21 and Respondent 24 agree with Respondent 23. Two ways feedback between the policy makers and general public can clear the ambiguity about a policy and form a positive public opinion about a certain policy which is in the interest of both the government and the general public. Despite the deficiencies newspapers act as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues in Punjab.

Discussion

Several public policy issues gain government’s attention because of newspapers which is a positive source. Whether the government takes a serious note of it or not, still newspapers keep on highlighting the issues. Newspapers have a role in disseminating information and are a source of information for policy makers in terms of letters to the editors, stories that are properly researched, editorials and writers’ opinion (articles and columns). The content of the newspaper coverage tells us that how the public thinks about issues of public concern. By highlighting the needs of the people and area of the public policy which needs attention, newspapers act as an information provider to the policy makers. The newspapers by giving coverage can set a discourse on public issues which helps the policy makers in making public policy. Newspapers provide public feedback on important issues and demands related to economy, education, health etc. The new ideas on various public policy issues are circulated through newspapers then these ideas get in to the

policy making process if they get the attention of the policy makers. Newspapers are a tool for not just public support but for seeking new ideas as well. The government uses newspapers to float their policy initiatives to get the reaction of the public and accordingly adjusts its policy. Public support or disapproval of policies is often echoed in newspapers. Newspapers highlight issues in such a way that they become tool to mobilize public support in favor or against any particular public policy hence newspapers can mold public's opinion.

The newspapers are criticized for becoming a tool to champion the interests of powerful lobbies and government, as newspapers generate revenues through them in the form advertisements etc. If there is a strong perception amongst the general public that certain newspaper is highly supportive of the government then it loses its credibility which results in losing readership and its worth. Therefore newspapers cannot cross certain limit in pleasing the government. Despite the deficiencies national newspapers are giving a platform to independent voices on public policy issues. We can say that newspapers are acting as a tool to form public opinion in favor or against public policy issues in Punjab, therefore influencing the process of public policy making process in Punjab.

Conclusion

Punjab is a province of a country with very low literacy rate and threatening scarcity of trained professionals, newspapers' role becomes critical to inform decisions makers about the imperatives of public policy and its short and long term consequences on the economic and social lives of the people. Media as the fourth pillar of the state is bound to guide, newspapers role is that of an opinion maker and a bridge between the government and the public. Newspapers should take responsibility to guide the government as they are the mouth piece of the public. Free media is an integral part of a functioning democracy but for this the democracy should be in true spirit. Media gives input and it is done through giving coverage to the views of both the policy makers and public but for this the media should be free in true spirit. The critics argue that the answer to this question is not simple; the term 'free media' is a very complicated one. It is impossible for the mass media to be free nowadays due to the investment required to establish a media house. That makes the owners of the media houses dependent on sources of

revenues which in countries like Pakistan are the government advertisements, corporate advertisements etc. Such dependency can curtail the freedom of media. People believe what they see and hear and so it becomes very important that they are given the real picture so that any initiative towards their uplift is actually translated into a success. Transparency requires public being made aware of what the government is doing. Thus, any measure to solve public issues could be supported by a free media. A free but responsible media is able to identify the fundamental problems in the society and governance hence exerting moral pressure on policy makers to reshape/frame public policy in the best interest of the general public.

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