Media as a Driving Force in International Politics: The CNN Effect and Related Debates

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Overview

It is over 20 years since debate over the relationship between TV news coverage of war, and resulting decisions to intervene for what appeared to be humanitarian purposes, occupied a good deal of scholarly and political attention. Back then, it was the newly emerging global media players such as CNN that were seen by many to be the driving force between purportedly humanitarian interventions during crises in countries such as Somalia (1992-1993) and Bosnia (1995).[1] The term *the CNN effect* came to be understood as shorthand for the notion that mainstream news media in general, not just CNN, were having an increased effect upon foreign policy formulation. Today, and despite the overshadowing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the issue of the role of media in terms of driving political responses remains a source of considerable academic interest.[2] Indeed, the intervention during the Libyan civil war raised familiar questions of the media's role and, at the time of writing, media coverage of atrocities during the Syrian conflict, combined with the possibility of an armed intervention by US and French forces, raise familiar questions as to the power of images and media to condition political responses.[3] What is known from previous research, and the major issues affecting scholarly and political debate today, are the principle concern of this short essay.

Background to the CNN Effect Debate

It was a series of events during the 1990s that elevated news media to the status of being potentially *critical* actors, with respect to humanitarian crisis and high-level foreign policy decision-making. Starting with the Kurdish crisis in 1991, and swiftly followed by Operation Restore Hope in Somalia (1992-93), a series of humanitarian crises were associated with an emerging doctrine of so-called *humanitarian intervention.* In Northern Iraq, media coverage of the Kurdish crisis appeared to lead to the first case of UN-legitimated humanitarian intervention whereby protected 'safe havens' were created in Northern Iraq in order to shield Kurds from attacks by Saddam Hussein's forces.[4] In Somalia, US news media coverage of famine during the civil war of the early 1990s appeared to persuade President George Bush (Snr) to deploy 28,000 troops in support of aid workers. For some, at the time, it appeared to be the case that news media were at the centre of an emerging doctrine of humanitarian intervention whereby sovereignty was no longer sacrosanct. The notion that media were driving foreign policy decision-making became widely known as the *CNN effect*. For liberals and those in humanitarian circles, naturally, these developments were warmly welcomed and seen as indicative of the way in which media could open up the traditionally conservative and non-interventionist (with respect to humanitarian crises) orientation of foreign policy communities.

The CNN effect debate gained significant attention for a number of reasons. First, the evolution of a doctrine of humanitarian intervention was, for some scholars, a major development and represented an important shift from a statist international society, in which the doctrine of non-intervention prevailed, to a cosmopolitan international society in which justice was allowed to trump order. Because news media were being implicated in this major shift, the suggestion was that media pressure had become a force to be reckoned with. Also, the changing geo-political conditions associated with the passing of the Cold War, which appeared to free up the foreign policy agenda, coupled with the rapid expansion of global news media such as CNN, appeared to be ushering in an era in which foreign policy agendas were more fluid and open whilst 'distant' crises were mediated to an extent never seen before.

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However, early claims regarding the power of media to initiate armed intervention during humanitarian crisis quickly gave way to a more sober assessment of media power.

Existing State of Knowledge

An early re-evaluation came with Gowing's[5] interviews with officials conducted during the early 1990s. He concluded that media influence upon *strategic* decisions to intervene during a humanitarian crisis was comparatively rare, whilst *tactical* and *cosmetic* impact was more frequent. So, for example, he found that media coverage was capable of influencing *tactical* decisions such as the creation of 'safe areas' during the 1992-1995 civil war in Bosnia or limited airstrikes against Bosnian Serb nationalist artillery positions. More often, he found that a frequent response of politicians to media pressure was simply to develop *cosmetic* policy responses, for example airlifting small numbers of injured children out of conflict zones. For Gowing, the superficial and limited nature of these cosmetic policy responses was entirely intentional. Indeed, these policies were enacted in order to deflect media pressure for more substantive intervention.

In another early study, Livingston and Eachus[6] highlighted the extent to which media appeared to simply reflect the policy agendas of government officials, as opposed to setting the foreign policy agenda in the way suggested by the CNN-effect thesis. Examining the case of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia 1992-93, they found that US media reporting of the crisis actually followed the cues of US government officials who had been attempting to draw attention to the crisis there. They concluded that, rather than media driving the intervention, journalists were actually conforming to more traditional patterns of indexing,[7] whereby their coverage was indexed to the viewpoints of US officials who were already persuaded of the need for intervention in Somalia. In sum, political agendas were influencing the media much more than media were influencing politics.

More generally, substantive research-based conclusions regarding the CNN effect debate, to date, have pointed toward a complex matrix of media effects, conditional on the type of humanitarian response in question and the political conditions in play.[8] First, and most importantly, media impact upon armed humanitarian responses was the least likely phenomenon to be occurring. Here, it was concluded that, at best, media pressure could trigger the use of air power intervention, for example *Operation Deliberate Force* in Bosnia 1995[9] and *Operation Allied Fore* in Kosovo 1999,[10] but that it fell short of being able to influence policy makers to intervene with ground troops. In short, the classic ground troop interventions in Northern Iraq 1991 and Somalia 1992/93 were not the result of the CNN effect. The explanation for this limitation was that, in the context of politically risky and high-level decisions regarding the use of force, policy makers were likely to be driven by concerns other than media pressure. Moreover, any pressure to intervene with troops was always held in check by the fear of taking casualties, the so-called 'body-bag effect'. To put this bluntly, policy makers, as much as they might feel compelled to respond to media pressure to 'do something' about a humanitarian crisis, were also aware that risking the lives of troops could ultimately backfire and generate negative media and public reaction when casualties were taken. Another factor militating against media influence in the context of forcible intervention decisions concerned more traditional *realpolitik* calculations that were also informing decision-making. For example, the apparently media-driven intervention in Northern Iraq 1991 in order to protect Kurdish refugees was also, at least in part if not mainly, motivated by geo-strategic concerns that stability in Southern Turkey was being threatened by the million or so Iraqi Kurdish refugees who were trying to escape Iraq. Here, the creation of safe havens was a tactic designed to draw the Iraqi Kurds away from the border and back into Iraq, thus helping to resolve Turkey's security crisis[11] Overall, and with respect to forcible intervention, media influence was relatively weak and, even then, limited to contexts where there existed policy uncertainty[12] amongst government officials.

However, when moving away from high foreign policy decisions regarding the use of force, Livingston[13] noted that policies involving lower political risks and costs were more likely to be influenced by media pressure. For example, the deployment of US troops in Zaire 1994, in which US troops were deployed as part of a non-coercive 'feeding and watering' operation was likely to have been influenced by media pressure. Consistent with this logic, and moving away from government-led responses to humanitarian crises, civil society responses such as that of the 1984 Ethiopian famine, discussed earlier, appear to have been significantly driven by media pressure. Finally, and with respect to foreign aid, the work of Van Belle and Potter[14] has argued that a close relationship exists between media

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coverage and decisions over aid allocation. In short, as we move away from policies involving the use of force, and toward non-coercive and less politically risky operations, the scale of possible media influence upon humanitarian responses appears to become greater.[15] At the same time, media influence on these types of policy responses must also be understood in the context of the progressive politicisation of aid and propensity of media to reflect elite political cues. As Barnett argues,[16] since the 1980s humanitarian organisations have become increasingly politicised alongside the increasing awareness amongst states that aid and humanitarian activities can serve foreign policy interests. With respect to media and political power, a large body of evidence highlights the close and deferential relationship between news media and political elites, especially in relation to foreign affairs.[17] With these points in mind, then, media influence on non-coercive interventions and aid allocations is likely to be the consequence of both media and political factors, particularly where media coverage becomes a part of elite politics by enabling some political actors to achieve their preferred policy outcomes.

Bringing the Debate Up-to-Date

Of course, the relevance of these findings to the contemporary setting is up for discussion. Much has changed since the 1990s, a period in which much of the CNN effect research has focused and, in view of this, the latter part of this essay considers the major trends and issues which need to be considered and, indeed, further researched. These are the media empowerment thesis, the 'war on terror' and contemporary approaches to media management and perception management that are employed by governments. I shall deal with each in turn.

Internet, Global Media and the Media Empowerment Thesis

For many, the proliferation of new communication technology, such as portable satellite broadcasting equipment and the emergence of digital cameras contained within mobile phones, appears to create a degree of transparency of events around the world that is unprecedented. Potentially, any event can be captured on 'camera' and that information then passed around the world instantaneously via the internet or global media. In addition, the rise of global media, such as CNN, and now the Arab-based network Al-Jazeera, as well as the Internet, means that such images (and their story) can be communicated to the peoples of the world. Received wisdom claims that such developments have a radically pluralising effect by bringing information and news to people more quickly and, in turn, creating much greater pressure on governments.[18] The recent and ongoing controversy over the *Wikileaks* website, which has disseminated online large quantities of secret US government documents regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well diplomatic cables, epitomises the apparently limited capacity governments have to control information flows in the internet era. Most recently, during the so-called Arab Spring, social media have been implicated in the ability of people to organise and rise up against authoritarian governments throughout the Middle East.

All of these developments offer, at first glance, evidence to suggest that the notion of media as a driving force might have greater validity in today's media environment. On the one hand, it is certainly the case that communication technologies such as the internet, as well as the omnipresence of digital cameras and mobile phones, means that there is more information circling the global media sphere and, in some ways traditional patterns of indexing, whereby journalists are heavily dependent upon official sources, seems to be a thing of the past. Moreover, there is now unprecedented potential for individuals to readily seek out alternative sources of information that present different viewpoints from those advocated by mainstream media and political elites. But for all the enthusiasm that many scholars show for the emancipatory potential of new communication technology, there is ample reason to be more cautious. For example, Anderson, based upon extensive interviews with journalists, highlights how new technology can curtail journalists. She writes:

Advanced technologies have liberated contemporary correspondents, they remain captive to new pressures caused by the imperatives of infotainment and the speed of technology. Instant deadlines, 24-hour news, increased syndication and editorial expectations beset the reporters in the field and affect newsgathering, quality reporting and content […] In theory the audience receives more information but much of it is duplicated, repetitive and flawed.[19]

At an aggregate level, also, the pluralisation of media outlets and the decline of traditional broadcast media may well

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have increasingly fragmented domestic and global public spheres. Rather than creating the context for greater popular engagement with global issues, conflict and foreign policy, the panoply of contrasting voices may well have created less potential for people to mobilise opinion and effect political influence. In an era when every week brings a new conflict or crisis to the attention of audiences that are decreasing in size, and for only a brief period of time before the next 'big story' comes along, and where many individuals take advantage of the interactivity of new media in order to avoid hard news, it is not at all clear that 'empowerment' actually is the major consequence of the new media environment. In short, such developments might actually weaken any potential 'CNN effect'.

The 'War on Terror', Ideology and New Forms of Propaganda

A second central question for today concerns the extent to which new ideological narratives, such as the 'war on terror', have come to shape the contemporary information environment. Ideological narratives such as 'anti communism' and the 'war on terror' are important because they structure the way policy-makers, journalists and the public perceive the world. As such, ideology can play an important and *a priori* role in terms of establishing frames that are then absorbed and communicated by journalists to the public at large. The medium of communication, whether it is the internet or a newspaper, is secondary to this process. To put this another way, if ideological narratives are firmly established, then the availability of communication technology may have little impact other than to act as a transmitter of that ideology. With respect to notions of a CNN effect, ideological narratives suggest that the far bigger role of communication media is to convey such narratives, reinforcing official view-points, rather than driving policy as such.

To what extent are ideological imperatives in play today? The case of both the Iraq War and the on-going conflict in Afghanistan are instructive here. On the one hand, both have been justified as part of the "war on terror" and rationalized accordingly as justified and necessary actions designed to defend against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.[20] At the same time, many critics have argued that this representation has disguised the underlying reasons for launching the war, including broader geo-strategic imperatives and material interests. For example, Afghanistan lies in Central Asia, which is a key oil-producing region that stands at the crossroads between U.S., Russian and Chinese interests. The projection of U.S. influence in the region is a plausible and likely subtext to the war there. In Iraq, many critical voices have asserted that the U.S. invasion was driven, not by fear of WMD or terrorism, but the desire to project U.S. power in the Middle East, at least in part because of its importance in terms of oil resources. But because of the dominance of the 'war on terror', relatively few citizens in the U.S. and the U.K. understood, and understand, these wars as anything other than part of a struggle against terrorism. Other ideological constraints that have been identified by some scholars include the ideology of humanitarian warfare, whereby Western action against Iraq and Afghanistan has been framed in terms of morally upstanding battles against dictatorship and extremism and in pursuit of human rights and freedom.[21] Overall, the presence of ideological imperatives, whether they are relatively weak or strong, can counteract the empowering potential of new technology.

In addition to the power of ideological narratives, it is also the case that governments have devoted increasing resources and time to attempts to shape and influence public perceptions in ways conducive to their preferred policies. Referred to variously as *perception management, strategic communication, public diplomacy* and, recently, *global engagement*, these activities involve the promotion of policy through carefully crafted PR campaigns, exploitation of links with journalists and media outlets and, most generally, taking advantage of the considerable resources at the disposal of governments in order to attempt to dominate the information environment. Some scholars argue that such activities amount to nothing less than *propaganda*.[22] The preeminent example of such activities in recent years was the campaign by the U.S. and British governments to persuade the world that Saddam Hussein posed a serious threat due to his possession of WMD and his alleged relationship with terrorism. In the U.S., the White House Information Group was set up in August 2002 to coordinate a "systematic media campaign"[23] that would reveal to the American public details of the threat posed by Iraq's alleged WMD activities. By September 2002, administration officials were publicly discussing the possibility of a nuclear attack, either from Iraq or terrorists armed by Iraq, with the chilling soundbite "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud" used by Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice on CNN. In the U.K., at the same time as the perception management campaign got underway in the U.S., a dossier based on intelligence about Iraq was published in September 2002, written by the Joint Intelligence Committee but with substantial involvement from the Prime Minister's office and from Alistair

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Campbell, (Blair's Communications Director). In what has become a controversial and frequently discredited process the dossier created an exaggerated sense of the threat from Iraq, suggesting in particular that Iraq could fire strategic weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes of an order to do so. The news media's reports on the dossier gave particular attention to the claim that Iraqi WMD could be ready "within 45 minutes of an order to use them"; "Brits 45 minutes from doom" was one newspaper's headline.[24]

The key point to be taken here is that, while the new media environment perhaps has the potential to empower non-elites, publics and pressure groups to challenge those with political power, governments themselves are not simply passive and impotent. Even in the era of the Internet, governments have considerable influence over how issues are framed and what issues are on the agenda. In the case outlined above, despite the Iraq conflict receiving global scrutiny, the presence of the Internet, and many skeptical voices, the U.S. and British governments were remarkably successful at persuading most of their citizens that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein was linked with Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. In this case, ultimately, the British and American governments were able to get themselves heard, loud and clear, despite the new media environment.

Where Does All this Leave the CNN Effect and Notions of Media Power?

At the heart of discussion and debate over the CNN effect, and other similar arguments about the power of media to shape policy responses, is the question of where power lies. The CNN effect of the 1990s highlighted the ability, under certain circumstances, for media to shape policy responses during international crises. There is little doubt that media influence continues to occur, particularly with respect to issues such as aid delivery, as summarised earlier. The question of whether media continues to be able to drive high-level decision making, as was occasionally seen during the 1990s, is more open to question. Since 9-11 Western foreign policy has been driven by a series of very high profile wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and, now possibly Syria. In most of these cases the role of media appears to have been a more familiar one of manufacturing consent for policies being enacted as part of the 'war on terror'. At the same time, the chaotic and fragmented media environment may actually have served to reduce the potential of mainstream media to significantly influence policy decisions. Add to this an increased level of coordination with respect to perception management (a.k.a propaganda) leaves the very real possibility that instances of the CNN effect, at least in relation to high-level foreign policy decision-making, are much less likely than during the 1990s.

With these points in mind, then, scholarship should continue to explore those circumstances where media might come to play an influential role in policy formulation, as was the focus of the early CNN effect research. But such research needs to be set within a broader context that reflects the prevalent tendency of media to reinforce government positions, the so-called *manufacturing consent* or *indexing* theories. Associated with this bigger picture, research needs to explore more fully ways of decreasing the democratic deficit associated with media reinforcing, rather than holding to account, governments; as well as attempting a far more detailed and focused line of inquiry into the ways in which governments seek to manage the contemporary information environment.

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[2] See for example
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLIR_hT9m0I&feature=share&list=PLC896525DA4EA5C3D.

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[9] Ibid.

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[16] Barnett, M.C. (2005) 'Humanitarianism Transformed', *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(4): 723-740. 726-727.

[17] For example, see Bennett, 'Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations' and Herman, E. And

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