

## The national media's role in shaping public opinion

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to investigate the role of the national media in shaping public opinion. The research method in this study has been defined in terms of purpose, data collection method and implementation method, which stands for applied, survey and correlation, respectively. Questionnaire was used to collect data in the current study and the study population was all professors of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) Media and Communications Department. Statistical work on questionnaires was conducted at two levels: descriptive and inferential statistics. By using Pearson test, it has been determined that the four key characteristics of the independent variable (the national media) are correlated with shaping of public opinion. These characteristics are including press roundtables, press conferences, religious TV serials and news reports.

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### 1. Introduction

Mass media are often considered as a powerful force for integration of ideas and opinions. Media files can determine our opinion about the world and about the deepest values. The mass media are among the phenomena that pervade all aspects of human life and give them direction [1]. The media, especially television, have the apparent, rapid, direct, and very pervasive effects in society. In specific, television features uniquely to send message to the farthest parts of the world and is considered as one of the most popular mass media. In addition, due to the possibility of playing both audio and video, it has created a lot of interest for its audience [2, 3]. What is completely evident is continuously transmitting a set of messages that is sent to the audiences, and because all age groups across the country are covered, all people are exposed to these messages and get affected. Therefore, the effect of television messages to people lead to the formation of good practice in applying of all around resources [4]. The current study investigated the role of the national media through different programs in shaping public opinion. The programs are including attendance in different social and cultural programs on several television channels, conducting media interviews, press roundtable and special interview which resulted to have impact on the audience in Tehran.

#### Mass Media

The mass media are all those media technologies that are intended to reach a large audience by mass communication [5]. Media means any device that can transmit a number of cultures and

ideas and various items such as newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, satellite, Internet, CD and video players are included in this definition [6].

#### Media functionality

The main feature of media is their accessibility. Unlike the school and other elements of human life, media are universal. They can form a class without walls, with billions of listeners. The media have a duty to protect the environment. They should create a general solidarity between the components in response to environmental needs and they are responsible for social heritage transmission from one generation to another [6]. Hall [7] has defined a society as a closed circuit in which mass media are involved as a highway in progressing identification procedure of the community. Media create and strength motion, dynamism and vitality as well as apathy and laziness and lethargy. On one side, they arouse emotional feelings, compassion and honesty and on the other side they vitalize feelings of ugliness, hatred, distrust, lies and violence. This function naturally rises to the inner behavioral conflict in individual and social scale.

News and educational duties are the other functions of media. For example, today by watching a film about the lives of young people, a personal idea about morality and the youth living conditions can be changed and even it is possible to tending for having today's youth troubled life [8]. Due to the emphasis on the role of television in the development of intercultural communication, next section looks into it more specifically.

#### Television and its features

Twentieth century was the century for the invention of the human amazing phenomena. Indubitably, one of the strangest phenomena of this era is the film industry followed by the television. In this century, cinema screen animated images, and the television transferred these moving images deep into community and family centers. It had such an attraction and appealing that called it "magic box". Overtime, the magic box has crossed all the boundaries and conquered the world [9].

The impression and attraction of television in today's world is obvious and its role in educating, guiding, directing and molding public opinion is inevitable [1, 2, 5-7, 10]. So, it has been used as one of the main tools to influence public opinion. In addition, it is being applied by governments or the private sector to reach their targets. In this regard television as a means to shape public opinion emerges its role with covering social problems and issues related to domestic and foreign policies as well as providing entertainment and drama [1, 11]. Regardless of the type of program displaying on television, such as news bulletins, music, games, serials, etc., this means of communication, however, is required to provide an ideological message.

TV has several features that distinguish it from other media and information practices [12]:

1. Television simultaneously affects both senses of vision and hearing.
2. TV is capable of transferring hot news to the viewers in light speed.
3. A television program does not require a mediator to achieve the intended audience.
4. Television is able simultaneously to cover numerous viewers.
5. Due to the direct and case relation with viewers and showing events on the occurrences, TV is non-competitive media.

All these distinctions not only demonstrate the point that television is means of news and information, but also it has gathered all the features of other media, transformed and integrated them.

#### **Public opinion**

Public opinion has been proposed for the first time by "Jacques Necker," the finance minister of Louis XVI at the beginning of the French Revolution [13]. He used this term in order to explain why investor got away from the Paris stock. He claimed that the public is an invisible power which legislates for the city, the country and even to the royal palace with no treasure, no guards and no army [13]. Public opinion is a court in which all men who attract public attention are required to attend and respond. Public opinion in its place is seated on the throne, will award the crown on the heads and increase or decrease reputations. In Hobbes's view [14], public opinion is

the real determination of the world and Temple counted it as a source of power and authenticity [15]. Alfred Sauvy [16], famous French demographer, who has expressed the "third world" term for the first time, has defined public opinion. He claimed that public opinion is the inner conscious of a nation. The public opinion, unknown power, is often a political force. It is a power which is not predicted in any constitution. He believed that this phenomenon is a political force which has impressed all the statesmen and leaders of the world and even has led to the destruction of the dictatorial regimes. In Ginsberg's view [17], public opinion is a social phenomenon, producing by the action and reaction of many people's minds. In Sidsen's view [13], public opinion is an overt or covert force to public opinion which has been created by the combination of values, emotions and personal impressions. It is combination that its weight is different from the efficacy and invasion potency of the combined opinions. Pascal [18], French philosopher and mathematician, says public opinion is the queen of the world. Fifty years later, Thomas Hobbes speaks about public opinion administration and governance. Gabriel Tarde [19], French thinker and psychologist, believed that public opinion is a series of judgments of people in a community about issues of the day in which most people accept the issue. In this definition, public opinion should be considered as a social and collective phenomenon in which an individual has not much role. The content of this phenomenon could be date's issues and controversies of a community including political, religious, social, cultural, historical and sporting which has drawn public opinion's attention for a while.

#### **The role of mass media in shaping public opinion**

Today no politics and programs can be successful without the support and participation of the people, even though they are technically set up correctly. Thus, understanding of public and its evaluation is one of the fundamental requirements for all governments and organizations that deal with people and the public opinion. Appearance of widely circulated newspapers in the nineteenth century led to the formation and emergence of public opinion [20]. Media (text, audio, visual) in the 1940s and 1950s were not only diverse but also developed. Since 1950s, public opinion phenomenon gained more power by growing radio and television; thereafter all governments began to control it. Similarly, since 1960 appearance of new communication technologies made public opinion more independent and eventually strengthened it. The new changes in the communication industry show itself in broader form after the computer revolution in 1970s and emergence of personal computers in 1980s. What distinguishes these new changes from the past

ones in the communications industry is the speed of data transportation in the shortest time [21].

Media as a tool for clarifying ideas, creating space for the healthy and constructive comments and an appropriate notification is considered as one of the important development factors and as the dynamic and mobility signs of societies in the current world. But it must be admitted that the dual role of the media in crisis and de-crisis is obvious and indisputable fact at least to the experts in this field. In the present world, media shape a wide part of public opinion nature and the trend is growing increasingly. To influence public opinion through the media and mass communication, one or more motivation should highly excite basic human instinct and drive it toward the special aims and dominance on public opinion [2, 3].

In our era, governments have become such a huge machine and economic and social policies are adopted in such specialized areas that the public does not have any role except being just viewers. Mass media partially fill a deep abyss between the government and people and that's why now more than ever some aspects of governments business is getting evident to people. Today when a political debate or an issue that is related to people's lives is proposed, mass media have capability and possibility to put a mirror in front of politicians through surveys and enumerations that they can get their picture in such a way that is reflected in the people's mind. The mass media make a powerful podium for people by playing this strategic role that allows them to get their voices heard by politicians and be assured that the government cannot totally unheard it, because they know that their dignity is based on the people's vote [11, 21].

### Agenda setting theory

Dr. Max McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw reported the systematic study of the agenda setting in 1972. They studied the agenda setting during the campaign for president in 1968, and proposed a hypothesis that mass media determine priorities for each political struggle and have emphasized on the importance of views related to political issues [22]. They conducted their study focusing on voters, because those who have not yet decided should be the most susceptible people for the effects of agenda setting. The researchers interviewed with a hundred of respondents and simultaneously the content analysis of mass media (five newspapers, two news magazines, two television channels which broadcasted evening news) was done and the respondents were asked the main problems of the country. Findings confirmed the effects of agenda setting. The correlation between the media focus on a topic and the voters understanding from that issue was 96%. The data shows that there is a strong relationship between the media focus on various political issues and voters' judgments about

the salience and importance [23]. After McCombs and Shaw, another researcher called "Funk Houser", worked on the understanding of the relationship between media coverage and public understanding of the important issue [24]. He concentrated his study in 1960, when there were too many outstanding issues. For measuring public opinion, he used the results of Gallup institute's opinion measurement. In that survey, people were asked for the most important problems that are encountered in US. He has done media content measurement through counting the number of articles presented on each subject in several media as well as considering the relationship between media content and reality. The results of this study show that there is a strong relationship between the general rankings of a topic as an important issue and the extent of media coverage. The topics that were given high-ranking by most people were the ones that were given a lot of coverage by media. These results are very similar with the agenda setting hypothesis. Funk Houser, in the second part of his study, examined the relationship between media coverage and the fact. In this context, he concluded that media coverage does not have a strong relationship with the facts. In the process of agenda setting, it is tried to exaggerate and highlight specific issues that are related to the country's macroeconomic policies. Especially in media wars which have been used in order to achieve military, economic and cultural results, the attacker country tries to highlight and exaggerate the confusion and difficulties of the target countries to provide dissatisfaction in the political background [25].

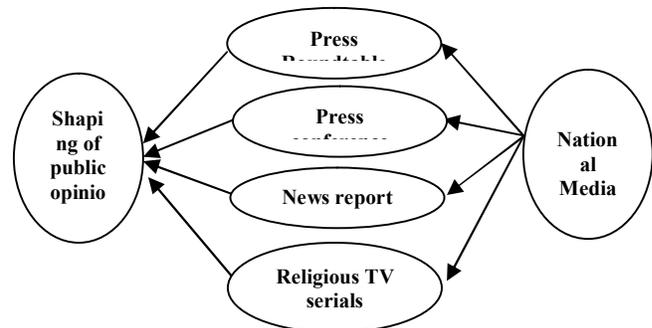


Figure 1. Analytical model of the study

## 2. Material and Methods

The research method in this study has been defined in terms of purpose, data collection method and implementation method, which stands for applied, survey and correlation, respectively.

Statistical population and sample:

The study population is all professors of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) Media and Communications Department. Due to the limited

number of samples (n=50), all members of the population are chosen for participating in the current study. Therefore, purposive sampling has been conducted and all samples are counted.

Statistical analysis:

Data analysis has been conducted in two ways; descriptive and inferential statistics. Using tables and graphs, data are summarized and described and according to the research hypotheses, data have been analyzed through Pearson test.

Research objectives

Main objective:

Understating of the role of the national media in shaping public opinion

Specific objectives:

1. Determining the role press roundtable of the national media in shaping public opinion
2. Determining the role of the press conference of the national media in shaping public opinion
3. Determining the role of the religious TV serials of the national media in shaping public opinion
4. Determining the role of the report news of the national media in shaping public opinion

Research hypotheses

Main hypothesis:

There is a significant relationship between the national media role and shaping public opinion through broadcasting press roundtables, press conferences, religious TV serials and news report.

Specific hypotheses:

1. There is a significant relationship between press roundtables of the national media and shaping public opinion.
2. There is a significant relationship between press conference of the national media and shaping public opinion.
3. There is a significant relationship between religious TV serials of the national media and shaping public opinion.
4. There is a significant relationship between report news of the national media and shaping public opinion.

### 3. Results

Table 1. The relationship between press roundtables of the national media and shaping public opinion

Variable	Statistical indicators	Shaping public opinion
Directing a press roundtable	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.778
	p-value	0.001
	No of samples	50

(Note: Pearson correlation coefficient between directing a press roundtable and shaping public opinion)

As it has been shown in Table 1, there is a positive and direct relationship between two variables (directing a press roundtable and shaping public opinion). In other words, increase number of press roundtable further increases the shaping of public opinion, but not in 100%, but this is true in 77 percent of cases and this result is generable. Thus the research hypothesis in terms of the relationship between holding a press roundtable and the shaping public opinion is confirmed and the relationship between these two variables is strong (0.778).

Table 2. The relationship between news conference of the national media and shaping public opinion

Variable	Statistical indicators	Shaping public opinion
Directing a News conference	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.870
	p-value	0.001
	No of samples	50

As it has been illustrated in Table 2, there is a positive and direct relationship between two variables (directing a news conference and shaping public opinion). In other words, increase number of news conference further increases shaping of public opinion, but not in 100%, but this is true in 87 percent of cases and this result is generable. Thus the research hypothesis in terms of the relationship between holding a news conference and shaping public opinion is confirmed and the relationship between these two variables is strong (0.870).

Table 3. The relationship between religious TV serials of the national media and shaping public opinion

Variable	Statistical indicators	Shaping public opinion
Religious TV serials	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.779
	p-value	0.001
	No of samples	50

(Note: Pearson correlation coefficient between religious TV serials and shaping public opinion)

As it has been displayed in Table 3, there is a positive and direct relationship between two variables (religious TV serials and shaping public opinion). In other words, increase number of religious TV serials further increases shaping of public opinion, but not in 100%, but this is true in 79 percent of cases and this result is generable. Thus the research hypothesis in terms of the relationship between religious TV serials and shaping public opinion is confirmed and the

relationship between these two variables is strong (0.79).

Also, there is a positive and direct relationship between two variables (news reports and shaping public opinion), as it has been illustrated in Table 4, In other words, increase number of news reports further increases shaping of public opinion, but not in 100%, but this is true in 71 percent of cases and this result is generable. Thus the research hypothesis in terms of the relationship between news reports and shaping public opinion is confirmed and the relationship between these two variables is strong (0.71).

Table 4. The relationship between news reports of the national media and shaping public opinion

Variable	Statistical indicators	Shaping public opinion
News reports	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.715
	p-value	0.001
	No of samples	50

(Note: Pearson correlation coefficient between religious TV serials and shaping public opinion)

#### 4. Conclusion

One of the most important components of a dynamic and thriving community is an ongoing, mutual and long lasting relationship between all sectors of a society. If a whole society is considered as a system, all components of the system need to struggle in order to prolong system's life. In summary, organizations, institutions and other sectors of a society must be connected and interact with each other in systematic views. This role is played in any society by the mass media. Media are considered as effective tools to maintain the balance of life and survival of a society, using the extensive capabilities and capacities of information and knowledge. Media plays a critical role in refining and revising their policies and strategies by carefully considering the actions and performance of the organizations at the community level. However, it should accompany with a commitment, responsibility, understanding of requirements and professional ethics to avoid transforming positive media performances into irreversible effects on society by neglecting these principles. Today, the role of the media, especially television, is very influential on audiences. In addition to pervasion and data transmission speed to audiences, television has further features such as more interaction with audience and more volume of accessible and feasible information. It could be said that television is revealed more highlighted due to the applying images, areas of coverage and accessibility.

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