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The CNN effect: can the news media drive foreign policy?

PIERS ROBINSON¹

During the 1980s the proliferation of new technologies transformed the potential of the news media to provide a constant flow of global real-time news. Tiananmen Square and the collapse of communism symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall became major media events communicated to Western audiences instantaneously via TV news media. By the end of the decade the question was being asked as to what extent this ‘media pervasiveness’² had impacted upon government—particularly the process of foreign policy making. The new technologies appeared to reduce the scope for calm deliberation over policy, forcing policy-makers to respond to whatever issue journalists focused on.³ This perception was in turn reinforced by the end of the bipolar order and what many viewed as the collapse of the old anti-communist consensus which—it was argued—had led to the creation of an ideological bond uniting policy makers and journalists. Released from the ‘prism of the Cold War’⁴ journalists were, it was presumed, freer not just to cover the stories they wanted but to criticise US foreign policy as well. The phrase ‘CNN effect’ encapsulated the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events.

This review article assesses what is meant by the term ‘CNN effect’ in relation to western intervention in humanitarian crises. The paper then goes on to look at another, more radical way of thinking about the relationship between news and political elites: the ‘manufacturing consent’ school of thought which argues that the media does not create policy but rather that news media is mobilised (manipulated even) into supporting government policy. The incompatibility between the CNN effect and manufacturing consent theory is noted. A review is then conducted of recent research into media effects on Western government responses to humanitarian crises. In my view, this research fails to clarify whether or not the news media has (or

¹ The research for this article was funded by the ESRC. For comments on earlier drafts thanks to Eric Herring, Michael Cox, Cécile Dubernet, Clair McHugh, Richard Little, Steve Livingston, Jonathan Mermin, Martin Shaw and two anonymous reviewers.

² James Hoge, ‘Media Pervasiveness’, *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (1994), pp. 136–44.

³ Michael R. Beschloss, *Presidents, Television and Foreign Crisis* (Washington DC: The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1993), Timothy J. McNulty, ‘Television’s Impact on Executive Decision-Making and Diplomacy’, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 17 (1993), pp. 67–83.

⁴ Kevin Williams, ‘The Light at the End of the Tunnel’ in John Eldridge (ed.), *Getting the Message* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 315.

has not) triggered recent 'humanitarian'⁵ interventions. On the other hand, it does offer important insights which I draw upon in order to propose a 'media-policy interaction' model. It is suggested that this model can advance upon CNN effect and manufacturing consent claims by offering an alternative two way understanding of the direction of influence between the media and government. Not only that: it facilitates a rigorous examination of what remain unsubstantiated claims regarding the power of the media to cause humanitarian intervention.

The CNN effect and humanitarian intervention

If the Gulf War reminded observers of the enormous power that governments had when it came to shaping the media analysis,⁶ events after the 1991 conflict appeared to confirm the opposite.⁷ In fact, according to Martin Shaw, emotive and often highly critical coverage of Kurdish refugees fleeing from Saddam Hussein's forces,⁸ quite literally caused 'the virtually unprecedented proposal for Kurdish safe havens'.⁹ Operation Restore Hope in Somalia quickly followed, and once again it was believed that the ill-fated sortie into the Horn Of Africa in 1992 had effectively been forced upon the United States by media pressure.

The two interventions—in Northern Iraq and Somalia—triggered a major debate within academic and government circles. Foreign policy 'experts' in particular were dismayed by what they saw as this unwarranted intrusion by the Fourth estate into the policy process. George Kennan, typically, argued that media coverage of suffering people in Somalia had usurped traditional policy making channels triggering an ill thought out intervention.¹⁰ Other commentators followed Kennan in expressing concern at the dangers of media dictated foreign policy.¹¹ James Hoge, for example, observed that 'today's pervasive media increases the pressure on politicians to respond promptly to news accounts that by their very immediacy are incomplete, without context and sometimes wrong'.¹² Working from a realist perspective, critics generally decried the CNN effect and stressed the need for elite control of the foreign policy making process.

⁵ In this article the term humanitarian intervention is understood to mean the use of military force (non-humanitarian means) being used in order to achieve humanitarian objectives; the interventions in Iraq 1991 and Somalia 1992 are commonly understood (although not necessarily accurately) to fit this definition. It should be noted however that, as Eric Herring argues, the term humanitarian intervention can be problematic. It is often used in relation to any instance of intervention during a humanitarian crisis. As such the term can gloss over instances of humanitarian means being employed to achieve non-humanitarian ends; and intervention during a humanitarian crisis which is motivated and conducted according to non-humanitarian goals.

⁶ For example see Jean Baudrillard, 'La Guerre de Golfe n'a pas eu Lieu', *Liberation*, 29 March 1991, W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (eds.), *Taken By Storm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Greg Philo and G. McLaughlin, *The British Media and the Gulf War* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Media Group, 1993).

⁷ Hoge, 'Media Pervasiveness'.

⁸ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises* (London: St Martin's Press, 1993), p. 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ George F. Kennan, 'Somalia, Through a Glass Darkly', *New York Times*, 30 September 1993.

¹¹ For example see Raymond R. Coffey, 'Don't Let TV Cameras Shape Policy', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 10 December 1992, Hoge, 'Media Pervasiveness', Michael Mandelbaum, 'The Reluctance to Intervene', *Foreign Policy*, 95 (1994), pp. 3–18, Jessica Mathews, 'Policy vs TV', *Washington Post*, 8 March 1994.

¹² Hoge, 'Media Pervasiveness', p. 137.

Within humanitarian circles there was also a good deal of debate about the apparent power of the news media to cause intervention. Indeed, ever since the 1984 Ethiopian famine, there had been much discussion about the purported impact which the media had had upon crises in the Third World.¹³ Amongst the most significant works in this genre were the Crosslines Special Report *Somalia, Rwanda and Beyond*¹⁴ and *From Massacres to Genocide*.¹⁵ Both took a decidedly different approach to that of either Kennan or Hoge, and writing from a broadly 'world society' approach applauded the role played by non-state actors in expanding the policy debate beyond the narrow corridors of political power. Furthermore, instead of attacking the irresponsible part played by the media, these writer-advocates actually praised the new activism and sought to harness the perceived potential of the media to encourage humanitarian intervention.

Though standing at opposite ends of the policy debate, crucially both realists and humanitarians took it as read that the news media was capable of driving policy.¹⁶ Rarely if ever did either question the claim that the news media had played a pivotal role in causing recent interventions.¹⁷ In this way, the CNN effect became an untested and unsubstantiated 'fact' for many in foreign policy and humanitarian circles.

Manufacturing consent

The underlying assumption of the 'CNN effect' literature is that the news can make policy. Those who talk of the manufacture of consent argue that political elites impel news makers to 'read' global events in a particular way. Thus rather than assuming that the news media influences or determines what governments do, those who adhere to this position maintain that the media is influenced by government and government policy.¹⁸

Two implicit versions of the manufacturing consent paradigm can be discerned. First, the *executive* version: this insists that news media reports conform to what might loosely be called the official agenda.¹⁹ For example, Robert Entman has shown how the moral outrage framing of US media reports of the 1983 Korean

¹³ Most notably Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer, *News Out Of Africa* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1986) and Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1993).

¹⁴ Edward Girardet, (ed.), *Somalia Rwanda and Beyond* (Geneva: Crosslines Global Report, 1995).

¹⁵ Robert Rotberg and Thomas Weiss (eds.), *From Massacres to Genocide* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The World Peace Foundation, 1996).

¹⁶ A notable exception to this tendency is Rotberg and Weiss, *From Massacres to Genocide*, who do not assume media influence on government policy.

¹⁷ A notable exception being Joanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War* (New York: St Martins Press, 1996).

¹⁸ For example see W. Lance Bennett, 'Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States', *Journal of Communication*, 40 (1990), pp. 103–125, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), John Eldridge (ed.), *Getting the Message News*, Robert Entman, 'Framing US Coverage of International News', *Journal of Communication*, 41 (1991), pp. 6–27, Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Glasgow University Media Group, *War and Peace News* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), Philo and McLaughlin, *The British Media and the Gulf War*.

¹⁹ For good examples see Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Glasgow University Media Group, *War and Peace News*.

Airline shoot down was consistent with the Reagan administration's 'Evil Empire' rhetoric.²⁰ The second *elite* version of the manufacturing consent paradigm claims that news media coverage conforms with the interests of political elites, where elites are defined broadly as members of the executive, legislative or any other politically powerful group.²¹ This viewpoint has received conceptual clarification through the work of Lance Bennett,²² who argues that 'mass media news is indexed . . . to the dynamics of governmental debate'.²³ Hence, even when media coverage is critical of executive policy, this simply reflects a 'professional responsibility [for journalists] to highlight . . . struggles within the centres of power'.²⁴ An important implication of this elite version is that news coverage critical of executive policy is possible when—and perhaps only when—there exists elite conflict over policy.

Recent research

The thesis that the media has the power to move governments is clearly at odds with manufacturing consent theory. However, before attempting to find a way out of this theoretical impasse, it might be useful initially to assess the various attempts made by recent scholars to analyse media effects on humanitarian intervention. I will first of all consider interview based research undertaken by Nik Gowing, Warren Strobel and Larry Minear *et al.*²⁵ I will then consider two systematic and methodologically rigorous case studies by Martin Shaw, Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus.²⁶

Two things are striking about the interview based studies: the difficulty each has in measuring exactly the precise impact which media has on policy, specifically whether or not the media can cause humanitarian intervention; and the significance each attaches to policy certainty (and uncertainty) in determining media influence. Let us deal with each in turn.

Starting with the impact, which the media is supposed to have had upon foreign policy, the various authors struggle for intellectual clarity. Gowing for example admits that media coverage can change 'overall [government] strategy', though only on very rare occasions.²⁷ However he never really defines what he means by overall strategy and therefore leaves the reader unsure as to whether the media can cause humanitarian intervention.²⁸ One detects the same lack of precision in Strobel. He argues at one point that there is 'little evidence of a *push* [i.e. cause intervention]

²⁰ Entman, 'Framing US Coverage of International News', p. 10.

²¹ For good examples see Bennett, 'Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States' and Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

²² Bennett, 'Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States'.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁵ Nik Gowing, 'Real-Time TV Coverage from War', in James Gow, Richard Paterson and Alison Preston (eds.), *Bosnia by Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), Larry Minear, Colin Scott and Thomas Weiss *The News Media, Civil Wars, and Humanitarian Action* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), Warren P. Strobel, (1997) *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

²⁶ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, Livingston and Eachus, 'Humanitarian Crises and US Foreign Policy', *Political Communication*, 12 (1995), pp. 413–429.

²⁷ Gowing, 'Real-Time TV Coverage', p. 88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–90.

effect . . . nor is there evidence of a pull [i.e. cause withdrawal] effect'.²⁹ But elsewhere he speculates that 'televised images of innocents' suffering can be a factor in moving policy'.³⁰ He also asserts that the media 'can exert strong influence' on policy,³¹ that it only plays 'a supplementary role',³² that it can 'have a decided effect',³³ but in the end does not 'cause intervention'.³⁴ This analytical confusion leaves one unsure as to what role the media does play exactly during humanitarian crises. The same lack of precision can be found in the volume, *The News Media, Civil Wars and Humanitarian Action*. The different contributors to the volume look in detail at US intervention in Northern Iraq 1991. They argue that media pressure built upon a perceived Western obligation toward the Kurds in order to create a rationale for humanitarian intervention.³⁵ Yet once again it is never clear how important the media was. They could get to grips better here if they differentiated between immediate and underlying cause. For example, the perceived Western obligation towards the Kurds³⁶ could have been described as the underlying cause of the intervention decision. Media pressure would then be understandable as the immediate factor in causing intervention. Instead, what we are presented with is a good deal of loose speculation about 'complex systems',³⁷ 'fluid interplay'³⁸ and a 'rich and diverse relationship' between media coverage and policy outcome³⁹—all of which sounds reasonable enough but does little to clarify things or prove a direct causal relationship between news coverage and policy options.

If the interview based research fails to offer clear answers regarding the significance of the CNN effect on humanitarian intervention, it does highlight the key role 'policy certainty' plays in determining media influence. Gowing approvingly quotes Kofi Annan who has observed that 'when governments have a clear policy, . . . then television has little impact'; however 'when there is a problem, and the policy has not been thought' through 'they have to do something or face a public relations disaster'.⁴⁰ Strobel is even more certain. He notes that 'the effect of real-time television is directly related to the . . . coherence . . . of existing policy'.⁴¹ The contributors to the Minear volume come to much the same conclusion. Indeed, in their view, there is an inverse relationship between policy clarity and media influence. Hence, when policy is unclear or ill defined the media can indeed have some influence on policy; on the other hand, 'the media effect on policy decreases as the clarity of strategic interest increases'.⁴²

Moving now to a consideration of the case study based research, Shaw's *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises* contains a useful analysis of the impact that news media coverage is presumed to have had upon the Western decision to inter-

²⁹ Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, p. 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁵ Minear *et al.*, *The News Media, Civil Wars and Humanitarian Action*, p. 51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Gowing, 'Real-Time TV Coverage', pp. 85–86.

⁴¹ Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, p. 219.

⁴² Minear *et al.*, *The News Media, Civil Wars, and Humanitarian Action*, p. 73.

vene in Northern Iraq in 1991. Shaw systematically analyses news bulletins and describes how coverage of the plight of Kurdish refugees became increasingly critical of Western inaction. When media criticism reached a crescendo, Shaw argues that the West was impelled to do something. His central and important claim, therefore, is that coverage of suffering Kurdish refugees actually caused the unprecedented proposal for Kurdish safe havens.⁴³

Significantly, Shaw's careful analysis of news bulletins reveals that it was a particular type of coverage that pressured Western leaders to intervene. In his words, 'the graphic portrayal of human tragedy and the victims' belief in Western leaders was skilfully juxtaposed with the responsibility and the diplomatic evasions of those same leaders to create a political challenge which it became impossible for them to ignore'.⁴⁴ The important point that Shaw's work reveals here is that the framing⁴⁵ of news media reports is crucial in determining their political impact. Media reports do not 'objectively' report humanitarian crises. Rather, they report crises in particular, and often very different, ways. The emotive and graphic coverage of the Kurds clearly pressured politicians to 'do something'. This pressure would not have existed if media reports had been framed in a less emotive and more distancing manner. For example, with regard to the humanitarian crises in Liberia during the 1990s, Minear *et al.* point out that 'the international media ventured into Liberia . . . to provide bizarre documentary style coverage from the "Heart of Darkness" rather than news of a serious threat to international peace and security'.⁴⁶ The result of this kind of framing was not to heighten but lessen pressure on Western politicians to do something. This insight into framing is a crucial one and will be drawn upon later to propose a media-policy interaction model.

The problem with Shaw's work however is a failure to analyse the policy process itself. He accepts that the 'loss of policy certainty' in the 'aftermath of the Cold War' may indeed have 'opened up a particular window for the media'.⁴⁷ But beyond that he says very little about official policy. As a result he tends to privilege the role of the media while ignoring other possible motivations for the intervention. His claim that the news media precipitated intervention in Northern Iraq during 1991 is certainly plausible; but without a deeper discussion of the policy-makers and how they viewed the situation, his account is rendered less than convincing.

Like Shaw, Livingston and Eachus⁴⁸ offer a systematic in depth case study—not by analysing the Iraqi case but by looking at US intervention in Somalia during 1992. They base their discussion on a survey of official statements, the policy process in question and media coverage. As such, it is the most methodologically exacting research considered so far. Interestingly, what drives their discussion is not so much whether the media can influence policy but rather who determines the content of the news and therefore controls its capacity to influence.⁴⁹ As such the

⁴³ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁵ The concept of framing refers to the 'specific properties of . . . [a] narrative [e.g. media report] that encourage those perceiving . . . events to develop particular understandings of them', Entman, 'Framing US Coverage of International News', p. 7.

⁴⁶ Minear *et al.*, *The News Media, Civil Wars and Humanitarian Action*, p. 48.

⁴⁷ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, p. 181.

⁴⁸ Livingston and Eachus, 'Humanitarian Crises and US Foreign Policy', pp. 413–429.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

authors actually assume that media influence on policy can and does occur.⁵⁰ Importantly, for Livingston and Eachus, if it turns out to be journalists themselves setting the news agenda, then it might be concluded that the CNN effect was indeed in operation. If on the other hand the news agenda was set by politicians then something else would be going on: but one could hardly talk of a CNN effect. And by carefully unpacking how certain government officials worked hard to get Somalia on the political agenda, Livingston and Eachus convincingly demonstrate how media coverage actually reflected the agendas of certain government officials in Washington. These officials then used this media coverage to influence top executive policy makers to intervene in Somalia. However, because it was government officials (not journalists) setting the news agenda, Livingston and Eachus argue that the CNN effect (as they understand it) was not present in relation to US intervention in Somalia.

Conceptualising the CNN effect in terms of 'who controls the media' is useful because it reflects the debate within foreign policy circles. For foreign policy experts, by focusing upon news media sources this approach can determine if non-elite actors have gained control of the media and therefore the ability to influence policy. This conceptualisation is also effective at highlighting how political actors manipulate the news agenda for their own purposes. I would argue however, that whilst valid for these purposes, defining the CNN effect in this way masks important and unanswered questions regarding the purported power of the media to trigger humanitarian intervention. First, by assuming media influence (as Livingston and Eachus do *re* Somalia), the conceptualisation forecloses the possibility that other factors might have caused an intervention decision. This is particularly problematic with regard to recent cases of humanitarian intervention where it is plausible that media inspired altruism was not a prime motivation.⁵¹ Second, whilst media coverage has been associated with recent humanitarian interventions it is also the case that media coverage has accompanied instances of non-intervention: for example, non-intervention during the 1990s humanitarian crises in Liberia. The question raised is why intervention occurs in some instances but not others; focusing on the CNN effect as an issue of media control does not explain why news media coverage of humanitarian crises appears only sometimes to cause intervention. Third, defining the CNN effect in terms of who controls the media fails to reflect the humanitarian debate that is concerned not with questions of policy control but the role the news media plays in triggering international responses to humanitarian crises. The questions of if and how the news media causes intervention are of fundamental interest to this debate and require analysis.

The way forward

The five research pieces reviewed, whilst generally failing to determine the impact of media coverage on humanitarian intervention decisions, offer guidance for a con-

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For example Howard Adelman, 'The Ethics of Humanitarian Intervention', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 6 (1992), p. 74 argues that strategic concerns over cross border refugee flows are the primary motivation for 'humanitarian' intervention.

structive move forward in resolving the theoretical impasse between CNN effect and Manufacturing Consent media theory. The idea of policy certainty as a key factor in determining whether the news media impacted on policy was prominent in the work of Gowing, Strobel, Minear *et al.* and in Shaw's case study.⁵² The importance of media framing as a key factor in determining the potential of media coverage to elicit pressure for intervention was well illustrated by Shaw⁵³ when he unveiled the emotive 'do something' framing of the Kurdish crisis. Taken together these insights suggest a theoretical media-policy interaction model that predicts media influence on government policy only when there exists policy that is uncertain and media coverage that is framed to advocate a particular course of action. When there exists uncertain policy *vis-à-vis* an issue the government is unable to feed a plausible and well rehearsed policy line to the media and therefore set the agenda. In this situation journalists are able to frame reports in a way that is critical of government inaction and pressures for a particular course of action. This is when the CNN effect occurs. Interestingly, the idea of media influence when there exists policy uncertainty fits neatly with the elite version of manufacturing consent media theory. As discussed earlier, this version implies that news coverage that is critical of executive policy is possible when there exists elite conflict over policy (i.e. policy uncertainty). Alternatively, when government has a certain policy it will draw upon its substantial resources and credibility as an information source to influence news media output. In these situations, the media serves to 'manufacture consent' for government policy. By identifying the conditions under which Manufacturing Consent and CNN effect occur, the model offers a way beyond the current theoretical impasse between the two theories.

Importantly, the research reviewed in this paper failed to clarify the significance of media impact on humanitarian intervention decisions. The media policy interaction model offers a way forward with respect to this question by providing a theoretical basis upon which to rigorously examine the impact of the news media on intervention decisions. As part of a case study comparison, if uncertain policy and pro-intervention framing is found to be associated with cases of intervention (and certain policy and media coverage supportive of official policy associated with non-intervention), theoretical support will be found for the claim that the media causes humanitarian intervention. If the opposite is found to be the case then doubt will be cast on claims regarding the power of the media to trigger intervention. Such measuring of independent variables needs to be supplemented via the kind of careful analysis of policy processes demonstrated in the work of Livingston and Eachus. Failure to do this, as we saw with Shaw's work,⁵⁴ means that other motivations for intervention can be missed and final conclusions be less than convincing. Research conducted along these systematic and theoretically informed lines would help to clarify the causal impact of the news media on recent intervention decisions. As such it would make up for the shortcomings of the research reviewed here, as well as contribute to both foreign policy and humanitarian debates which take it as read that the media has caused humanitarian intervention.

⁵² Gowing, 'Real-Time TV Coverage from War', pp. 85–6, Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, p. 219, Minear *et al.*, *The News Media, Civil Wars, and Humanitarian Action*, p. 73, Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, p. 181.

⁵³ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, p. 88.

⁵⁴ Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*.

In summary, the realisation of this research programme would offer a rigorous assessment of what remain unsubstantiated claims regarding the power of the news media in the post Cold War, real-time world. At the same time the media-policy interaction model promises to advance media theory beyond the simple manufacturing consent/CNN effect dichotomy toward a more nuanced understanding of the media-policy relationship.