

How Convincing is the CNN Effect in Explaining Contemporary US Foreign Policy?

Written by Andrew Clarke

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Gaining prominence in the post-Cold War era, the CNN Effect thesis originally described the facilitation of instant communication between states and leaders, forcing them to adopt policies and take decisions they would not otherwise make. The issue of media influence on policymakers is still at the forefront of foreign policy analysis, however the debate has evolved in a number of ways. Firstly, much of the research on the CNN Effect does not take into account the rising presence of the internet in foreign affairs. As demonstrated in the Arab Spring, sources such as social networking sites are beginning to have a drastic effect on the way we receive information. Secondly, some scholars, such as Gilboa would argue that the CNN Effect is nothing more than a paradigm as it has never been fully defined and can be interpreted in various ways (2005:326). Without a concrete definition, debate has centred on whether the media actually forces or merely influences governments in their foreign policy. For the purpose of this essay it shall be argued that the CNN Effect is certainly part of the agenda setting process, but is only one of a number of players involved in the conduct of foreign policy. Particularly in the case of US foreign policy, interest groups can play a significant role in policymaking. For example, Philo and Berry point to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as a reason for the significant media coverage and interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict (2004:252), which remains one of the most over-reported areas of foreign policy in the media (Bahador, 2011:41). Both of these claims are later explored in more detail.

Within the field of foreign policy analysis there is widespread acknowledgement of the media's power to influence the policymaking process. However, there is disagreement about the way in which it influences, and whether it is a good force. Analysing from a realist perspective, critics would argue for the need of elite control (Robinson, 1999:302) rather than allowing military interventions to be effectively led by media coverage. Perhaps one exception to the notion of media influencing government policy is Hermann and Chomsky's Propaganda or Manufacturing Consent model, which poses the idea that the media follows the government and power structures rather than the reverse: "A propaganda model suggests that the 'societal purpose' of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state" (1994: 298). It could be argued that this model has some merit, and has been demonstrated as early as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. In this particular case, President John F Kennedy made a "personal intervention... with several newspapers, the only stories written Monday morning were reports that a major speech was to be given by the President" (Kennedy, 1969:29).

Arguably, the propaganda model accurately describes the US foreign policy approach towards the Israel/Palestine conflict, which remains an issue very much at the top of the agenda: "In all media corporations studied [ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, The New York Times and the Google news archive], the Israel-Palestine conflict received by far the most coverage" (Hawkins, 2011: 57). As outlined, pressures on policymakers from interest groups aligned with corporate interests or religious groups can have a strong effect on the conduct of foreign policy (Ramos et al., 2007: 387). In looking particularly at the pro-Israel lobby in America, we can see a clear avenue of influence. "AIPAC's power has become the stuff of Washington legend. Fortune magazine consistently puts it in the top five special interest groups. No other foreign policy based lobby groups gets into the top 25" (Radio 4, 2002). Further to this, it has been argued that media coverage itself is influenced heavily by the pro-Israel lobby to such a degree that

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there is almost a culture of fear in media circles surrounding the issue (Philo and Berry, 2004: 253-4):

“Journalists are often loathe to write about the influence of organised Jewry. Throughout the Arab world, the ‘Jewish lobby’ is seen as the root of all evil in the Middle East, and many reporters and editors – especially Jewish ones – worry about feeding such stereotypes... Jewish organisations are quick to detect bias in the coverage of the Middle East and quick to complain about it” (Massing, 2002).

Massing’s observations demonstrate to a large extent the sheer power of the pro-Israel lobby to in fact shape media coverage, rather than vice versa. He does, nevertheless, contend that the US support for Israel is not simply a direct result of lobbying. Rather it may also be influenced by the value of Israel as a strategic ally and the only democracy in the Middle East, at least at the time of writing (Massing, 2002).

An alternative route of analysis is to understand the circumstances in which the media can become more or less influential (Robinson, 2011). To assess the fluctuations in media influence, one can look at the idea of policy certainty. In this case, the media can become submissive and almost suspend negative coverage when a high degree of consensus exists between foreign policymakers. This was the case leading up to the 2003 Iraq War. Given the strong emotive connotations attached to Iraq and terrorism in general to America in the context of a post-9/11 world, the media largely suspended its criticisms of the Bush administration policy. After the government had widely promoted the idea of a global war on terror and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities of Iraq, it was perhaps understandable that the media halted its criticism. Coupled with this was a perceived loyalty and ability to ‘fall in line’ within Bush’s National Security Council (Bahador, 2011:47). With the gift of hindsight, perhaps the media could have played a larger role in scrutinising the intelligence surrounding the WMDs. This particular case once again illustrates that the manufacturing consent model is, at least in some ways, more fitting to the understanding of US foreign policy conduct. It is certainly true that if adding political leadership to the analytical understanding of foreign policy, we can understand another area of the decision making process.

Another criticism of research on the CNN Effect is that studies assessing its effectiveness focus mainly on military interventions and defence issues. It would be naïve to dismiss the media’s influence in areas such as economics, health and environment, as it remains the main source for information. In his review of the CNN Effect, Robinson differentiates between substantive and procedural policy issues. The former will often result in a smaller sphere of influence due to the policies perhaps having high economic and political costs. However, procedural policy issues, such as supplying humanitarian aid may result in a higher level of media influence (Robinson, 2011:7). This is largely dependent on media framing though – the way in which a story is reported. Hawkins argues that an emotive story providing a ‘call to action’ can lead to strong increases in humanitarian aid (2011: 63). After the conflict in Darfur, for example, there was evidence to suggest that the relatively high level of aid provided to the victims may have led to the lower ratio of indirect to direct deaths (Hawkin, 2011: 63).

In addition to this, the CNN Effect fails to observe the use of what Joseph Nye has termed ‘smart power’, the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction (2011: xiii). Traditionally, the CNN Effect (and the news media) has, in general, increased the coverage of large scale conflicts, i.e. those with the highest death toll (Hawkins, 2011:61). However, it may be somewhat unfair to measure foreign policy success simply on an arbitrary number. Nye draws attention to the evolution of American military policy, which has evolved much further into using smart power. For example, in training Iraqi forces post-conflict and promoting international military education, the US is providing much more of a service (Nye, 2011:47). This is likely to receive less media coverage though as it lacks the emotive element attached to large numbers of deaths.

Overall, the main area of contention in using the CNN Effect as a model for explaining the conduct of foreign policy is that it fails to accept the possibility of other factors in the decision making process. Other foreign policy analysts may place more emphasis on psychological models and the role of groupthink, or the influence of public opinion. After all, from a business perspective, media companies exist as a profit generator. In order to fulfil this objective, they are somewhat constrained by their consumers (the public). In addition to this, we cannot underestimate the role of leaders in the conduct of foreign policy. Some would argue that George W Bush was always intending to invade Iraq regardless of whether a second resolution was passed by the United Nations. This provides clear ground for the

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personality interpretation that can be used in foreign policy analysis.

As discussed in my introduction, the CNN Effect, due to the context in which it was created, fails to take into account the role of new technologies. This is something that Livingston tackles though, when he proposes the idea of the “CNN Effect Plus” (2003:112). With the advent of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the CNN Effect perhaps needs to be recalibrated in various ways. The lack of a narrower definition plays against the merits of the CNN Effect. Is it to be understood as forcing or merely pressuring governments to act? Throughout this essay, I have argued that the media does indeed play a key role in the policymaking process. However, it is just one of many deciding factors when making foreign policy decisions. Ultimately, any decision lies with the President in his role as Commander-in-Chief. He is clearly subject to a number of mitigating factors and circumstances. We have seen the role that public opinion and interest groups can play in shaping the policy outlook of America and even influence the media to report stories in certain ways. As well as this, the President can perhaps face increased media pressure in cases of policy uncertainty, when his administration may have differing ideas on solutions. This was shown during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when JFK resisted calls from many of his advisers and military staff for a stronger stance against Khrushchev (Kennedy, 1969:54). Given the fact that the CNN Effect is also subject to only a small amount of empirical studies, though there have been attempts (see Bahador, 2011), it is difficult to interpret exactly what we understand to be the CNN Effect and the type of influence it has. We can speculate as to the situations in which the media may have a stronger voice on issues. However, the CNN Effect is ultimately an outdated thesis, and should be viewed as only one aspect in the conduct of foreign policy.

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