Public Opinion and the Media

—in the Context of US Foreign Policy Decision-Making Processes†—

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the relationship between public opinion (in the United States) and the media in the context of international human rights in the post-Cold War era. The paper highly involves US foreign policy decision-making process, especially towards the so-called “humanitarian intervention” and the United Nations Peace Keeping Operations.

There is no doubt that we are now living in the world in which we are enable to seize almost all the information we need from all kinds of media. Even though it is so normal for us being exposed to various kinds of media from print to TV nowadays and it is almost part of our daily lives to deal with certain types of media every day, studying media and its effects on us do not seem to be highly regarded or realized. In other words, how do we see the media as the information source and how should we understand our status in this information-flooded age?

The paper will exploit qualitative analysis based on literature reviews. Especially, the argument will involve the discussion of the “CNN Effect”, if it has a real effect on people or public opinion in terms of understanding foreign policy decision-making processes on humanitarian interventions.

Introduction

"The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported and imagined", analyzed famous writer and journalist, Walter Lippman during the 1920s. Even though this was a statement made over eighty years ago, this notion seems to be still reasonable today when analyzing the correlation between the public and the media. However, the difference between Lippman’s era and the present is the fact that the world

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† This paper is part of the master’s thesis handed in for the completion of the Master’s Program in Area Studies in January, 2003.
is now facing a new revolution. That is, a revolution in communication technology that makes the world much closer than before.

If the world that we deal with now has to be imagined as Lippman stated, today's electronic media is all about the image. According to Marshall McLuhan, who was the author of the book called *The Mechanical Bride* published in 1951 in which he challenged to analyze the social and psychological pressures generated by the press, radio, movies and advertising, there are different impacts on human beings by several media. He stated that books impact on eyes, whereas radio impacts on ears. The most important factor is the third, which is the electronic media such as television. He insisted that this type of media makes an impact both on eyes and ears.²

This argument brings the discussion of the so-called the CNN effect, which is regarded as the impact of media's live broadcasting of human sufferings during humanitarian crises. Most notably, interventions during the humanitarian crises in northern Iraq (1991) and Somalia (1992) are the very best examples of media-driven policies.³ This can be linked to McLuhan's theory that TV is a set of impressions, icons and images, and what is always more important to understand is not the context, but the effect. Impressions and images here mean that they are highly involved with the emotional pictures. The emotional pictures are the only factor that can be broadcasted by TV because it requires the participation with our eyes and ears. It can be the picture of people suffering from hunger, disease, or the picture of dead person. These are the pictures that somehow evolve an emotional attachment to the actual event. Specifically, if the picture is broadcasted live, impact and effect can be much more powerful.

Whole CNN effect debate can be rooted from the discussion of image-driven electric media. Some scholars understand that a rapid improvement of technology, especially the satellite technology that makes the world much closer in terms of live news triggered the Western government's intervention on humanitarian crises. Also, that media coverage of suffering people in Somalia had taken traditional policy-making channels away, and elite control of foreign policy-making had been lost to the media are argued.⁴

Understanding the CNN effect relates to the understanding of today's electronic media. The following sections will illustrate the definition of the so-called CNN effect, and its relation to American public opinion. Before explaining those in the following sections, some introductory comments on present American public opinion and its presence of foreign policy decision-making process should be addressed. In other words, how much impact does public opinion have on foreign policy? Glenn P. Hastedt claims that public opinion's influence is greatest if exercised at

⁴ Ibid., 10.
the agenda-building stage and ratification stages of the policy process. This statement can be deeply overlapped with media's agenda-setting issues, where the media chooses news to be broadcasted in order to exploit the power of persuasion to shape public opinion.

Taking an example of President Clinton's foreign policy, to implement the policy of democratic enlargement, he had, as all presidents before him, to react to public opinion. When analyzing American foreign policy, the common view of scholars is that the impact of public opinion on the foreign policy decision-making process is limited and of relatively minor importance. In a realistic approach, the public is more integrated in and informed about domestic policy, and foreign affairs are too remote from them. Therefore, the realist tradition is skeptical of the public's contribution to effective foreign policy. The Almond (Gabriel Almond)-Lippman (Walter Lippman) Consensus of public opinion claims the public is volatile and that its attitudes on foreign policy are lacking in structure. Nevertheless it also states that public opinion has at least same impact on the conduct of foreign policy, even if the level of the impact is limited. Its last claim about public opinion supports the view that American presidents have had to pay attention to the public mood.

Public opinion in American foreign policy, even if it is generally considered as a minor constraint in the decision-making process, plays a sufficiently significant role that presidents have not been able to ignore it. It can be said, therefore, that the public is one of the significant factors in American government. President Clinton tried to implement a policy to realize a new concept, which is the enlargement of democracy. He promoted the view that the US should protect human rights all over the world through his heavily weighted UNPKO foreign policy. In so doing, he needed public support, and it was necessary for him to follow the shifting public opinion on such humanitarian issues as stopping the devastation in Somalia.

The research question in this paper is; how does the public maintain its relationship with the media and is it manipulated in the context of American foreign policy? What should the public know to deal with today's electronic media, and is public opinion really a minor constraint in foreign policy decision-making processes?

**Definition of the CNN Effect**

The section will illustrate the fifth estate in American politics, the media. To answer the

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4 The consensus was introduced and challenged by Ole R. Holsti in a paper listed in footnote 6.

question of how the public forms its opinion toward foreign policy of the government, the role that the media plays is essential in the era of information technology. World affairs are no longer remote to us thanks to advanced technology such as TV and the internet. Throughout the 1980s, new technologies improved much enough so that it could start offering a constant flow of information globally in real-time. Within this context, phenomena called the ‘CNN Effect’ should be examined in terms of analyzing foreign policy decision-making process in the post-Cold War era.

"Television has changed the way the world reacts to crisis," said former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He meant that the world is in a new era in which we can no longer survive without taking into account the power of the media and information technology. If we think how long it takes us to find information today, the change is clear. In many cases, answers can be found in minutes thanks to the rich development of TV news networks and the internet. Another factor contributing to the increased power of the media is the absence of military threats to Western security, the military interventions became one of the choices for Western democratic countries to perform their military power. This notion is rooted from the trend of the post-Cold War international society that is to make human rights issues the center of foreign policy agenda. This tendency led the media to play an important role since global humanitarian problems became one of the major issues in foreign affairs.

In this era, CNN (Cable News Network) is one of the largest and the most influential international broadcasters. Indeed, the connection between CNN and the foreign policy process is now referred to as the "CNN Effect". This section attempts to illustrate what the CNN Effect is and how it works.

The term, "CNN Effect", originated with the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and by the subsequent Somali conflict in 1993. The Persian Gulf War, demonstrated for the first time CNN's ability to send "real-time pictures" from the battlefield using its advanced satellite technology. CNN first began transmitting via satellite to Japan in 1985 by the so-called Satcom I satellite, which was launched in the mid-1970's. It now has six satellite television networks, two radio stations and 11 websites. It is estimated that CNN reached more than 150 television households

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10 Ibid., 132.
11 According to Peter Jakobsen, "real-time television" is defined as the transmission of pictures less than two hours old.
in over 212 countries and territories in 1999, and almost 800 million people have access to CNN's broadcasting. As for budget, during NATO's campaign in Kosovo in 1999, for example, CNN spent an estimated $150,000 a day. CNN literally became one of the most powerful news sources in the world, and it established certain status in the news media business.

It is astonishing to consider how fast media technologies have developed. Back in 1960's, the role of the media was not as significant as it is today. When the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in 1962, for example, President Kennedy had known about the existence of Soviet nuclear capable missiles in Cuba six days before the media broadcasted about it. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, observed that he did not think that he turned on a television set during the whole two weeks of the crisis in Cuba. Three decades later, television has become an essential reference that policy-makers could not ignore anymore.

President George Bush stated during the Persian Gulf War that, "I learn more from CNN than I do from the CIA". Clearly, the presence of the media such as CNN was now indispensable. President Clinton's advisor George Stephanopoulos has stated that the White House operated a 24-hour news cycle, and CNN assured that the administration was forced to react at any time. One key example to prove the point was the way in which the Clinton White House immediately reacted to CNN's visual reports of the Somali conflict. Contrary to the era of President Kennedy, Presidents Bush and Clinton now had to respond instantly to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or images of starving people in Somalia.

What makes difference in decision-making today is the speed of the spread of the news and its impact. Information technology, led by the likes of television as CNN, has changed the style of decision-making into something "instant". At Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives hearings in 1994, sixteen media lessons for modern day presidents were enumerated: Proposition 1, for example, says that "Television offers presidents a superior weapon for framing issues and selling policy in crisis," and proposition 4 claims that "Television can drastically reduce the time, secrecy, and calm available to a president for deliberating with advisers on an urgent foreign policy problem." 17

The key to the CNN Effect is the vast improvement of information technology, especially of the satellite technology, so that all citizens in the United States are able to see real-time pictures from locations however remote. In addition, the reason why the term, the CNN Effect, was cre-

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12 Used as a phrase that policy-makers are able to watch any kind of live news 24 hours a day.
14 Ibid., 130.
ated was because the press was and is now searching for a different organizing principle in the post-Cold War era. This "differ ent principle" might emerge as North-South tensions, religion versus secularism, nationalism versus internationalism. President Clinton's democratic enlargement and the protection of human rights are also included in these "new" and different principles. Because of many factors created by the end of the Cold War, the role of the media in decision-making became something indispensable, and the CNN Effect was the representation of it. Many factors here mean that the change in foreign policy agenda as the world started to focus more on global human rights, rapid improvement in information technology, in particular in satellite technology, and the media's tendency to exploit images of human disasters using live pictures. The next section focuses more on the relationship between the public and the CNN Effect.

The CNN Effect and the Public

Former United Nations' Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once said that CNN was the sixteenth member of the Security Council. The role of the media has become so powerful that decision-makers are not able to ignore it when making any decisions, especially foreign policy decisions. This section focuses on the relationship between the CNN Effect, and the public. CNN is the sender of information, while the public is the receiver of information that CNN sends to it. How is the public influenced by CNN's coverage of news?

The public tends to be persuaded psychologically. Research in the expertise of psychological persuasion was begun at the time of World War II. Then research was motivated by the use of propaganda by the communists. It focused on the message itself and the characteristics or the means used to deliver the message used. Considering this psychology of persuasion, there are some guidelines for communication that can be applied to CNN: (1) two-sided messages are better than one-sided messages for persuading neutral or opposed audiences; (2) vivid messages are more convincing when the communicator has high credibility and the message is simple; (3) film or video messages are markedly effective in teaching factual knowledge, are accepted as accurate, and are not perceived as propaganda; (4) emotional appeals are persuasive when they are truly frightful, suggest effective actions to reduce the fear-arousing threat, and the recipients believe that they are able to perform the suggested action. Also, some social psychologists have looked within the individual for causes for aggression. For instance, people were found to

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respond more aggressively if they were frustrated.\textsuperscript{29} If some people in this kind of psychological situation, the emotional picture that the media delivers must play a significant role in terms of shaping their own opinion on particular events. These principles are intended to apply to the behavior of the public.

Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon implemented the research of news coverage of the Persian Gulf War and public opinion. Their research used polls taken by the Gallup Organization between April 1990 and March 1991. They found that between September to December 1990, news from the Gulf averaged approximately sixty minutes per month. Operation Desert Storm raised the level of coverage to about ninety minutes per month. Based on an analysis of CNN's coverage, they concluded that under thematic framing, viewers tended to assign responsibility for national problems to general societal factors such as cultural norms, economic conditions, and the actions or inactions of public affairs. Under episodic framing, however, viewers attributed the responsibility not to societal structural forces but to the actions of particular individuals or groups such as poverty, crime or terrorists. Ultimately they concluded that exposure to episodic framing of the crisis increased viewer's support for the military resolution of a conflict.\textsuperscript{30} This explains the reason why the Clinton administration went into Somalia to "do something", and also it meets psychology of persuasion that emotional appeals are more persuasive. The public then was persuaded by real-time picture of starving people in Somalia, which should have been recognized as "emotional appeals." The Clinton administration was pushed by the public to do something, including the use of force by participating in UNPKO. This is how the CNN Effect works on the public. This whole sequence also explains that the media's role is significant in sending emotionally charged images. In the case of Somalia, the media as represented by CNN exploited the psychology of persuasion because the pictures it showed were emotionally powerful enough to sway public opinion.

The news media places itself between decision-makers and the public. The media and the public also have mutual relationship. Considering how the public responded to the government by receiving information by the news media, it can be said that the relationship between the two, the media and the public, is not equal. The influence of media coverage on the public is more powerful than that of the government.


\textsuperscript{30} W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz eds., Taken By Storm, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 179-181
The Media, Human Rights and the Public

The present section explains about human rights and the public. In the previous sections, emotionally charged pictures were argued. To the extent of emotional pictures, especially in the context of public opinion and its relations to foreign policy, it is all about people suffering in politically devastated countries without enough humanitarian aids. This notion leads the discussion of human rights.

The protection of human rights is another significant factor to understand the post-Cold War American foreign policy. The issue of "human rights" was pushed toward the center of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. It is because that the protection of human rights became a central issue due to permissive condition of international politics in the post-Cold War era, which was caused from the collapse of the bipolar system. By permissive condition meant here is that in the post-Cold War international society, there are various seeds of ethnic/regional conflicts all over the world. This permissive condition of international society and the development of information technology synchronized to form a new type environment for the public. The public is now able to receive information instantly, and the information about foreign affairs started to focus more on humanitarian issues.

According to Robert Y. Shapiro, who claimed that the public has actually been coherent and stable historically in the United States in terms of its impact on foreign policy ever since World War II, the American public has been increasingly aware of human rights violations throughout the world. In particular, Americans have focused on violations of the right to life, the integrity of the person, and such fundamental freedoms as those of expression, movement, and due process of law. This was especially so during Jimmy Carter's presidency between 1977 and 1981. Indeed, Shapiro's research reveals that the amount of the media coverage on human rights was drastically increased between 1976 and 1977. In the New York Times, the number of stories on human rights in 1976 was 120. The next year, a year after that President Carter took office, it increased to 466. Also in the Washington Post, 379 stories were reported on human rights in 1977 in contrast to 66 the year before. As for television news coverage, the number of stories on human rights followed a similar trend. The CBS Evening News broadcasted 6 stories on human rights in 1976, but 93 stories in 1977.

The Administration of President Ronald Reagan started in 1982 did not maintain President Carter's diplomacy centered on human rights issues. This parallels the decrease of coverage of

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23 Ibid., 389.
human rights in the media. Under President Regan, the focus shifted back to the Cold War and this preoccupation reduced the attention paid to human rights issues. It can be said that the American public must have become more aware of the issues of global human rights because of the greater increase of media coverage on human rights. However, the issue of human rights was not yet regarded as a central factor in American foreign policy. The reason for this is because the public then was still concerned more about the containment of communism. For the American public, therefore, issues of human rights violations and the protection of human rights around the world should have linked somehow to some visible national interest.

Contrary to the Carter–Regan years, the post-Cold War Bush–Clinton years of American foreign policy changed its characteristics primarily because the significance of “public deliberation” was enhanced according to Benjamin I. Page. He suggests that even though public deliberation is essential to democracy in modern societies in order to ensure that the public's policy preferences are informed, enlightened, and authentic, public deliberation is largely mediated with professional communicators rather than ordinary citizens talking to each other and to the public through mass media of communication. His point of view is derived from the idea that modern mass media play its role as a political actor in American government.

Considering how the news media work in American government, it can be said that the political system of traditional “check and balance” in the US may particularly encourage the news media to act in governmental terms as a political institution. Given the greater independence of journalists from political institutions, and given both the greater need for intermediary institutions to bridge the gaps between the constitutional branches.

I agree with Page’s perception of modern mass media playing its role as one of important political actors, and that information that the mass media deliver to the public is usually dominated by the professional communicators. This notion of public deliberation and the role of the mass media by Page meet today's event-based and image-driven reporting by the press. The key phrase here is global “human rights”. For the media, the stories that they produce should be emotionally charged in order to influence public opinion. Page’s suggestion that the public not be deceived in this information-flooded age and maintain a healthy skepticism. He also suggests that we must not be stuck with only one news source, but we have to “shop around” so that we can be exposed to a significant diversity of ideas. The public lost the easy link to be interested

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24 Benjamin I. Page is the Gordon Scott Fulcher Professor of Decision Making in the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University, and he is also the one who has been claiming that policy-makers in the United States have actually been pretty much concerned about public opinion.


27 Page, pp. 126-127.
in international affairs due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In other words, the public is no longer able to see the common enemy that they had been so much aware of. That is why, the press is also burdened because it will take all the skills of reporting, writing and reasoning to let the audience know where in the world the dangerous lies and how important that event is to Americans even if it is remote from them.38

As a conclusion, the status of the mass media today has been the product of many factors that arose as the result of the end of the Cold War. Public opinion influenced by the way the media changed after the Cold War. In this new information environment dominated by the likes of CNN, citizens need to be aware of the warnings presented by Page and others. As for the media, it should also be alert to what kind of information it sends to the public and be fair, which means that it should avoid bias.

Speaking of American foreign policy decision-making process in Somalia, for instance, was a "major-league CNN-era disaster," as David Halberstam says, and "no sight could have been more bitter for ordinary Americans sitting at home to witness; the body of a dead soldier, who had gone so far away on a humanitarian mission, being dragged through the streets, while the people he was there to help cheered his desecration." To answer the research question of this article, I would still agree that foreign policy decision-making process can be influenced by public opinion being affected by the media. The situation can be put another way. It is possible to state that the relationship between the state, the media and the public became much closer. It is important to understand that the media can recently act as one of the political institutions, which means there is a cycle of influence between the media and political actors. In this sense, debate of media regulations has another possibility to deepen the study.

There is nothing, but information today. That information sometimes contains emotionally persuasive pictures to the audience, the public is indispensable fact. When it comes to human rights issues, pictures that the media deliver to us enhance our emotional attachment to the ongoing events, because that information is not only visual, but powerful. This is the trick of TV. When the first television debate between JFK and Richard Nixon was broadcasted, people who saw and heard the debate on TV thought that JFK would win the election whereas people who just heard the debate had an impression that Nixon would win. This means that the visual impression is significantly powerful.

The last point is that the idea of "Global Village" or Civil Society in more intense meaning has been triggered because of the rapid improvement of information technology, especially TV and internet. McLuhan says that electric technology does not require words any more than a digital computer requires numbers and it makes possible an amplification of human consciousness

38 Grunwald, p. 13.
on a world scale, without any verbalization at all. That the TV does not require any persuasive wording if it contains a powerful and emotional picture is another debate. However, what he means is that the world itself is obviously becoming smaller in terms of receiving information. He also means that TV can create mass understanding of the world. What we are expected to do in the TV era is that each one of us takes part in the cycle to create information without only being a receiver by using any sorts of public deliberation. In that way, the voice of us, public opinion both at the national level and international level would become much more powerful in any aspect of policy makings.

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