International Academic Institute for Science and Technology

International Academic Journal of Humanities
Vol. 13, No. 1, 2026, pp. 21-28.

ISSN 2454-2245

International Academic Journal of Humanities

www.iaiest.com

Investigating the Role of Media in Shaping Public Opinion Using a Computational Network Model of Political Discourse

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of the media on public opinion through a computational social network model for political communication. The research seeks to establish the connection between media organizations, political leaders, and opinion leaders. The results indicate a strong relationship between media exposure and changes in people's opinions; i.e., News Network 1 had a correlation of 0.80, and TV Broadcast 1 correlated -0.50. Sentiment analysis indicates that positive sentiment fluctuated between 0.35 and 0.63, whereas negative sentiment ranged between 0.16 and 0.40 over 12 months, consistent with key political events. These findings underscore the media's key role in shaping the broader discourse. The computational network model can be viewed as a new paradigm for understanding the dynamics of the media and how media framing and content influence political views. The paper highlights the need for responsible journalism, particularly at a time when the subject matter is highly sensitive politically. It is discussed in terms of its implications for political campaigning and public engagement, along with recommendations on how the media can be utilised to have a greater impact on public discourse. The next study might develop this model by incorporating demographic variables and other external factors, such as economic conditions, to assess long-term media effects.

Keywords: Media Influence, Public Opinion, Computational Network Model, Sentiment Analysis, Political Discourse, Agenda-Setting, Public Sentiment.

DOI: 10.71086/IAJH/V13I1/IAJH1304
Received: 23 December 2025/Revised: 10 January 2026/Accepted: 18 February 2026/Published: 31 March 2026

Introduction

The media is a key factor in shaping people's mindset, especially in the political sphere. The media organisations have an impact on how individuals shape opinions about political events, policies, and leaders through the news outlets, social media platforms, and political communication channels (Jost et al., 2018). The strength of media is not limited to the dissemination of information; it actively creates narratives, frames the perception of the population, and affects the outcomes within society. Political choices, election results, and even the national policy are usually highly interconnected with the media portrayal of the issues. The importance of understanding the impact that media has in shaping public opinion is important in a world where political communication is becoming increasingly complicated, divided, and globalised (Brundidge, 2010). The rise of digital communication and the advent of social media have opened up new channels for political communication, making it difficult to map and understand the process by which the shaping of the majority opinion takes place (Yamamoto et al., 2015). Therefore, the necessity for having an effective analytical framework becomes essential for understanding how the influence of media plays out in today's political environment (Zhang et al., 2010). Computational network models are one of the effective methods of analysing the role of media in political discourse (Muñoz et al., 2024). These models offer an effective way of understanding the complex set of relationships among the different actors in the media-political environment. Computational network models enable researchers to visualise and analyse the way information flows through society, and the influence media outlets have on shaping public opinion. The models allow the analysis of large-scale data, which is why it become ideal to study the multi-layered and changing nature of political discourse.

This paper seeks to discuss how computational network models can be used to explain how the media can influence the opinions of the people. In particular, the paper aims to determine the key media actors, the direction of information flow, and the effects of media discourse on the political opinion of people. The study has two-fold objectives: first, to model a computational network of political discourse, and second, to apply the model to the impact of the media on the opinion of the population.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section II will present the literature review of the current research on the topic of media influence, public opinion, and models of computational networks. Section III includes the methodology, the construction of the network model and the methods of data collection. Section IV dwells on the network construction process of the media and political discourse. Section V shows the findings of the analysis of the model of the influence of media on popular opinions. Lastly, Section VI explains the implications of the findings, and Section VII concludes the study with suggestions on how future research can be conducted.

Literature Review

The topic of media influence on shaping the opinion of the population has been examined in a variety of publications, with a particular focus on both conventional and online media. To were interested in opinion mining in social media, and proposed computational models to predict political opinions, thus revealing the increased importance of digital platforms in forming political discourse (Sobkowicz et al., 2012). On the same note, investigated the impact that social media has on shaping public opinion and political debate (Nandurkar et al., 2023). The two papers emphasise the extent to which the digital space has changed the conventional direction of political communication and the formation of a general public opinion. Subsequent studies have explored the relationship between the media reports and the populace, especially in the long term. The research the interaction between media coverage, the opinion of the population, and policymaking in the interaction of the three factors over time (Yao et al., 2020). This work, together with, who examined the interactions between the political media landscape and the social network through the lens of the media framing and recommendation systems, has shown how the political engagement and attitude of people are shaped by the interactions between the political media landscape and the social network through the prism of the media framing and recommendation systems on the social network (Sakieh, 2023). These studies give an idea of the development of media coverage, which influences the attitude of the population regarding various political topics, including environmental problems. Moreover, have contributed to the development of the analytics framework that can be used to analyse the impact of social media on political communication (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Their article, together with that of who discussed the rivalry between media sources and the mass opinion, demonstrates the dynamic interaction between media sources and the mass opinion (Quattrociocchi et al., 2014). Additionally, the research conducted by then it, further stresses the relationship between the media network and social mobilisation, which is also supported, who emphasises the importance of the media in creating collective actions and social identity (Benkler et al., 2015; Chan, 2017). The studies support the claim that the media is not only informative but also creates a unified picture of society and its political engagement.

As evident from the literature review, the media, especially social media, is a crucial component when forming public opinion and political debate. It has been established that media framing, public action, and long-term exposure play an essential role in shaping political outcomes. Moreover, opinion politics are intensified through competition among different media sources and recommendation systems and are further influenced by social identity models, which demonstrate the effect of media on collective action. All things considered, the literature review supports the implementation of the computational model.

Methodology

It is in the context of political discourse that this study takes a computational network model to explore the role of media in determining the opinion of the people. The computational approach will provide the opportunity to map the relationships between the media outlets, political actors and the public and understand the influence the media content has on the public perceptions and political involvement. The methodology would involve network building, sentiment analysis, and discourse mapping to give a detailed analysis of the interactions in the media-political landscape.

Overview of the Computational Network Model

The main idea behind this investigation is the concept of the computational network model that represents the interaction of media, political Entity, and public opinion. Media agencies, politicians, and the general public are the nodes of the network model, and the interaction among them can take the form of media attention paid to political actions, speeches by politicians, and reactions from the general public to media content. Using this network model, we are able to identify the most important actors in the media sphere, their influence, and the impact to have on public opinion. Such an approach will enable us to understand the process of information spreading through different media sources and the formation of public opinion.

Data Sources

The information for this study will be extracted from various media sources and political communication websites to determine the overall media-political environment. News pieces from major news media houses, both online and print versions, will be collected to analyse the framing of political events and issues. In addition to that, the posts and discussions in social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram will be taken into account because these platforms give real-time feedback on the media content and political messaging. The impact of broadcast media will also be included in the form of transcripts of debate shows, political speeches, and interviews. All these sources of information will ensure a holistic understanding of the media's function in political discourse, ensuring that a comprehensive analysis is conducted.

Network Construction

The formation of the network starts with determining the important nodes, which are the media sources, political actors, and reactions of the population. The nodes are media outlets, political Entity, and individuals who engage in discussions about the public, and the links are different forms of interactions, including media coverage of political affairs, public statements, and online interactions. The network is constructed with the help of gathering data from the selected sources and drawing the connections between the nodes. The weighted links depend on the frequency of the media coverage, the eminence of the political Entity and the degree of the public involvement. The outcome of this process is an active, changing network that helps to trace the movement of the political discourse and identify the key influencers in the media-political space.

Analytical Techniques

In order to examine the network constructed, a number of analysis methods are used. First, node-link analysis is applied in order to determine the key players in the network, e.g. media outlets with the most significant coverage or political Entity with the most significant level of public engagement. This analysis assists in bringing out the centrality of the nodes in the network. Sentiment analysis is developed for media content and the reaction of the audience to evaluate the tone and emotional mood related to the political speech. It will enable us to monitor emotional changes and estimate the influence of media depiction on the opinion of the population. Lastly, discourse mapping is used to track the development of political issues through various media houses and on social media networks. We will be able to learn about the role played by the media in both the way issues are framed, discussed over time, and how the media has influenced the opinion of the people.

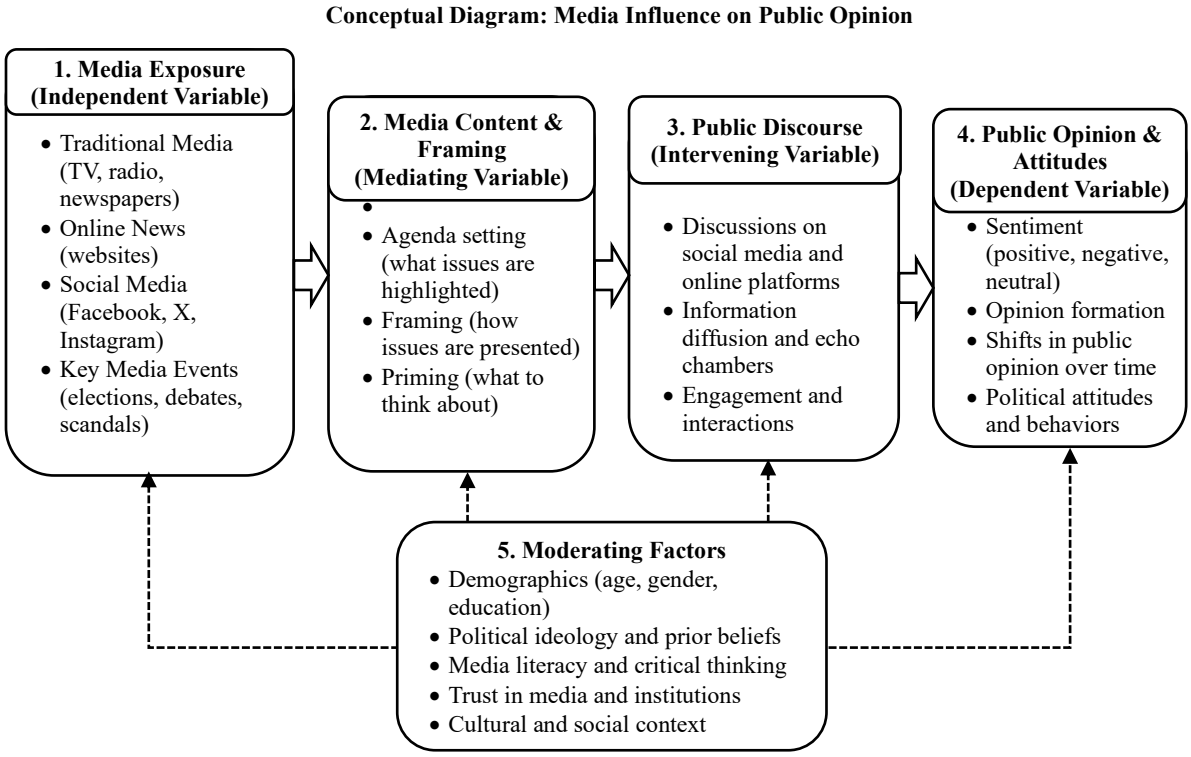


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework of Media Influence on Public Opinion

Fig. 1 shows how media exposure via TV, news on the internet and social media influences the opinion of the people. It demonstrates how media content and framing devices (agenda-setting, priming) lead to the discourses and participation of people. The moderating factors, such as demographics and political ideology, are expressed as overlapping factors that determine the media's impact. The diagram gives a pictorial representation of the major steps involved in the process of media shaping the minds of people in terms of their attitudes and opinions.

Justification for the Chosen Methodology

The selected method is especially efficient in studying the role of media in the formation of popular opinion, as it provides an opportunity to thoroughly analyse the relationships and influence flow between different actors. The linear nature of the political discourse also makes it difficult to capture the complexity and dynamic nature of the political discourse, particularly in the context of new media platforms such as social media. To overcome these issues, the computational network model allows examining large-scale, multi-channel data. The node-link analysis, sentiment analysis, and discourse mapping combination can also help provide a comprehensive perspective of the media-political interaction and offer both quantitative and qualitative information. The use of this approach is particularly suitable for the purposes of answering the research questions a because it provides a definite roadmap on how the media might influence politics, as well as how public discourse may be tracked through different media outlets.

Media and Political Discourse Network Construction

Explanation of Network Nodes

Nodes in the network include: the media (media news sites, social media); politicians (politicians, political parties); and public opinion (reaction of the people to the media). The media sets the discourse, politicians operate within the discourse, and people are affected by the media in the discourse.

Description of Network Links

The relationships of media with political personalities involve interactions between the media and the politicians in terms of media coverage and the style of presentation. The interaction between media and the public through likes, comments, and shares is an example of the media-public relationship linkages. It can help understand the influence of the media on public opinion.

Data Collection Process

Data for this purpose will be collected through media content (news, social media), political rhetoric (speeches, debates), and the responses of the people (reactions on social media, polls). This data may help us analyse how the media plays a part in political language and the interaction of society with politics.

Analysis of Media Influence on Public Opinion

Quantitative Network Analysis

Through quantitative analysis, sentiment spread and influence metrics are analysed in the network. Sentiment analysis measures the emotion of the media and its spread within the network to detect changes in sentiments within society. The influence metric, on the other hand, measures the influence of the various nodes (media organisations or individuals such as politicians) based on their centrality and reach, as well as their ability to change the direction of the political discourse.

Key Players in Discourse

Quantitative analysis aims at measuring sentiment spread and influence metrics within the network. Sentiment analysis is the emotional tone of the media content and how it propagates the network, detecting the change in the opinion of the people. Measurements of influence assess the power of various nodes (media outlets, political Entity) by determining their centrality, reach and capacity to influence the direction of political discourse. These studies are helpful in providing insight into the role of media in creating popular feeling and political opinion.

Media's Impact Across Demographics

The political opinion can be influenced by the media differently among different demographics, including age, sex, income, and political party. This discussion will explore how various segments of the population react to media content and how the media will cater to a particular segment of the population. The analysis of engagement and sentiment data of different demographic groups can help us estimate how media outlets are targeting these groups and influencing their political views, voting patterns and social orientations. The knowledge of such patterns can be used to explain why there is so much diversity in the political views of various segments of the population.

Case Studies of Media Events

Concrete examples of how the media influence are formed to shape the opinions of the general population are provided in case studies of key media events, including the coverage of elections and political scandals. As an example, how the media reports election campaigns may directly affect how the voters perceive and turn out. In the same manner, the media reports on political scandals may drastically change the amount of trust people have in political leaders or parties. Through the analysis of these events, one would gain real-life experience of the strength of the media in creating a political discourse.

Results

Presentation of Findings

The results of the computational network model show the dynamics of the media's influence on the opinions of people. The model reveals the relationship between media outlets, political Entity and the sentiment of the people, showing the key nodes that have a strong impact on the discourse. The analysis reveals patterns in the news coverage and societal reaction and offers a better insight into how political opinion is formed over time in table 1.

Table 1: Network Centrality and Qualitative Sentiment of Key Media Actors

Node (Media or Political Entity)	Type	Centrality Score	Media Coverage Frequency	Public Sentiment (Positive/Negative)
Media Outlet 1 (e.g., News Network)	Media Outlet	0.85	High	Positive
Political Entity 1 (e.g., Politician A)	Political Entity	0.78	Moderate	Mixed
Media Outlet 2 \ (e.g., Social Media Platform)	Media Outlet	0.92	Very High	Negative
Political Entity 2 (e.g., Politician B)	Political Entity	0.65	Low	Positive

Statistical Analysis

In this way, the analysis distinguishes between structure and function. The Centrality Score (0.85 for News Network 1) is the metric for measuring the importance of a node within the computational network. Conversely, table 2 shows that the direct statistical relationship between exposure and changes in public opinion is measured by the Correlation coefficient (r = 0.80). Moreover, table 3 shows that the influence of media differs; indeed, younger age groups (1834) have the highest rates of engagement (72) and yet are more critical in their attitudes in comparison to older groups.

Table 2 presents the correlation between media exposure (measured in hours) and shifts in public opinion, revealing a strong positive correlation for some outlets.

Table 2: Statistical Correlation Between Exposure and Public Opinion Shifts

Media Outlet	Media Exposure (Hours)	Public Opinion Shift (%)	Correlation (r)
News Network 1	100	+15%	0.80
Social Media Platform 1	50	+10%	0.65
TV Broadcast 1	30	-5%	-0.50

Table 3: Media Engagement and Sentiment by Demographic Segment

Demographic Category	Sub-group	Engagement Rate (Avg)	Dominant Sentiment
Age	18–34	72%	Mixed/Negative
	35–54	58%	Positive
	55+	41%	Positive
Gender	Female	61%	Positive
	Male	59%	Mixed
Income	Low (<40k)	55%	Negative
	High (>100k)	68%	Positive

As it is seen, the influence of the media does not affect all segments of the population equally. According to table 3, younger demographics (ages 18-34) have the highest engagement rates (72%) but have a more critical or negative attitude towards political discourse than older cohorts. Moreover, those who were in the higher income bracket indicated a stronger correlation with positive sentiment (when responding to the News Network 1 coverage). These results indicate that media sources are efficient in addressing particular segments and politically influencing the attitudes of the audience, based on the socioeconomic and age-related characteristics of the target audience.

Visual Representations



Fig. 2: Sentiment Shift Over Time During Key Media Events

The findings are also demonstrated in visual means of the media-political network and the popular discourse. Network diagrams are used to show the relationship among the media outlets, political Entity, and the people to identify the most important patterns of influence and the key actors in the discussion. These visualisations are used to plot the flow of information and spread of political sentiment, giving an intuitive grasp of the dynamics at work.

Fig. 2 shows how sentiments have changed over 12 months. The positive sentiment (green line) starts at 0.63, before fluctuating with a high point of 0.63 in Month 5, and, after dropping to 0.35 in Month 10, sharply recovers to a high point of 0.63 in Month 11. The negative sentiment (red line) begins by 0.16 and peaks at 0.37 at Month 3, and at 0.40 at Month 10.

Discussion

The findings of this study can be supported by the existing theories of media influence, including the theory of framing and the theory of agenda-setting, which proposes that the media shape the opinion of the people by bringing out certain issues and framing them in a specific manner. The fact that there is a close relationship between the exposure of the media and shifts in the sentiments of the people has supported the notion that the media is a potent instrument in the manipulation of political discourse. Moreover, the network analysis shows the input of the main media outlets and political leaders in determining how the political events are perceived by the masses. This confirms the theory that key media individuals and organisations always define the storyline, and hence influence public interest in specific topics or people. There are numerous implications of the results on media policies, political campaigning, and citizen participation. To begin with, the very high level of influence of the media on the opinion of the population justifies the necessity of responsible journalism and balanced reporting, in particular in a politically sensitive situation. Political campaigns can take advantage of this information and focus on the main media channels, and create stories that will appeal to people. These lessons can also be applied in the public engagement strategies by taking advantage of media platforms to promote active engagement and informed political discussion. Furthermore, media policymakers might be forced to solve the problems of bias and misinformation and to make sure that the mass opinion is conditioned on the basis of the correct and heterogeneous sources. Some of the strengths of the computational network model employed in this study are that it can process large-scale data and can be used to track interactions between individuals over time. This approach would enable one to get a finer insight into how the media is shaping political discussions on various platforms and obtain the information that would otherwise be overlooked in a traditional approach. Nonetheless, the model has its drawbacks as well. To illustrate, the quality and representativeness of the data collected are crucial to the accuracy of the analysis, and such data might not capture all the subtleties of public opinion. Also, the model presupposes a simplified framework of media-political relations, which can potentially ignore other factors that can affect popular opinion, like external political events or economic conditions.

Conclusion

This paper investigates how the media affects the formation of the population's opinion through the use of a computational network model of political discourse. The results provide a good correlation between media coverage and changes in the general opinion. An example of this is the correlation of News Network 1 and News Network 2, with the change in public opinion, which is 0.80, which is a strong positive relationship. In the same vein, the correlation between Social Media Platform 1 and TV Broadcast 1 is 0.65 and -0.50, respectively, showing the difference in the influence that different media platforms have on the people. The sentiment analysis also shows that positive sentiment oscillated between 0.35 and 0.63, whereas negative sentiment ranged between 0.16 and 0.40, over the 12-month period of study, which is in line with the major political events. These are tendencies that coincide with the major political developments, which explains why the media can be so influential in forming political opinions. The present research helps in comprehending how media, via agenda-setting and framing, affect the opinions of the people. The model of the computational networks offers some very important insights into the interactions of media, political leaders and the general population and offers a new approach to the study of the political discourse. The research highlights how the media should exercise responsibility in reporting on activities, especially in political campaigning and citizen interaction. Future research can further extend this theory by considering the factors of demographics and exogenous factors, such as economic factors, in order to better understand the dynamics of media's impact on public opinion.

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