

The Role of Mass Media in Influencing the Public Policy Process

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Abstract

Mass media has a strategic role in democratic systems, not only as a channel of information, but also as an actor that influences public opinion and policy processes. This research aims to analyze how the media, both traditional and digital, influence the public policy agenda in Indonesia through agenda-setting, framing, and mobilization of public opinion. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with library *research* techniques that examine academic literature, media reports, and related official documents. The analysis was carried out through a content analysis approach and narrative analysis to reveal the pattern of the media's role in shaping policy discourse. The results show that various social media platforms have different impacts on public policy: Twitter and Facebook function as an arena for discussion and mobilization of issues, Instagram builds visual politics and policy framing, YouTube becomes a means of education as well as a space for disinformation spread, while TikTok accelerates the virality of political issues among youth. On the other hand, the mass media faces serious challenges in the form of disinformation, polarization, political-economic intervention, and the erosion of public trust. However, great opportunities remain open through strengthening the watchdog function, utilizing digital technology, and collaboration with civil society. This research emphasizes the importance of media independence, public digital literacy, and transparent government communication to create more inclusive and democratic policies.

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Introduction

Mass media has a strategic position in the modern democratic system, not only as a channel of information, but also as an actor that influences public opinion and political agendas. *Agenda-setting theory* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains that the media is able to determine what issues are considered important by the public and ultimately influence the public policy agenda. In the Indonesian context, the role of the media is even more evident when economic and political issues receive wide attention, such as the policy of increasing VAT to 12% by 2025. Massive media coverage of the impact of the policy has caused public resistance and forced the government to provide clarification (CNBC Indonesia, 2024)

Furthermore, the mass media functions as a *watchdog* that oversees government practices. Habibie (2018) emphasized that the media can be a channel of social control, while Latifah & Najicha (2022) show that digital media is able to accelerate the mobilization of public opinion on policy issues. However, serious challenges are also present, such as disinformation, framing bias, and intervention in the media's political-economic interests

(Ummah, 2022). Thus, understanding the role of mass media in influencing public policy is very important. This study aims to explore how the media not only conveys information, but also shapes discourse, drives public opinion, and puts pressure on policymakers to be more responsive to the needs of the public.

A number of studies confirm the importance of the role of the media in the dynamics of public policy. Setyawan (2011) emphasizes the contribution of civil society through the media in the preparation of the APBD, while Singkoh (2012) shows the role of political elites who gain legitimacy through the mass media. Mahardhani et al.'s (2020) research highlights the role of *civil society organizations* (CSOs) that use media to strengthen community participation in local policy processes. In the international realm, Newman et al. (2020) in *the Digital News Report* show that digital media accelerates the formation of public issues that then enter the political agenda. McCombs & Shaw (1972) emphasized that the media does not regulate what people think, but what issues need to be thought about. This means that the media functions as an active agent in the formation of policy discourse.

Although there is considerable research on mass media and public policy, there are several gaps that need to be answered. First, studies in Indonesia still tend to be partial, such as the issue of the APBD or the role of local political elites, so there has been no comprehensive analysis of media interactions, public opinion, and policies at the national level. Second, the literature emphasizes more on the role of interest groups or political actors, while the function of the media as an independent actor that influences policy is still poorly explored. Third, contemporary challenges such as disinformation, polarization of opinion due to social media algorithms, and political economic pressures of the media have not been widely researched in relation to the public policy process in Indonesia. Therefore, this research is here to fill this void (Stuttgart, 2011; Suryana et al., 2022; Latifah & Najicha, 2022; Ummah, 2022).

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of mass media in influencing the public policy process in Indonesia, focusing on how the media frames issues, sets public agendas, and channels people's aspirations. Academically, this research contributes to the development of the literature on political communication and public policy by enriching perspectives on the relationship between media and democracy.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing complexity of digital media in Indonesian democracy. The media is no longer just a conveyor of information, but also a political-economic agent that can push or even hinder policies. Practically, the results of this research are useful for the government to be more sensitive to the dynamics of public opinion formed by the media, as well as for the media itself to further enforce journalistic ethics and maintain independence in playing its role as actors in the public policy process.

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the role of mass media in influencing public policy processes, rather than simply measuring the relationship between variables. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research focuses on efforts to

understand meaning, context, and social interpretation. The design of this research is descriptive because it aims to systematically describe how the media shapes public opinion, conducts agenda-setting, and puts pressure on policy decision-makers.

This study also uses *the library research* method as the basis for data collection. Through this method, researchers can explore the results of previous research, political communication theory, and studies related to mass media and public policy. This method is relevant because the object of study is more of a discourse and socio-political phenomenon that is widely discussed in academic literature and the media. With this approach, this research is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive understanding of media interaction, public opinion, and policy in the context of democracy in Indonesia. (Zed, 2004).

The data in this study was collected through *library research*. According to Zed (2004), this method involves collecting data from written sources in the form of books, journal articles, research reports, and relevant official documents. This research uses academic literature, both national and international, which discusses the role of media in political communication, agenda-setting, and public policy.

In addition to the academic literature, data is also obtained from mass media reports as well as global research publications, such as *the Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2020), which highlights trends in the use of digital media in the shaping of public issues. National media reports such as Kompas, Tempo, and CNBC Indonesia are also used as secondary data to understand how the media raises policy issues, including framing public responses.

The criteria for selecting data are (1) relevance to the research topic, (2) credibility of the source, and (3) up-to-date information. The data is then compiled, sorted, and categorized according to the focus of the research, resulting in valid analytical materials to answer the research questions. Data analysis was carried out using *content analysis* and narrative analysis. Content analysis was chosen because it is suitable for studying media texts and literature to find patterns, themes, and tendencies of news coverage of public policy issues. Through this technique, researchers can see how the media does agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping in reporting (Krippendorff, 2018).

Furthermore, narrative analysis is used to understand how media discourse shapes public opinion and influences perceptions of policy. According to Riessman (2008), narrative analysis helps researchers construct stories from data so as to produce richer contextual understanding. The analysis process is carried out through three stages: (1) data reduction by sorting out relevant information, (2) presenting data in the form of main themes, and (3) drawing conclusions based on theoretical interpretation. To maintain the validity of the results, source triangulation is carried out, which is comparing findings from various literature and news reports (Denzin, 2012). With this approach, the research not only describes, but also interprets how mass media plays a role in influencing public policy processes in Indonesia.

Result and Discussion

Mass media has an important role in shaping public opinion in several ways, mass media provides information on political issues, candidates, and policies. By providing accurate and reliable information, the media helps the public understand various events and policies that are taking place. The mass media chooses certain issues to be reported and discussed. Thus, they can set the public agenda and determine which issues are considered important and worthy of attention.

Through news and opinions, the mass media encourages the public to discuss and debate about political issues. These discussions can shape public views and attitudes towards policies and leaders. Through news and opinions, the mass media shapes people's attitudes and behaviors towards politics. They can influence the election of leaders, political participation, and support for certain policies.

Mass media provides knowledge about politics, government systems, and important issues. Thus, they play a role in educating the community. Through news and campaigns, the mass media encourages public participation in political processes, such as elections and general elections. Mass media can promote awareness about cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. This is important in the context of public policies that value diversity. By revealing information openly, the mass media ensures transparency in the public policy process. (São Paulo et al., 2022)

The Impact of Various Social Media Platforms in Influencing the Public Policy Process

Social media has become one of the important actors in the modern democratic process, including in Indonesia. If previously traditional mass media such as newspapers, television, and radio dominated the flow of information, now social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok play a major role in influencing public opinion and policy processes. The unique characteristics of each platform shape different patterns of political interaction, thus having a diverse impact on the shaping of public policy agendas.

Facebook and Twitter (X) are still the most frequently used platforms for political discussion and policy advocacy in Indonesia. Twitter, with its fast and interactive format, allows public issues to develop in a matter of hours through *trending topics*. For example, the issue of the revision of the 2019 KPK Law went viral on Twitter, which then triggered a large wave of protests from civil society. On the other hand, Facebook plays a role in building virtual communities that support long-term policy advocacy. Interest groups and civil society organizations use Facebook to disseminate information, organize actions, and mobilize public support for specific issues (Lim, 2020; Tapsell, 2018).

Instagram, with its visual power, plays a role in shaping political imagery and policy framing. Politicians and government agencies use Instagram to display a humanist side and be close to society. For example, posts about social assistance programs or field visits by officials are often aesthetically packaged to create a positive perception. From a public policy perspective, Instagram serves as a tool for policy legitimacy by spreading a visual narrative that is easily accepted by the wider community. However, the role of Instagram is also

inseparable from the risk of image manipulation and political imagery. Policy framing through Instagram often emphasizes the emotional and visual aspects more than the substance of the policy itself. This can obscure the critical discourse needed in democracy (Shirley & Zuliestiana, 2021).

YouTube has become a strategic platform for the dissemination of more in-depth public policy information. The government and non-governmental organizations use YouTube to broadcast policy socialization through long videos, discussions, and webinars. With an audio-visual format, YouTube has the potential to become an effective public education medium. YouTube is also vulnerable to becoming a channel for spreading disinformation. Research by Guess et al. (2020) found that political content on YouTube is often used by certain groups to spread conspiratorial narratives that can influence public perception of policies. In Indonesia, this phenomenon can be seen in the COVID-19 vaccination issue, where a number of YouTube channels spread false information that affects the acceptance of public health policies.

TikTok is growing in popularity as a political platform, especially for the younger generation. TikTok's algorithm allows political issues to spread very quickly through short, viral content. Research by Hutaaruk et al. (2024) shows that political promotion through TikTok significantly affects the preferences of novice voters. In the context of public policy, virality on TikTok can force the government to respond to issues that receive great attention, even though they are initially taken for granted. However, the big challenge of TikTok is the potential for disinformation and political polarization. Provocative or emotional content is more easily viral than educational content, so it risks worsening the quality of public discourse (Isni, 2022). Thus, TikTok has become a double-edged sword: on the one hand it encourages political participation, but on the other hand it has the potential to amplify misinformation. From the above explanation, it is clear that social media serves a dual function: as a means of political participation as well as an arena for disinformation. The government cannot ignore the role of social media in the public policy process. A quick response to viral issues on social media is important to maintain public legitimacy and trust. However, over-reliance on social media opinions also risks producing populist policies without in-depth study. (Habibie, 2018)

In addition, the role of social media emphasizes the importance of digital literacy among the public. With good literacy, the public can be more critical in assessing information, so that they can contribute more constructively to the policy process. On the other hand, social media platforms have an ethical responsibility to control the spread of disinformation and make room for quality content. Different social media platforms have different impacts on influencing public policy: Twitter encourages issue mobilization, Facebook strengthens community advocacy, Instagram frames policy through visuals, YouTube provides an educational space as well as the risk of disinformation, while TikTok accelerates the virality of issues. All of them form a new ecosystem in digital democracy that cannot be ignored. Therefore, the involvement of social media in public policy needs to be managed through digital literacy, appropriate regulations, and the active participation of civil society so that the role of social media remains constructive in supporting democracy.

Challenges and Opportunities Faced by the Mass Media in Carrying Out Their Role in Influencing the Public Policy Process

The mass media is one of the important actors in modern democracy that acts as a conveyor of information, a *watchdog*, and an agent of public opinion. In the context of public policy, the media not only functions as an information channel, but also as an actor who is able to direct issues and influence political agendas. However, in carrying out its role, the media faces various challenges as well as opportunities that coexist.

One of the main challenges is the rise of disinformation that spreads through digital media. Disinformation can undermine the credibility of the media and obscure relevant facts in public policy. Latifah & Najicha (2022) emphasized that political hoaxes have the potential to create public confusion while weakening the legitimacy of government policies. Social media algorithms reinforce *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles*, so public opinion is polarized. Mass media that is dragged into polarization risks losing independence and exacerbating political conflicts (Sunstein, 2017).

Another challenge is the intervention in the interests of media owners and advertisers. Ummah (2022) explained that the media is often not completely independent because it is bound by political-economic interests that can affect news related to public policy. The phenomenon of *news fatigue* and public skepticism of the mainstream media is also a challenge. Newman et al. (2020) show that trust in the media continues to decline in many countries, including Indonesia, thus affecting the effectiveness of the media in influencing policy.

The media still has great power in setting the public agenda. Through consistent reporting, the media is able to pressure the government to respond to certain issues. With the right framing, the media can strengthen public awareness of strategic policy issues such as health, education, or the environment. Digital transformation provides an opportunity for the media to expand the reach of information. Online platforms allow the public to engage directly in policy discourse through comments, petitions, or digital campaigns (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) (Lim, 2020).

The media has an opportunity to strengthen the *watchdog's* function by leveraging investigative technology and data journalism. This can increase the transparency of public policy and narrow the space for corrupt practices or abuse of authority (Tapsell, 2018). Another opportunity is to collaborate with *civil society organizations* (CSOs) in fighting for more inclusive policies. Mahardhani et al. (2020) show that CSOs who work with the media are more effective in influencing local policy processes.

The above challenges and opportunities show that the mass media is in an ambivalent position: on the one hand it faces the pressures of disinformation, polarization, and political-economic intervention, but on the other hand it has a great opportunity to strengthen transparency, participation, and accountability of public policy. In order for these opportunities to be optimized, the media needs to maintain editorial independence, strengthen journalistic ethics, and improve the quality of media literacy in the community. In addition, the government needs to respect press freedom while building transparent

communication. Thus, the mass media can play its role more effectively as a pillar of democracy in influencing responsive and accountable public policies.

Conclusion

Mass media, both in traditional and digital forms, has become an important actor in influencing the public policy process in Indonesia. This role is not limited to the delivery of information, but also includes agenda-setting, framing issues, and mobilizing public opinion. Through news, the media can strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of a policy, pressure the government to respond to emerging issues, and open up space for public participation in the democratic process. The impact of social media further emphasizes this role. Twitter and Facebook are spaces for discussion and mobilization of policy issues, Instagram plays a role in visual and image politics, YouTube presents educational opportunities as well as the risk of disinformation, while TikTok accelerates the virality of policy issues among the younger generation. This shows that each platform has a unique mechanism for influencing public opinion and policy responses.

However, the strategic role of the media is inseparable from serious challenges. Disinformation, political polarization, intervention in economic-political interests, and erosion of public trust are the main obstacles that can reduce the effectiveness of the media as a pillar of democracy. On the other hand, great opportunities open up through the use of digital technology, collaboration with civil society, and strengthening the watchdog function to increase transparency and accountability of public policies.

Thus, the success of the media in influencing public policy depends on its ability to maintain independence, improve journalistic quality, and strengthen public media literacy. The government also needs to respect press freedom and build transparent and responsive communication. If challenges can be overcome and opportunities are maximized, mass media will remain an important pillar in supporting democracy and encouraging more inclusive, participatory, and community-oriented public policies.

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