

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

Mass media plays a vital role in shaping public opinion by delivering information, framing issues, and constructing social realities. In the era of globalization, media is not merely an information channel but also a powerful institution that acts as a gatekeeper, mirror of society, and platform for civic dialogue. In Indonesia, the development of mass media has contributed to education, health, economy, and democratic awareness. However, biased or exaggerated reporting often distorts perceptions and may trigger social tensions. This study employs library research with a qualitative-descriptive approach, drawing on books, journal articles, and digital sources. Through documentary content analysis, the study explores how media influences public opinion both positively and negatively. The findings reveal that mass media strengthens democracy, civic participation, and access to information, yet also has the potential to manipulate perceptions. Therefore, ethical journalism, regulatory frameworks, and media literacy are crucial to ensure media supports informed and democratic societies.

Keywords: Mass media, public opinion, communication, democracy, media ethics

INTRODUCTION

In the present era, the demand for information has increased rapidly, particularly in relation to social life. Various types of information needed by society can influence their lives, both directly and indirectly. Within this context, the study of mass communication has expanded into a broader field. Mass communication has become a potential area of study encompassing diverse and in-depth topics, supported by numerous theoretical frameworks. This development is understandable, as the discipline of communication today is the outcome of a long process of evaluation.

Before the era of mass media, interpersonal communication typically relied on others to record, interpret, and deliver messages directly through highly personal interactions. The era of mass communication began when humans succeeded in inventing production machinery that transformed personally delivered information into information disseminated widely to large audiences. Consequently, along with the development of mass media as an informational tool in Indonesia, there have also been efforts to improve the overall living conditions of society, including in the areas of economy, infrastructure, education, health, and the environment. The significant role of mass media in

shaping national development policy requires support from institutions, supervisory bodies, and regulatory frameworks, including the formulation of a clear code of media ethics. ¹

Mass media serves as a highly influential source of information in shaping public opinion. The information conveyed by mass media impacts the perspectives of society. In the context of citizenship, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion regarding issues such as human rights, cultural pluralism, and good governance.

However, the role of mass media in shaping public views on civic issues is not always positive. Unreliable or biased news can influence public opinion in a disproportionate manner on matters of citizenship. Media also holds an important role in the formation and management of culture. At times, mass media exaggerates the reporting of ongoing issues, which can lead to intercultural conflict or the violation of human rights. Therefore, it is essential to critically assess the role of mass media in shaping public opinion, with the aim of understanding both the positive and negative consequences of media coverage on societal perspectives. ²

METHOD

This study is a library research that relies on a literature review as the primary method for collecting the necessary data to strengthen the hypotheses formulated in the preparation of this scientific work. The literature review involves collecting data from sources such as books and online journals accessible through the internet. The method of data collection in this research employs document analysis. The documentary method (document/information analysis) is one of the commonly used techniques in social research methodology, particularly in relation to data collection procedures. ³

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a qualitative-descriptive method. This approach was chosen to provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding. Qualitative research enables broader exploration of the phenomena under investigation. ⁴ The data in this study are obtained from a variety of sources, including journal articles, books, digital media content, and the findings of previous research discussions. Once the data were collected, an analysis was conducted using descriptive content analysis, which requires the researcher to examine the content and information in depth.

The researcher comprehensively gathered the data, then carefully read and studied them. Important aspects that could contribute to sharpening the research analysis were subsequently noted. After the

¹ Hamdani Thaha, "Media Massa Dan Masyarakat," *Al-Tajdid* 1, no. 1 (2009): 60–61.

² Nur Avifah Dwi Apriliani et al., "Peran Media Massa Dalam Membentuk Opini Publik Dalam Konteks Kewarganegaraan," *Jurnal Pendidikan Transformatif (Jupetra)* 1, no. 2 (2022): 156–157.

³ Haris Ferdiansyah, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif Untuk Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* (Jakarta: Salemba Humanika, 2012).

⁴ Ifit Novita Sari et al., *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, ed. Hayat, Cetakan Pe. (Malang: Unisma Press, 2022).

data collection process was completed, categorization and polarization were carried out to facilitate data interpretation in explaining the role of mass media in shaping public opinion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Mass Media

Mass media is a tool or medium for delivering information to the wider public through both print and electronic platforms. It encompasses various forms of media that are capable of directly providing information to society at large. Commonly recognized types of mass media include electronic media such as television and radio, print media such as newspapers and magazines, as well as online media such as the internet, television streaming services, and other forms of information accessible through digital platforms. In today's era of advanced globalization, online media has become one of the most popular means of communication, consumed by nearly all segments of society.⁵

The characteristics of mass media include, first, its institutional nature, which involves large audiences in the processes of information gathering, management, and dissemination. Second, it is unidirectional, meaning that communication tends to occur without direct dialogue between sender and receiver. Third, mass media has a broad and simultaneous reach, allowing it to overcome barriers of time and space by delivering information to large audiences simultaneously through practical tools such as radio, television, and film. Finally, mass media is open in nature, meaning that messages conveyed can be received by anyone, anywhere, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity.

In a broader sense, mass media refers to the communication industries and technologies that encompass various platforms such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and film. The term "mass" in this context denotes the ability of communication technologies to disseminate messages efficiently across space and time, reaching a wide audience.⁶

Through mass media, the public can access information about government policies and obtain diverse insights related to the performance of public officials. Indirectly, mass media functions as an intermediary that facilitates communication between society and the government. From mass media, people acquire a wide range of information about events, whether occurring abroad or domestically. Even in private spaces, such as the bathroom, many individuals carry their gadgets as constant companions. Between entertainment and information, audiences are continuously exposed to a variety of content. From breaking news and traffic reports to weather forecasts, all of these are automatically accessible. Moreover, auditory signals from media devices continuously reach us, and daily newspapers often await on the front porch, ready to be read. During breakfast, individuals typically attempt to absorb additional information, consciously choosing what content to consume throughout the day.

⁵ Reza Ade Putra, "Tantangan Media Massa Dalam Menghadapi Era Disrupsi Teknologi Informasi," JUSIFO (Jurnal Sistem Informasi) (2019): 1.

⁶ Thaha, "Media Massa Dan Masyarakat."

As time progresses and technology continues to advance, gadgets equipped with internet connectivity have become the next primary medium for information consumption. Their primary purpose is to deliver the latest, most current, relevant, and engaging information to satisfy society's thirst for knowledge. The absence or malfunction of any of these sources, even for a single day, often creates a sense of incompleteness in daily life. In fact, losing access to all such sources of information would render life empty—much like a frog trapped within the confines of a coconut shell.⁷

All of these realities indicate a profound dependence on media content and technology. Even when media content loses its meaning due to oversaturation, this does not seem to be a problem for the global community. What matters most is having access to all forms of media and enjoying the content they provide, including light information or even trivial material from social networks.

Mass media enables the public to express diverse opinions, complaints, criticisms, and suggestions on various matters, thereby exerting a significant influence on society. Daily use of mass media can shape certain behavioral patterns. As recipients of information, society must filter, process, and manage the information they receive, so as not to become passive consumers who merely accept information without considering its validity.⁸ In this regard, mass media plays a crucial role in delivering accurate and trustworthy news.

The information disseminated by mass media has a meaningful impact on shaping public opinion regarding issues that are widely discussed. This influence may be either positive or negative, depending on the level of accuracy, balance, and impartiality of the information presented. Accurate, balanced, and impartial reporting helps society to better understand the information they consume.⁹

Mass media functions not only as a provider of information but also as a source of entertainment for society. In fulfilling its primary functions, mass media must plan, implement, and analyze its methods of information dissemination in order to capture the attention of its audience—whether readers, listeners, or viewers.¹⁰

To be classified as mass media, a medium must fulfill several specific characteristics. First, it must be operated by a number of individuals involved in various aspects of information gathering, management, and dissemination. Second, communication through mass media tends to be one-directional, where interaction between sender and receiver is limited and feedback requires a certain amount of time. Third, mass media is capable of reaching audiences broadly and simultaneously, overcoming barriers of time and space by delivering information to large audiences at the same moment. Fourth, mass media relies on technical or mechanical attributes such as television, radio, newspapers, and similar platforms. Lastly, mass media is open in nature, allowing messages to be received by anyone, anywhere, regardless of age, gender, or ethnic background.

⁷ Alim Puspiano, "Media Massa Dan Pembentukan Opini Publik," *An-Nida': Jurnal Prodi Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam* (2022): 97–98.

⁸ Rina Ade Saputri, Laras Ayu Pratiwi, and Erina Setianingrum, "Peran Media Massa Dalam Mempengaruhi Public Trust Di Masyarakat," *PANDITA : Interdisciplinary Journal of Public Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2023): 15–16.

⁹ Avifah Dwi Apriliani et al., "Peran Media Massa Dalam Membentuk Opini Publik Dalam Konteks Kewarganegaraan."

¹⁰ Iren Silvia, Elok Perwirawati, and Besti Rohana Simbolon, *Manajemen Media Massa*, 2021.

In addition to these characteristics, mass media can be categorized into several types. The first is print media, which includes newspapers, magazines, and books. The second is electronic media, such as television, radio, and film. The third is online media, including cyber media, the internet, and other internet-based platforms.¹¹

In the era of globalization, mass media plays an irreplaceable role, comparable to the human need for oxygen. The moment individuals open their eyes and become aware of the world around them, their instincts automatically drive them to seek the latest information through mass media. Recognizing the insatiable demand for this “oxygen” of information, media providers continuously compete to deliver diverse information with unique and engaging details.

Mass media functions as a medium of communication that disseminates information, ideas, and perspectives to large audiences on a significant scale. This underscores the important role of mass media as a meaningful institution within the structure of society.¹² This perspective is reinforced by McQuail, who contributed extensively to the study of mass media by highlighting the following roles:

1. **Window on events and experiences:** Mass media enables audiences to see what is happening in the outside world and serves as a source of learning to better understand such events.
2. **Mirror of society and the world:** Media is considered a reflection of events, presenting them faithfully without distortion, though the framing and presentation of content are shaped by media professionals.
3. **Filter or gatekeeper:** Media selects which issues and information are worthy of public attention, thus determining what is considered significant.
4. **Guide or interpreter:** Media provides direction for audiences in facing uncertainty or making choices.
5. **Platform for information and ideas:** Media functions as a channel for conveying information and ideas, allowing responses and feedback from the audience.
6. **Means of communication:** Media serves not only as a distributor of information but also as a communication partner that facilitates two-way interaction.

All of these functions indicate that the role of media extends far beyond being a mere source of entertainment or an escape from routine. It has a significant impact on social life. The content and information disseminated by mass media influence not only how individuals perceive the world but also how they construct their understanding of social reality. This implies that what people see, hear, or read through mass media shapes their responses and attitudes toward various aspects of social and cultural life. If the information provided by mass media is inaccurate, it can lead to a distorted understanding of a given issue.

Therefore, mass media holds a responsibility to provide accurate and high-quality information. The quality of information is an ethical and moral imperative that must be considered in every act of media

¹¹ Fauzi Syarief, “PEMANFAATAN MEDIA SOSIAL DALAM PROSES PEMBENTUKAN OPINI PUBLIK,” *Jurnal Komunikasi* (2017): 264.

¹² Sri Choiriyati, “Peran Media Massa Dalam Membentuk Opini Publik,” *UML* (2015): 22.

presentation.¹³ Mass media plays an essential role in controlling, managing, and initiating innovation in society. It may serve as a substitute for other resources or act as a force that influences social dynamics. Ultimately, media functions as a primary platform for presenting the events of social life, both on national and international scales.

The Formation of Public Opinion

In the context of communication, public opinion is the outcome of a process in which messages are delivered and collectively responded to by the public due to a shared interest in the content being conveyed. The formation of public opinion is often based on the effective majority rather than the total numerical majority.

The term *public opinion* derives from two English words: *opinion*, meaning view, assumption, or judgment, and *public*, meaning society at large, the people, or the audience. An opinion is essentially a response to stimuli shaped through personal interpretation and contributes to the formation of an image. An unfavorable opinion toward a particular object tends to create a negative image of that object, and conversely, a favorable opinion fosters a positive image. Opinions encompass beliefs, values, and appreciations as responses to particular objects.

Meanwhile, the term *public* refers to a group of people who share a specific relationship with an individual or institution. For instance, the public may refer to users of a company's products (consumers), clients who save in a bank, or residents of a particular region within a state (citizens). Overall, public opinion has been defined in various ways by scholars. Broadly, it can be understood as a collection of views held by individuals on matters that influence or attract the interest of a community. In short, public opinion reflects the collective beliefs or judgments of society.

In the book *Public Opinion* by Helena Olii and Novi Erlita, William Albig's explanation is cited, stating that public opinion is formed as the result of individual opinions that emerge through debate and interaction among members of a public. Within the discipline of communication studies, public opinion may be regarded as a communicative construct that presents issues to the public with the expectation of eliciting responses or feedback. Thus, public opinion does not merely represent individual perspectives but is also a product of dialogue and interaction among members of society.¹⁴

When responding to various issues, particularly those of significant concern, society often generates diverse perspectives and evaluations. Differences of opinion between groups of citizens and the government are considered natural in a democratic state. This stands in contrast to authoritarian regimes led by dictators, where public opinion is often "standardized" by those in power, leaving citizens with little or no freedom to voice dissenting views.¹⁵

¹³ Abidin Santosa, "Peran Media Massa Dalam Mencegah Konflik," *Aspikom* 3 (2017): 207–208.

¹⁴ Dedi Kusuma Habibie, "Dwi Fungsi Media Massa," *Interaksi: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 7, no. 2 (2018): 80–81.

¹⁵ Herdiansyah Amanu and Adli, "ANALISIS OPINI PUBLIK TENTANG PEMBERIAN REMISI KEPADA PARA NARAPIDANA KORUPTOR," *Jurnal Bulayudha* (2021): 14–15.

Freedom of Expression in Ancient Greece

Based on the preceding explanation, it can be concluded that the history of freedom of expression is closely linked to the formation of public opinion, beginning with the use of simple symbols and later evolving into the use of mass media to convey opinions.

In Ancient Greece, freedom of expression was closely associated with the autonomy of each *polis* (village or city-state) in determining its own fate. For instance, a village could build and strengthen its fleet according to the number of wooden ships it was able to assemble in order to enhance its naval power. This illustrates that the greater the size of a fleet, the stronger the village became. Consequently, the larger the naval fleet possessed by a village, the greater the degree of freedom of expression granted by the state to that community.

During this period, Athens functioned as a city-state where Greek democracy, particularly between the 6th and 3rd centuries BCE, was characterized as direct democracy. This meant that political decisions were made directly by all citizens, operating on the basis of majority rule. In this context, freedom of expression was exercised collectively and simultaneously, such that decisions not reached through collective agreement could not be implemented.

The Emergence of Freedom of Expression (Public Opinion)

A significant milestone in the history of freedom of expression occurred in England during the early medieval period with the introduction of the *Magna Carta* in 1215. The *Magna Carta* was an agreement between several nobles and King John of England. For the first time in history, a reigning monarch consented to recognize and guarantee certain rights and privileges of his subjects in exchange for financial contributions to fund warfare. Among the rights contained in the *Magna Carta* was the recognition of freedom of expression, though it primarily applied to the noble class. This charter emerged within a turbulent social structure, where the influence of ancient Greek democracy was still evident in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the feudal period of the Middle Ages (600–1400) was characterized by a social hierarchy dominated by the control of social and spiritual life by the Pope and other religious authorities, while political life was marked by power struggles among the nobility. Unlike in Ancient Greece, where freedom of expression was limited to native citizens—excluding slaves and foreign merchants—the *Magna Carta* in England extended such recognition only to the aristocracy, excluding the common people.

The global recognition of human rights was further solidified with the proclamation of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on December 10, 1948, during the United Nations General Assembly. This landmark declaration affirmed the rights of all nations to independence and freedom from colonialism and injustice. Articles 18 and 19 of the Declaration explicitly guarantee freedom of thought, conscience,

and religion; freedom of opinion and expression; as well as the right to seek, receive, and impart information through mass media without geographical restrictions. ¹⁶

The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Public Opinion

The presence of mass media, with its wide reach, diverse audiences, and ability to disseminate messages rapidly and simultaneously, has made it an attractive channel for conveying particular messages. It is undeniable that mass media plays a significant role in shaping issues that become the subject of public discourse. In this context, the messages presented by the media cannot be separated from the existence and identity of the media institution itself. Over time, mass media has come to be recognized as occupying a position between the interests of the state, the market, and the elite groups or media owners themselves.

Mass media often advances the interests of specific groups by embedding their agendas within the content presented, with the aim of capturing public attention. By repeatedly presenting certain information, mass media seeks to influence public attitudes and perspectives. The influence of mass media on political life is particularly profound. Its ability to amplify the presence of a message is remarkable, as public responsiveness to particular issues determines whether the media will reinforce such issues or allow them to fade. The reproduction and circulation of messages through mass media, therefore, have substantial impacts on society. ¹⁷

The powerful influence of mass media in disseminating information makes it a central actor in shaping public opinion, thereby strengthening its appeal to various interest groups. Mass media plays a pivotal role in serving as a communication channel between public or political communicators and society at large. As a medium of public communication, mass media possesses the capacity to shape public opinion and influence political behavior. Effective management of public opinion, in turn, is crucial for securing societal support. ¹⁸

When discussing mass media, it is inevitable to also consider the effects of media coverage. One prominent phenomenon is the strong relationship between news coverage and the issues perceived as important by the public, a process widely known as *agenda-setting*. The theoretical framework that analyzes this phenomenon is referred to as the *agenda-setting theory of mass media*. ¹⁹

CONCLUSION

First, the relationship between public opinion and mass media is highly interconnected. Mass media plays a pivotal role in the communication process, functioning both as a medium for advocating particular interests and as a channel for disseminating information that shapes societal perspectives.

¹⁶ Johnny J. Senduk, "Peran Hubungan Masyarakat Dalam Pembentukan Opini Publik" (Universitas Samratulangi, 2013).

¹⁷ Sri Choiriyati, "Peran Media Massa Dalam Membentuk Opini Publik," *Jurnal UML* (2015): 22.

¹⁸ Muhammad Qadri, "PENGARUH MEDIA SOSIAL DALAM MEMBANGUN OPINI PUBLIK," *Jurnal Hukum Tata Negara* (2020): 62.

¹⁹ Puspianto, "Media Massa Dan Pembentukan Opini Publik."

However, the use of mass media often generates controversy, as the information conveyed tends to be unbalanced and influenced by specific interests.

Second, mass media is frequently utilized by individuals, groups, and even the state to introduce strategic issues with the aim of influencing public opinion in their favor. This function is not only employed to construct a positive image but is also often exploited as a tool to weaken opponents or competing parties. In practice, mass media frequently operates behind the scenes, driven by agendas supported by capital owners or political elites who exercise control over it.

Third, the role of mass media can be understood as the primary narrator of social reality. The media does not merely present information about current events and emerging issues but also provides interpretive frameworks that shape public understanding of the world. From editorial perspectives to audience perceptions, the media possesses the power to direct societal views toward a particular construction of reality.

Fourth, the influence of mass media varies depending on its type and platform. Newspapers, with their in-depth analyses and editorial opinions, tend to influence readers in a more reflective manner. In contrast, television broadcasts, with their dramatic visuals, are more likely to affect audiences emotionally. Meanwhile, digital platforms and social media enable direct interaction, fostering broader discussions and facilitating rapid exchanges of ideas.

Finally, it is undeniable that mass media holds immense power in shaping public opinion. With its capacity to present information in ways that are engaging, accessible, and repetitive, the media can significantly influence public perceptions, whether directly or indirectly. Therefore, media literacy emerges as a crucial necessity, enabling society to critically consume information, question its validity, and develop a more objective understanding of social reality.

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