The Impact of Media on Foreign Policy

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/10/the-impact-of-media-on-foreign-policy/

IAKOV FRIZIS, MAY 10 2013

Introduction

This essay offers an analysis of the effect that modern media have on the formation and exercise of foreign policy. To do this, I will follow a three dimensional structural approach, examining the levels of the man, the state and the system, while taking under consideration the interplay that takes place between them. This essay examines media in a *twofold* design*, as an input source for decision-making* and as *an environment,* which actors have to take into account during the policy formation (Srivastava, 2009, p. 3). Before proceeding to the examination of the influence that media have on foreign policy, it is of great importance, first, to clarify the conditions under which the states socialize within the current international system and, second, to define what foreign policy is.

This analysis will be based on the post 9/11 international system.[1] The author considers the current system as anarchic, competitive and inter-polar, while he identifies states' socialization with one another on the basis of complex interdependence. Furthermore, the essay defines foreign policy as the articulation of a state's priorities to the international arena, which are formed through the correlation that exists between the constraints that a state faces and its national interest. At this point, in order to avoid an endless argumentation over the concept of national interest, we will explain it on a dual scale conditional basis. Primarily, national interest is comprised by a Machiavellian thesis of *raison d' ètat*. Under this spectrum, the first and foremost goal of the sovereign is the continuation of its existence. Furthermore, we can identify national interest as a derivative of domestic actors' interplay. According to Gilpin,

"it cannot be said that states have interests. Only moral agents can have interests. Thus the objectives and foreign policies of states are determined primarily by the interests of their dominant members or ruling coalition" (Burchill, 2005, p. 49).

First level of Interplay: The System and the State

"What in the name of God is strategic superiority? What do you do with it?" (Kissinger 1982, 1175)

Foreign policy is the way in which states articulate their interests towards foreign actors. The effectiveness of the articulation rests on the relative level of power that a state has. To appreciate the complexity of the interplay that takes place within the international arena, this essay will follow, to a certain extent, J. Nye's analysis of power as a three dimensional chessboard (Nye J. S., 1999).

The chessboard's first level is comprised by pawns hierarchically ordered based on their military capabilities, a level of interaction that today has been led to a relative standstill. This rigidity of military interaction is mainly based on the theory of Mutual Assured Destruction and the prohibiting expense of a full scale conflict between great power states[2]. The middle level of the chessboard consists of pawns deployed according to their economic capabilities. The economy is increasingly transcending the sphere of latent power, where it used to be utilized as a mere means of maintaining civil cohesion or as a hard-power supporting factor. Economic incentives/disincentives are increasingly used by states as a way of exerting influence. Last but not least, the third level of interaction focuses on transnational relations and legitimization of actions. Here, states exert influence through benefiting from the prestige that follows

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their name. Now that we have briefly outlined the various stages of state interaction, we may proceed in examining how the existence of media influences foreign policy analysis and management.

Media and Hard Power

In order to see how media environment impacts upon the deployment of hard power, we will divide the phenomenon called the "CNN effect"[3] into consequent reverberations. First of all, we observe an accelerant effect. Under this scope, the existence of a 24 hour media environment leads to a constant flow of news and information, which acts as a pressing factor upon governmental decision-making. On that account, the accelerant effect impairs the quality of both the gathering of intelligence and of the actual response formation (Hoge 1994, 137). The constant flow of information can also be seen as an impediment to operational/national security, since news coverage on certain topics may lead to disclosure of classified information. A perfect example of an organization that uses media in a way that compromises many countries' security protocols is Mr. Assange's WikiLeaks, an organization that aims to reveal the countries' true colors to the world, thus destroying the state's myth, through publicizing governmental documents. Also, examining media through an input perspective, based on the prestige paper theory, media cables potentially can act as agenda setters. Following this theory, "in each major power, one newspaper stands out as an organ of elite opinion" [4] (Cohen B. C., 1963, p. 136).Thus, media can obtain great influencing power through its role as a core provider of information/intelligence.

Turning the scope of examination from passive recipients to active decision makers, executives themselves tend to utilize media as loudspeakers. In this way, governments send public signals, targeting foreign governments or certain groups of people. Governments can thus put pressure on foreign actors while raising awareness of their motives and intentions on an international scale.

Political Economy and Media

A picture is worth a thousand words.

After the termination of the Bretton-Woods financial system, states experienced an increasing level of transnational market interaction. This led to a consequent boost of transnational capital flows, an event that shifted control of the national economy away from the state. Governments cannot regulate the inflow and outflow of capital without interfering with the system of *laissez-faire*. Any action as such would impair the welcoming environment towards foreign direct investment, an inflow of capital that is vital "for modern states, since most (states) are incapable of generating (enough) endogenous wealth to finance their economic development" (Burchill, 2005, p. 146).

Nevertheless, if a country is to experience economic prosperity, having a free market is not enough. Markets[5], just like states, are composed of people who make rational, utility-maximizing decisions in an environment of imperfect information (rational actors' assumption). An addition to this is a second stress factor, which is that markets are built around the time-economization concept. Due to the fast-paced operations of modern markets, time is a luxury that decision makers cannot afford. Consequently, it is understandable that news blasts potentially have the power to impact on markets, creating herding tendencies. Therefore, since the main trader of information is media, it seems of grave importance for a state to have a positive appearance on the international stage through media. Consequently, foreign policy makers need to pay attention to the financial stigma that the state projects towards the markets. Any wrong indication could threaten the credibility of the economy, driving capital away, and thus impairing the state's economic power[6].

Media and International Prestige

Due to the anarchic nature of the international system, no state can successfully attain and hold the position of a global hegemon. The world is too vast for any state's limited reach (Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus, a state in the pursuit of security and prosperity needs to use further means to influence other actors in the international system. Two of the main elements that will guide us through the examination of the media's effect on a state's relative level of prestige are: institutional interdependence and the liberal school of thought's approach to foreign policy making.

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After the Second World War, states have not only tried to safeguard themselves through forming alliances, pacts and treaties, but also through building a system of complex institutional interdependence[7]. Due to the state of extensive interdependence that has been created, states are bound to seek international legitimization for their intentions, not only in order to receive assistance in their ventures but also to avoid penalizing retaliation from the international community[8]. At this point, we will incorporate the media factor in our analysis, with respect to utilizing media as a tool of manufacturing consent on an international basis. Based on this, the articulation of foreign policy within a media-governed environment should be done in such a way that the motives of the acting state should appeal not only to international law, but also to international civil society, thus acquiring consent for the intended actions. The best way of accomplishing that is through an eloquent projection of the country's intentions, thus acquiring ethical legitimization for the intending actions.

The liberal school of thought offers further insight into the importance of media for the contemporary foreign policy makers[9]. Liberal states tend to identify themselves with values such as democracy, the free market and human rights. They place high importance on civil society and treat non-liberal states as possible threats[10] to world peace. This liberal collective identity provides its members with a system not only of self-reference, but also of action under the framework of "liberal obligations". Consequently, including media in the context of a non-homogenous, semi-liberal world, we see that the interaction between actors can become yet more complicated, due to the increasing pressures that media can exert on governments. This opinion is supported considering media as an agenda-setting agency focusing on the existence of "liberal obligations". According to Former Secretary of State, James Baker,

"All too often, television is what determines what is a crisis. Television concluded the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and the fighting in the Balkans was a crisis, and they began to cover it and cover it. And so the Clinton administration (was left) to find a way to do something. (Yet) they didn't do that in Rwanda where the excesses were every bit as bad, if not worse" (Livingston, 1997, p. 6).

Bearing in mind the above, we conclude that the salience that media may give or not give to certain topics can influence the importance that the topic has for the government, thus increasing its priority in terms of national security. This phenomenon occurs most commonly during humanitarian crises, where liberal states have to interfere in order to, on the one hand, abide by their liberal values, whilst on the other hand, project power in terms of being able of escalating in terms of pressure (Srivastava, 2009, p. 7).

Second Level of Interplay: The Man and the State

The following analysis is based on the assumption that sovereignty rests with the people and not with the government in power. This suggests that the government is looking to attain the consent of the people for its actions in order to remain in power. Hence, the following syllogisms are applicable to both democratic and semi-autocratic regimes, provided that the government does not attain domestic legitimacy through overpowering its people, coercing them into perfect subordination. This analysis will first shed light on the domestic structure of power-interplay. Then, it will show in what ways media can shift the balance of power between the government, the elites and civil society. Last but not least, it will exhibit how the rise of media has contributed to the formation of certain media-led phenomena.

The Game of Domestic Influence

The interplay that takes place between the state and its people can be seen under two contrasting themes: the model of *manufacturing consent* and the model of *constraint*.

On the one hand, the government through its institutions is trying to manufacture consent for its actions. According to Professor Chomsky, we live in webs of deceit, in an indoctrinated society, where elementary truths can be buried with ease (Achbar & Chomsky, 1992). In this respect, the governmental elites are using the media in order to steer public opinion through controlling access to information and by choosing the levels of salience that certain topics will receive. In the same way Plato, in his book *The Republic,* enables the guards of the cave to control the prisoners through filtering their reality, thus fostering political apathy. One of the things that we may take from Plato's allegory is that through restricting access to information within a perfectly ordered system, such as that of domestic politics,

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governments can control more effectively their subjects. Strategies as such are famous for promoting civil apathy through determining the peoples' perception of reality, thus contributing to a regime's stability.

On the other hand, since the government's power/legitimacy stems from civil society, governments are bound to be held accountable for their actions by their people. In this sense, the public has the capacity to influence the government's decision-making. This influence may take place either in the form of setting the agenda, thus deciding what the national interest will be, or in the form of imposing constraints on governmental decision-making.

Adding Media to the Equation

Now that we have established a political framework of domestic interaction, we can observe how the existence of media may influence the outputs of domestic political interaction[11].

To paraphrase Cohen, the media might not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are incredibly successful in telling their public what to think about (Cohen B. C., 1963, p. 13). This point highlights the importance of salience and priming as a tool of fostering either political apathy or civil unrest (Iyengar & Kinder, 2012, p. 63). A great example of the impact that a topic's salience has on foreign policy is a comparison between the Israeli crackdown on Hamas (November 2012) with its consequences on civilians who reside Gaza, and the civil war that has been taking place in Syria for the past year. The salience that was offered by the media to the former, despite its brief duration, overwhelms that of the latter. This similarly applies to the public outcry that each one created. Consequently, the overwhelming outcry induced by the first incident led to stronger and more direct governmental responses[12].

Even though media's strong skill is controlling what people think about, it would be quite reductive to ignore their opinion-bearing aspect. Media quite often focus on "procedural framing". These tactics concentrate on the negative or positive criticism of the way that policy decisions are being implemented. Another opinion-bearing tactic is "substantive framing". In such an occasion, media evaluate the reasoning and the argumentation behind the policies followed by the government (Robinson, 2012, pp. 176-179). This leads us to three aspects of the "manufacturing consent theory": the executive, the elite and the pluralist aspects. The executive version argues that the government influences the media, thus encouraging them to frame their broadcasts in accordance with the governmental agenda. Contrary to that, the elite version explains non-conformity of the media towards the governmental agenda as a byproduct of elites'[13] disagreement towards the governmental position (Srivastava, 2009, p. 3). For instance, we see how Mr. Berlusconi, former Italian Prime minister and media tycoon, managed through a positive framing of his policies to become the longest serving post-war Prime Minister of the country, despite the fact that, Italy would, following a counterfactual syllogism, most probably be better-off following different policies than the ones suggested by Berlusconi. A more moderate approach to this is put forward by the pluralist model, according to which media are mere cables of the will of the electorate. Thus, their stance towards policy is in accordance with the opinions and interests of the people.

The Media-Led Phenomena

The most interesting aspect of the rise of media is their direct link to liberal ideals. In particular, the media have become increasingly important to civil society. Not only due to the multiplier effect that they have, turning internal disagreements to full-scaled civil unrest through "framing", but also due to the fact that media have forged a "*glocal"* state of affairs. What yesterday used to be local, nowadays rapidly transcends states' borders, thus turning local into global in a few hours. For instance, a lack of social cohesion may immediately signal domestic instability towards the international system. What is more interesting though, is the "multiplier effect" that under the circumstances of the existence of an environment of complex interdependence, turns a lack of social cohesion into an undermining factor of the country's economy, the country's bargaining position and the country's international legitimacy. Hence, we observe that the existence of media contributes significantly to the intensification of a spillover effect that characterizes interdependent environments.

Proceeding with our analysis of the impact that media have on the field of domestic politics, we observe that

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governments are trying to adapt to the issues that the change in civil society's relative importance has raised. These issues include the need for refashioning the way that countries do diplomacy, the so-called "Vietnam syndrome", and the increasing uncertainty over the ratification of transnational treaties.

After the secrecy of the Cold War era, governments felt the need to redefine the way that they practice diplomacy, due to the changing needs of the international system. These needs have steered governmental executives towards greater transparency. This can be seen in the tasks that ambassadors perform today. Nowadays, the ambassador's task list includes interaction with civil society and the promotion of the country's image through media, rather than meetings behind closed doors. In fact, what we have just exhibited is conceptualized under what political scientists call "public diplomacy". To be more precise, R. Murrow defines public diplomacy as,

"interactions aimed not only at foreign governments but primarily with nongovernmental individuals and organizations, and often presented as a variety of private views in addition to government views" (Nye J. S., 2004, p. 107).

Thus, we observe foreign governmental action influencing the domestic politics of a state through targeting directly its civil society.

The "CNN effect" has already been established as an important if not core aspect of the media environment. A further reverberation of the CNN effect is the appearance of the "Vietnam Syndrome". Based on this, coverage of war atrocities may lead to discontent and a loss of support for the war, having as a consequence increasing demands of troops' repatriation. According to John J. Fialka[14], a Wall Street Journal correspondent, during the Gulf War, the U.S. military was advised to censor what the Press was allowed to record and broadcast, so that the government would not lose support for the war (Livingston, 1997).

Finally, many countries, in the context of civil society's increasing importance, try to promote more participatory forms of democratic governance. Here, a core element of decision-making is the ratification of interior or foreign policies through referendums. This, under Putnam's two-level bargaining model, might increase a government's bargaining power through decreasing its "win-set", thus increasing the chances of securing a better deal (Putnam, 1988). Though, if we are to examine participatory democracy under the concept of "framing", we cannot disregard the decision-making power that participatory regimes give to media. Inevitably, through "framing", media have the capacity to sway public opinion. Thus it can be argued that media can have leverage over policy-making.

Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion, we see that this essay does not consider the media as another independent actor in the international arena, which tries to influence others in order to protect its interests. Nor does it pay much tribute to any reductionist analysis of the individuals who might govern the media. This essay has shown that the media can take many faces, and through the evolution of technology the media have become the catalyst that alters the environment in which international actors interact. In other words, both game and players have remained the same, while what has changed and has possibly become more sophisticated is the rules or the variables that a player has to take under consideration as well as the strategies that a player has to deploy in order to "checkmate the opposing king". In other words, the evolution of media has affected the structure of both the international and the domestic system, thus indirectly impacting foreign policy.

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[1] This essay chooses to consider as the main points of reference of the current international system the following: First, the bifurcasion point that altered the hierarchy of powers, cancelling the U.S.A. as the sole territorial hegemon throughout the international system. Second, the subprime Mortgage financial crisis of 2008, as well as, the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, since according to the author these events modified both the discourse through which the contemporary international system is identified and consequently the rules under which the interaction of the systemic actors takes place. The above incidents reveal not only the high level of dependency that states bear towards the civil society and fellow states, but also the extent to which states are directly linked to each other, with ties of technology and social institutions.

[2] A great military power is defined through a country's capabilities of escalating conflicts to the level of nuclear warfare.

[3] The CNN effect is a term that was coined during the cold war to explain the effect that the 24hour news channel had on foreign policy making.

[4] It is important to mention this approach in our analysis, without minding its reductionist character, cause it would be simplistic of us to assume that the individual factor has no effect on the formation of foreign policy.

[3] When we refer to markets we should not consider them as some autonomous actor of the international system, but as a system of multi-level and multi-unit interaction, ranging from international organizations and states, to corporations and individuals.

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[6] A rather interesting case study is the European debt crisis and mainly the contributing factor of rating agencies and media on the stampede of private capital from the south towards the northern European countries during the first months of the crisis.

[7] It is true that the international system is governed by uncertainty, thus states do not have perfect information for the intentions of fellow states, but when an identity of interest appears, this will, more often than not, lead to high level of cooperation (Thucydides 1954; 1972, 107). According to Axelrod in repetitive games, the actors have more incentives to cooperate, rather than following a Nash equilibrium strategy leading to always defecting, thus reaching maximum long-run pay-off (Axelrod 1984).

[8] There is no such thing as an actor called international community that is vested with night-guard capabilities, responsible for withholding world peace. The will of the International community is articulated through the interplay of power that takes place during the exchange of opinions in international organizations such as the United Nations. Retaliatory tendencies expressed by the "international community" mainly focus either on rogue states or on states that try to challenge the existing status quo.

[9] This study does not engage itself with questions regarding which school of thought is more useful or more common in the study of foreign policy analysis, it only takes as a given the fact that taking the current status quo, most western states have initiated themselves to a liberal "society of states". Under this assumption, we observe that a liberal membership is identified with a certain set of values that the state should stand by if it wants to become a member of the "liberal society".

[10] According to the liberal peace theory the main sources of destabilizing tendencies in the international system are non-liberal states. In this context, preemptive war against states as such has to take place in order to stop them from posing a threat to global peace (Fukuyama 1992).

[11] In this point we will not examine which actor (government or civil society) may exert greater influence on media as an agenda-setter. We perceive media as a neutral actor (profit maximizing firm), examining the potential influence that it may have on the way that the national interest is formed.

[12] Such as: The visit of the Egyptian Prime Minister Hisham Qandil to Gaza (16/11/2012). Immediate governmental press releases stating their viewpoint on the incidents. Intervention of the Egyptian President Morsi, leading to a ceasefire(22/11/2012).

[13] The deviant elite might stem from the government, the opposition or even the civil society that has a sway on the media. *Hallin develops the concept of three spheres, one of consensus, one of legitimate controversy and one of deviance. These exist with regard to any given political issue. He argues that news media coverage, taking its cues from political elites, rarely produces coverage within the deviant sphere but rather either reflects elite consensus on an issue or elite 'legitimate[d] controversy'* (Piers 2001), *(Hallin, 1986).*

[14] "*We were escorted away from most of the violence because the bodies of the dead chopped up by artillery, pulverized by B-52 raids, or lacerated by friendly fire don't play well, politically*" (Fialka 1991, 2)

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Date written: 12/2012