Foreign Policy, the State, International Public Opinion and the Media

Foreign Policy, the State, International Public Opinion and the Media:

What Gets Lost in the Cracks?

The conduct of foreign policy, the state, public opinion (domestic and international) and the media intermingle in a nexus of complex relationships. These relationships are being transformed through globalisation, technological marvels and outside-in led pressures. Considerable scholarly research has been conducted on these relationships within the fields of International Relations, Foreign Policy Analysis and Information, and several theorems have been forwarded. However, this paper argues that there is no singular suitable grand/meso theory as a ramification of relationships progressively transforming, while the position and role of the media is fluid, shifting between elite and plural conceptual models. Thus, what gets lost in the cracks changes according to context. The paper firstly attempts to unravel the complex relationships surrounding the key concepts under investigation, before looking to empirical evidence of these relationships within the case-studies of Vietnam and Iraq and then identifying what exactly can get lost in these cracks. The research methodology utilised is qualitative; epistemology is broadly outside-in, leaning towards agency-based perspectives through the emphasis of cognitive processes in the media environment, where the media as an agency influences structure. The ontological focus is on this constructed media environment, its relationships and how it may be manipulated.

The international state system, of post-Westphalian lineage, has evolved to be conceptualised in a number of different ways: First, Second and Third worlds; the East and the West; the global North and global South; or the centre and the periphery. In any and all perceptions, the state has arguably prevailed as a primary territorial entity (Hughes, 1997: 71-75); it's inherent monopoly on violence (sovereignty) remains "a central legal concept" (Hill, 2003: 31). The dealings of states amidst the anarchic international system have traditionally been centralised, foreign policy being the tool of princes who could effectively "stand alone" (Machiavelli, 2003: 33-36). However, foreign policy is a broad field, being "the sum of official external relations conducted" (Hill, 2003: 3); Gilboa breaking it into two stages, "policy making" and "interaction and diplomacy", the policy's implementation (2002: 732). While diplomacy may be the domain of princes, both princes and governments alike require a supportive population, thus 'policy making' is not necessarily 'stand alone', foreign policy being "one way in which a *society* defines itself, against the backcloth of the outside world" (Hill, 2003: 5, emphasis added).

Liberal democracy has empowered populations to scrutinise foreign policy, making public opinion "both an instrument and a factor in the conduct of foreign policy" (Tatu, 1984: 26). Democratic principles demand that the government should respond to public opinion, for which elections and media-orated concerns are tools (Robinson, 2008: 139), it is after all, the public which legitimises the government within democracies. Public opinion should not be thought of as a rational or singular actor, however, nor of singular consensus, rather it is multi-faceted, as the culmination of interest groups and the masses, while 'attentive opinion' varies (Hughes, 1997: 187).

Three realisations of public opinion are common, 1) "the low level of knowledge that informs", 2) "the volatility of opinion on many specific issues", and 3) "the long-term stability of fundamental attitudinal structures" (Hughes, 1997:

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183). However, a knowledge-gap does not stop the volatile and opinionated (Hill, 2003: 263), and while it may make the elites wary of public involvement, it remains arguably their democratic right. This 'right' can vary in theory and practice; if all decisions were delegated to the public by way of referendums, policy making would be subjected to the "tyranny of the majority" (Mueller, 1995: 167). Were the public to have no say in policy making, with all power centralised with the governments implementers, then policy making would be subjected to an "elected dictatorship" (Goody, 2006: 251). Of course, even under 'elected dictatorships', public opinion is still exerted through 'punishing' and 'rewarding' political parties on election day (Robinson, 2008: 140).

Within the public's relationship with the state and foreign policy conduct, news-media (comprising print newspapers, television news, radio and the internet) are commonly perceived as "gatekeepers" (Naveh, 2002: 5). Free press is a requisite for democracy (Held, 2006: 280), and has been conceptualised as the 'fourth estate' of government (Hill, 2003: 273), a role in which it can "help to educate, inform and facilitate debate" (Smith and Dunne, 2008: 141). In this role, it has been said that "journalists see themselves as guardians of the public welfare" (Graber, in Powlick and Katz, 1998: 40). Adherence to this ethical stance creates what Gergen called "a world of discourse" (1999: 222), where objectivity, truth and reality can be battled over, with weapons of competing speech acts and narratives for armour. In reality, of course, the news-media does not demonstrate flawless democratic pluralism, through monopolising media-barons (elites in their own right), and fickle short-termism (Hill, 2003: 278). However ultimately, when the news-media presents an issue to the public, interest levels over the issue rise, inevitably resulting in pressure reaching government (Iyengar and Kinder, in Mueller, 1994: 130). From the state government perspective, news-media murmurings can signify public opinion (Hill, 2003: 265).

The balance of these relationships is evolving. Now in the twenty-first century, the international system seems somewhat less anarchic; external regimes such as human rights and supranational governance such as the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) compete with states for space (Hill, 2003: 34). Globalised interconnectedness creates overlapping frameworks, arguably restricting state freedoms (Hughes, 1997: 493). Globalisation has also facilitated non-official voluntarism to internationalise public opinion allowing large scale activism to reap considerable impacts on state policy (Scholte, 2001: 26), as seen in the 'Arab Spring' of 2011. This may be in the guise of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating amidst global information networks to promote change as well as stall governmental efforts (Aronson, 2001: 551), or it could simply be popular-culture led, such as with the recent upsurge in the use of social networking sites.

Arguably, while globalisation weakens states, it strengthens media. Through "transforming revolutions in communication and international affairs" (Gilboa, 2002: 743) spurring the rise of the 'information society', whereby information technology has replaced land and labour as the primary societal source of power (Scholte, 2001: 20-21). Globalisation has thus created a new space for the news-media and discourse within the conduct of foreign policy (Naveh, 2002: 11). Within this 'information society' of 24/7 news networks of international reach such as CNN and Al Jazeera, the news-media can influence through a consortium of techniques, including 'agenda setting' through focussing on issues, 'priming' by directing judgement, 'framing', tailoring the presentation of issues, and 'deflecting' opposing narratives (Robinson, 2008: 144-146).

The news-media 'gatekeepers' are commonly conceptualised to be either pluralist or manipulated by elites. The pluralist theoretical model is the democratic ideal mentioned above, whereby power and influence is dispersed, with the media and public separate from political manipulation and so able to constrain government and thus foreign policy (Robinson, 2008: 138). As Gandhi said,

the objectives of the press: to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects (Gandhi, in Smith, 1980).

In practice, print journalism is often considered to be more partisan than the coverage of the television news-media (Robinson, 2008: 142), but partisan methods may be required to expose defects and regulate.

The 'CNN effect' is one often cited theorem whereby 24/7 news-media vigorously frames issues to saturation point, forcing government action (Gilboa, 2002: 733, Hill, 2003: 273, Robinson, 2008: 138). As per a partisan *New York*

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Times article, all it took was "the spectacle of mass open graves and children sobbing over dead mothers to prick American interest in Africa" (*New York Times*, 1994, in Moeller, 1999: 126), spurring Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. A couple of years later,

television pictures of dead US rangers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, in Somalia, revulsed public opinion, leading to the most definitive policy decision possible: complete withdrawal of American forces (McLaughlin, 2002: 196).

Such is the power inherent in the news-media mobilising public opinion. Here the state loses initiative and the ability to pursue national interests free from interference.

In contrast, the elite theoretical model is antithetical to democratic values, whereby "media and public opinion are subservient to political elites" (Robinson, 2008: 138-139). The elite model is rather Machiavellian, with foreign policy dictated by the 'prince', while "domestic affairs will always remain under control provided that relations with external powers are under control" (Machiavelli, 2003: 59); at the extreme end of such a relationship can be found the likes of *Pravada*, the mouthpiece of the Soviet Union. In western democracies it has been argued that the 'CNN effect' has rendered the media the dominant agency of foreign policy conduct, replacing policy-makers – but is the media independent, or being hand-fed news-agendas from the state (Gilboa, 2002: 732)? Elites such as media barons can 'manufacture consent', through their having the capacity to "filter out the news fit to print" to the governments tune, as in Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 2).

Independent news-media still relies upon advertising revenues and elite sources for information, creating a clash of interests from the media watchdog function. The media can accordingly be "reluctant to challenge the administration, the media can simply become a means of transmission for the administration, rather than a critical filter" (Kull et al, 2004: 593). This can be seen in the likes of embedded journalists within army units, who are supplied with a government approved narrative. Even when the news-media does 'call the tune' as with Somalia, it cannot control how the government in office will react (Robinson, 2008: 142); it rather depends upon the elected officials' own democratic credentials. Here democratic values and objectivity are at stake.

While democracies should bear governments which are responsive to the people, those elected officials are employed to remove the burden of decision making from the citizen, and effectively 'run the country'; as Hills noted, "the public is usually a follower, not a leader" (2003: 264). An added complexity in the current 'information society', and the internationalised nature of that society, is *who* governments attempt to lead. Potentially, elites can now use the media to target foreign publics in addition to domestic audiences, in order to create public pressure on foreign elites and thus enact a foreign policy influencing *foreign* foreign policy!

Through this 'public diplomacy' governments can attempt to 'by-pass' their counterparts in favour of directly influencing international civil society. In effect this is a more subtle form of propaganda or subversion, by influencing "morale or belief in another state" (Hill, 2003: 279). In this sense it is an extension of 'soft power', the utilization of attraction as opposed to coercion, relying on cultural rather than military might (Nye and Owens, 1996: 21). However such methods can be construed to possess ethical concerns, through interference in other states (not to mention issues of sovereignty), but what of the democratic public's right to know (Hills, 2003: 281)? Upon the spectrum of plural to elitist theoretical models, 'public diplomacy' is broadly elitist, however it's potential subversive implications can be used to undermine hostile or undemocratic regimes (Hill, 2003: 152), such as through abetting the civil society-led strife in Gaddafi's Libya.

Looking further back, America's escalating involvement in Indo-China after the French defeat has become a significant demonstration of the plural theoretical model in practice, it being popularly thought that lacking domestic support for Vietnam undermined the war effort (Robinson, 2008: 140). This is not to say that the American public were always anti-war; Vietnam is rather an enactment of Machiavelli's (2003) elitist adage of four-hundred years before, that domestic affairs will be stable if foreign affairs are. However, foreign affairs in Vietnam exploded as a result of the 1968 Tet Offensive; as the war turned into a quagmire, domestic affairs followed suit. Here the news-media was a facilitator, "when America goes to war, so too does the press" (Kalb, 1994: 3), and by the 1960s growth

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in information technology had benefited the press with newfound 'liveness' (McLaughlin, 2002: 24). The American public soon heard of devastating attacks across the southern Vietnamese cities, on Dak To and Khe Sanh firebases, and on the American embassy and southern army headquarters (Willbanks, 2008: 15-31).

The American government's narrative forwarded that the Tet Offensive was "a desperate last gasp of a defeated enemy" (Hilsman, 1990: 51), that more troops were needed, but to exploit the newfound enemy weakness, not because the war effort was failing (Willbanks, 2008: 203). However the government lost the discourse war; the news-media attacking with superior speech acts on which public opinion could bandwagon. Chief of which, Walter Cronkite's CBS news report, "[w]e are mired in stalemate" (Cronkite, in Willbanks, 2008: 205), can largely be accredited with costing Johnson the race for the next presidential election. As Hilsman described, the American public now believed "the Viet Cong were 10 feet tall and could strike anywhere in Vietnam" (Hilsman, 1990: 53). As Hills noted, while opinion polls are rarely counted on when it comes to foreign policy, Vietnam syndrome changed this (2003: 267). Even American defence spending slumped as a ramification of downgraded public support for the war, before Senator Charlie Wilson's cause in Afghanistan gained popularity (Hughes, 1997: 187). It was only in February 2009 that President Obama relinquished a ban on broadcasting footage of American soldier's repatriated coffins, a measure to curb news-media influence that generates negative public opinion (Stone, 2009).

The Gulf War of 1990/1991 and the Iraq War of 2003 pose interesting examples of the elite theoretical model in practice. Whereas the 1991 conflict put the memory of Vietnam to bed, the 2003 conflict evoked it with a vengeance. As per Chomsky's conceptualisation of media-propaganda, governments held the reins of the news-media in the 1991 Gulf War, where information dripped from press-conferences dominated the air-waves and public consumption (Cloud, in MacArthur, 2004: 155). As a result the war took the form of a movie to domestic audiences. Control over journalists' spoon-fed information during the 1991 war reached levels whereby they could not ask critical questions (Kalb, 1994: 3); thus at the mercy of the government narrative through a lack of pluralism in the news-media, public opinion could only see the war as "correct and just" (Morrison, 1992: 93).

In the 2003 Iraq War, both the British and American governments again devoted significant effort into convincing their respective publics of the need to wage war on Saddam (Robinson, 2008: 140). This was a deliberative act, with British doctrine such as *Media Operations: Joint Doctrine Publication 3-45.1* (2007) and the *MoD Green Book* (2008), utilizing apparatus of state to "secure popular and political support for the UK's policy objectives" (MoD, 2007: 1-2). However the media-environment had shifted. The elite's iron grasp of the media was weakened in the 2003 conflict by greater plurality from news-networks. Al Jazeera, the Qatar based news agency now forwarded different, competing narratives in their coverage of the 2003 Iraq War. Al Jazeera highlighted the war's negative impact on civilians, contradicting the British and American government narratives. This prompted Al Jazeera as a brand being criticised by these western governments, their accusing Al Jazeera of being a mouthpiece for hostile powers in a new battle of discourse (Taylor, 2003: 101). Despite British polls depicting the majority of public opinion as being opposed to the 2003 conflict, Prime Minister Blair maintained his foreign policy stance (Robinson, 2008: 141). On news-media pressure over the rationale of the 2003 War, Blair later wrote in his book *A Journey* (2010):

The intelligence was wrong and we should have, and I have, apologised for it. So the real story is a story and a true one. But in today's [media] environment, it doesn't have that sensational, outrage-provoking 'wow' factor of scandal. Hence an error is made into a deception. And it is this relationship between politics and media which then defines the political debate (2010: 463).

Perhaps Blair's narrative of 'the real story' was 'a story', and 'a true one'; perhaps the news-media was sensationalist. What is clear is that news-media led pluralism trumped Blair's government narrative. Ultimately Blair had placed himself in a perilous situation; as Machiavelli taught, "a prince should never join in an aggressive alliance with someone more powerful than himself… if you are victors, you emerge as his prisoner" (Machiavelli, 2003: 73), or in Blair's case, as Bush's "poodle" (Assinder, 2003).

In bringing the empirical study up-to-date, the unfolding discourse over Gadaffi's Libya perhaps poses a new twist. Here internationalised civil society has swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with revolutionary

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vigour, monopolising much of news-media air time. The Western-led (with Arab elements) intervention could be interpreted as the 'CNN effect' in action, the mass-media levying agenda setting focus, spurring western governments (notably Britain and France) into action. With 'public diplomacy' in mind however, the nature of this "gunboat humanitarianism" (Schofield, 2011) may be interpreted as these western governments attempting to rebrand themselves before international public opinion, particularly after recent misadventures in the Arab and Islamic worlds. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in addition to influencing foreign publics, has won massive support from the French, some calling his actions a "De Gaulle moment" (Schofield, 2011).

As a ramification of the relationships detailed and their 'playing through' in these examples, it can be surmised that the conceptual positioning of the media is indeed a fluid one. Consequences of media relationships shifting transcend beyond conceptualisations, in affecting the very practice of democracy. The news-media must be objective for the plural theoretical model to work in practice (Robinson, 2008: 141), but the government must also be able to pursue greater state interests. A healthy balance must be sought, as Hill argued there are (and must be) limits to the degree in which the news-media can empower or mold publics in its position as gatekeeper (2003: 275). Clausewitz famously reckoned "that war was the continuation of politics and that war changed as politics and society altered" (in Brown, 2003: 43), but war is only one exertion of foreign policy – evolving relationships affect them all. So what are the notional cracks? In the supposition that the media's positioning in the spectrum between the theoretical plural and elite models can shift; the cracks are chasms which open behind any such movement. A shift towards the elite model opens a chasm of objectivity and democratic values; while movement towards the plural model, while positive for democracy, signifies a chasm of state initiative and the state's rational ability to pursue the national interest. For instance, as Moeller lamented on the lack of action over the Rwanda genocide, "there are genocidal acts that fall through the cracks of coverage… Certain locales just don't make the cut" (1999: 227). Intervention in Rwanda was not in western states interests, but under such chasms of objectivity, the democratic public lose control to prioritise.

In conclusion, the news-media holds significant power in the position of an intermediary between a state's foreign policy apparatus and the state's polis. Globalisation and the internationalisation of public opinion create for this relationship to be perpetually shifting. As a ramification, singular theorems such as the 'CNN effect' or 'propaganda model' are insufficient in explanation. As Vietnam demonstrates, within democracies public opinion is a force to be reckoned with, and the media can work as an adept facilitator. However this can constrain state initiative. As the Gulf War demonstrates, state elites can indeed lead and coerce the public consensus. However, this arguably contravenes democratic principles and objectivity. Furthermore, they cannot always count on this ability, as seen in the 2003 Iraq War. Through the information revolution, the public are not as ill-informed as they once were, and while attitudinal structures can still exhibit long-term stability, issues suitably framed can trigger volatile opinion of revolutionary capacity (as with Libya). Sometimes, 'the tail wags the dog'. As Bennet aptly argues:

[F]oreign policy, once that private domain of pinstripe bureaucrats and business elites, that gray world of threats, promises, wars, espionage, and diplomacy, may have become transformed by a combination of new communications technologies and global media systems (1994: 12).

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