

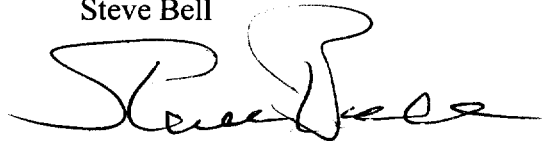
Diplomacy Live: The Media and Foreign and Affairs

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the media and the American government is a complicated one, especially on global level. This paper looks at the difficulties of modern media and the United States' foreign affairs. The *Media Revolution* explains how the Vietnam War and the birth of the CNN network changed the way international news is covered. The *CNN Effect* addresses a controversial media syndrome that suggests the press influences the actions of the government. The *Information Age* shows how the introduction and implementation of new technologies have added new dimensions to reporting foreign affairs. *Operation Enduring Freedom* looks at the current conflict in Afghanistan and new challenges the media and government are facing.

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Introduction

This summer, I turned on the television in a hotel room in Cairo and watched CNN. I had been studying abroad for weeks, immersed in foreign languages, customs, and peoples. In those weeks, I learned as much about America and perceptions of this country as I did the ones I visited. What I realized then was that our media is as much a cultural export as our movies or music.

CNN and other global news networks play a role in how other countries see the United States and how the United States sees the world around it. The interaction of our government with other governments is communicated to millions through this powerful medium. I came back to the United States in August with a greater desire to understand why I had chosen to become a part of it. In particular, I wanted to know more about the media and America's foreign affairs in times of peace and war. A month later, America was attacked, and now I'm learning about the latter.

Purpose

The relationship between the media and the government is indeed a complex one. Both exist to serve the public interest, yet they often seem to work at cross-purposes. Some critics suggest that the media's power over public opinion is strong enough to influence the government's actions. On the other hand, media proponents say that U.S. policy should be strong enough to support scrutiny. The debate becomes even more complicated when other countries are involved.

The role of broadcast journalists in America's foreign affairs has a new timeliness. As the situation in Afghanistan progresses, there will be questions about how

the press and the government should coexist. How involved should the news media be in the war effort? To what extent could their coverage of the war influence public support?

The Media Revolution

The evolution leading to what is now considered modern media took place gradually through the introduction and implementation of new technologies. However, two particular events are widely mentioned by analysts as being significant in that evolution. The Vietnam War and the birth of CNN were milestones for the American media, particularly in their coverage of international affairs.

Vietnam is remembered by many as the first “living room war.” It was the first war in our history that Americans actually saw the bloodshed going on overseas. Many historians agree that this is partly what “caused the American people to lose faith in the war effort and to demand that it be brought to end... the daily drumbeat of pictures of the horrors of war would weaken the resolve of the American people” (Dunsmore 251). Certainly there were other factors involved in the decision to pull out of Vietnam. The number of American victims was staggering and growing exponentially. Also, the United States had been involved in Vietnam for more years than any other conflict, without making any substantial progress. Undoubtedly, the constant images were simply a final blow to the campaign, but that does not decrease the significance it had on public perception of war. From that point on, Americans would expect to see more. War would be a grim reality, not just for those fighting it, but for those watching it as well.

Created in 1980 by business mogul Ted Turner, CNN has arguably become one of the world’s most watched news sources. CNN has managed to attain the respectability of

a major network without having some of the difficulties a traditional network news operation faces. While other national operations have 30 minutes to summarize the day's news, CNN broadcasts 24 hours a day. They can air live coverage uncut and uninterrupted, as they did throughout the Gulf War. Also, CNN prides itself on its objective image. Unlike ABC, NBC, and CBS, this American-based network markets itself as an international organization, and they approach their coverage from that perspective.

Although it is rooted in American democracy and the free market, CNN presents itself as a global network that must remain politically neutral. . . . On the one hand, CNN enabled Boris Yeltsin to transmit his message of hope and freedom during the Moscow putsch, advancing democracy in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the network broadcast a sycophantic interview with Fidel Castro which ignored the many real violations of human rights and democracy in Communist Cuba. (Edwards 313)

CNN is designed to appeal to the younger generation. This generation wants immediate, constant information. As the success of CNN continues to grow, analysts predict other networks will begin to emulate their style.

The CNN Effect

CNN has the added distinction of being the namesake for the heavily discussed "media syndrome." The CNN effect, in its simplest terms, is the opinion that in any tug of war between press and government, one side has the advantage of a medium which can influence the perceptions and opinions of the masses. The masses represent votes, and therein lies the political power.

The CNN effect essentially implies that news coverage is capable of directing the government's agenda. It is important to understand that it takes more than a single report or article to get the government to take notice. The idea here is market saturation. A

story that networks covers and continues to cover for an extended period of time will draw attention. The story may not necessarily be of national importance. It may simply be visually arresting or particularly unusual. However, according to advocates of the CNN effect, policymakers will assume that if the media continues to address this story, it is of concern or interest to the public. It is something they should incorporate in their agenda.

Critics who argue that the media has entirely too much public influence are not without some supporting proof. Perhaps one of the best examples of the CNN effect is the United States intervention in Somalia. The media is often described as a main factor in the decision to send American forces into Somalia as well as the decision to withdraw them a year later. Media coverage of widespread starvation throughout the country certainly played a part in President Bush sending U.S. troops to safeguard relief supplies. "Television images of people suffering from famine, disease, or natural disasters, can by their effect on world public opinion (or presumed effect, in policymakers' minds) get the United States and other industrialized nations involved where they might not have been otherwise" (Strobel).

The project was widely received as a success until an unfortunate incident changed public opinion. In October 1993, a picture of a U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu hit the air and gained national attention. The Clinton administration decided to withdraw troops from Somalia soon after (Livingston 296). Whether the news media had any goal other than simply reporting the incidents in Somalia to the public, their action had a reaction. The fact remains that the media has a certain influence over public perception, and by extension, influence over the government.

Some analysts say this influence is exaggerated. According to Warren P. Strobel, senior editor of *U.S. News and World Report* and author of *Late-breaking Foreign Policy*, the CNN effect underestimates the intelligence of the public and the strength of the government. “The CNN effect is highly conditional. . . .sometimes [the press] suggest policy choices, but there is ample reason to believe that officials can reject those choices if they feel it necessary” (Strobel 211). In Strobel’s opinion, placing the blame on media is a sign of weak leadership. Not only should the media not be seen as a threat, a smart policymaker is one who considers the press to be an asset and a resource. “CNN can be an immense boon to them. . . .if they know how to use it. Real-time television allows these actors to disseminate their policies and positions almost immediately, to send signals to adversaries and allies alike; and to view the results, correcting where necessary” (82).

The CNN effect may be a relatively new concept, but evidence of the media’s active involvement in political matters is not. In November 1977, Walter Cronkite took it upon himself to play “peacemaker.” In separate interviews, Cronkite secured promises from Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin that lead to a historic Egyptian-Israeli meeting (Edwards 64). Certainly it was in the public interest. Without being put on the spot in front of the glaring eye of the camera, Begin and Sadat might never have agreed to meet. However, Cronkite might have been seen as crossing the line between reporting news and making it.

On the other hand, some analysts oppose the idea that journalists should avoid actually entering the political spectrum at all costs, because they are already as much a part of it as the politicians themselves. Their coverage of policy can help determine how favorably it is received. Their portrayal of an elected official can determine whether he

or she continues to be one in the next term. Therefore, to this mindset, their journalistic integrity is not damaged by becoming an active participant.

The news media should be thought of not only as an institution but as political; in other words, journalists are political actors. This does not mean that reporters...are consciously pursuing particular partisans or ideological agendas. On the contrary...their political influence may emerge not in spite of, but because of principled adherence to norms of objectivity, deference to factuality and authority. (Cook 85)

This approach to the CNN effect is perhaps too extreme. To say that the media is not only aware of their influence but that they use it to control the government and accomplish their own agenda seems almost sinister. It is more likely that CNN effect is simply a fact, a result of the system. The media could not decrease this influence over the public even if that was their intention.

The Information Age

Thanks to advances in technology, today's foreign correspondents have the tools to do faster, more visual reporting from the field. Satellites and laptop computers serve as a portable newsroom. Sound and images can go from a remote location in the desert to a studio in New York within minutes. Consequently, government officials have lost much of the processing time they were accustomed to in the past. "One of the potential effects of global real-time media is the shortening response time for decision-making. Decisions are made in haste, sometimes dangerously so. Policymakers 'decry the absence of quiet time to deliberate choices, reach private agreements, and mold the public's understanding'" (Livingston 294). If an official is unable to respond to a question or problem within a news "cycle," the length of time from one newscast to the

next, there is the risk of looking lazy or incompetent. The pressure to say something, anything, is immense.

The advanced capabilities of today's major media operations are common knowledge. Now the question is not can they do it, but should they? Despite the shared goal of serving the public interest mentioned earlier, there is one major aspect that divides the objectives of the news media from those of government. Television news is as much an industry as it is a service, and businesses within an industry are instinctively competitive. As long as ratings serve as an indication of profit and status, networks will continue to look for new ways to keep people watching. In the worst-case scenario, the greater good could be compromised. Lives could be endangered in an international conflict, all in an attempt to achieve the "it's happening now and we've got it" edge.

If during the next war, one of those screens lights up with 'live from the battlefield' coverage, the pressure to duplicate will be virtually irresistible. No matter all the academic and philosophical arguments against doing so, the nature of the business is such that if one goes, they all go, and there is an enormous temptation to be the one to go first. (Dunsmore 258)

Imagine the consequences if the pressure to "go first" revealed information concerning a covert operation. Before the so-called information highway, there was ample time to consider the ramifications of running a particular story. Without that time constraint, the temptation to act now and think later is too great.

Perhaps in the past there was less urgency due to less competition. This is where it is necessary to differentiate groups within this entity known as media. At one time, there were three major networks that dominated the market. That means there were a limited number of well-known, well-respected journalists in the field. As time passed and technology increased, the field became slightly more crowded. Newer, smaller groups

were introduced. CNN was followed by MSNBC, CNBC, and FOX News. The three original networks, or the “traditional gatekeepers,” now have to compete with these new groups. That includes covering stories they might have avoided in the past. Scandal stories like “Monica-gate” might have a high sizzle factor, but their audience appeal is undeniable. The result is an environment where there are too many sources outside of the mainstream to control the flow of information. In a wartime situation, where information is vital, the government will simply opt to say little or nothing rather than risk becoming a casualty of competition.

Operation Enduring Freedom

Today, it is difficult to believe that a few mere months ago the tumultuous marriage of press and foreign affairs was mostly the philosophical debate of media practitioners and government officials. One unforgettable early autumn day gave it practical application. On September 11, 2001, millions of Americans, glued to their televisions in horror, watched two airplanes filled with passengers crash into the World Trade Center. They watched as the Twin Towers crumbled to the ground. They watched as a third plane crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C., and a fourth plane, whose pilots refused to hit the intended target, simply crashed. They stared at the impossible, the world’s strongest nation under attack and thousands dead at the hands of a few with a dangerous agenda.

Operation Enduring Freedom, like all wars and international conflicts before it, introduces a unique set of elements. CNN Washington Bureau Chief Frank Sesno, in an appearance on the CNN program *Reliable Sources*, addressed the ways in which this war will be different from any other in American history.

SESNO: 21st century war. Small groups. Covert activities. An unidentifiable sometimes invisible enemy....a season, not an eclipse. A 21st century media. Real-time pictures. Satellite phones. Instant imagery potential. We can all see—common sense suggests where the pressure points are going to be. (“On the Brink of War”)

In one statement, Sesno named the many challenges and complexities American military and media will face throughout this conflict. The “season...eclipse” comment is a reference to the potential length of the war. The Gulf War was a swift and decisive victory for the United States. Public expectation of a similar resolution in this situation might meet with a disappointingly long haul. Already, media coverage has often had a negative edge. Perhaps in this Information Age, the standard has become a faster pace and immediate results. CNN correspondent Bernard Kalb commented on the media’s short-term support on *Reliable Sources*.

KALB: It took years before the media did a flip-flop in the way it covered the Vietnam War. It was gung-ho in the mid 60s....But by the end of the decade, the media began raising serious questions about how the war was going....By contrast, in this war, it has taken just a few weeks, less than a month, for the first media shots to be aimed at the pentagon strategy in Afghanistan. (“War on Terrorism”)

Here again, the CNN effect comes into play. If negative press during difficult periods in this campaign carry substantial weight with the public, how long will popular support of the war effort continue?

There is another aspect to consider. This is not a war of designated sides. America is not fighting against a particular country or force. The Taliban and Osama bin Laden are our named enemies, however, the United States has declared war on terrorism. Terrorism is much more difficult to target than a person or a country. It’s not traditional battlefield warfare. In the past months, it has become clear that many of those who

would do America harm are living within its borders. Barring unconstitutional racial and religious profiling, they are, as Sesno says, “unidentifiable” and “sometimes invisible.” Therefore, they are equally privy to any information made public knowledge by the press.

Finally, this war is personal. The United States interceded in conflicts between other countries in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars. The reason may have been to satisfy our personal interests, but those interests were not justice or retribution. Not since Pearl Harbor has America been attacked on its own soil. Thousands of innocent Americans died unnecessarily without the opportunity to face their attacker or understand what was happening. It’s an emotional ordeal to say the least, and there is the added fear of future attacks. “Another complication of covering in this war is that it is the first in modern American history with a real homeland threat, and that has contributed to full-throated popular support that can be at odds with what ought to be journalists’ natural skepticism” (Johnson). Americans, and certainly our journalists are included, are especially sensitive to what is happening at home and abroad. Yet, however much a cliché, journalists do not have the luxury of bias.

Indeed there is an abundance of subject matter for the media to delve into, and yet the common attitude of journalists, broadcast and otherwise, has been one of extreme caution. For whatever reason, there appears to be little resistance in this particular tug of war. “So far there has been mutual cooperation. The media fueled by common sense, patriotism, and fear of public backlash or all three, have embraced the government’s call for discretion” (Johnson).

In one situation, the ever-tempting scoop overcame the “discretion” of the news operations. Representatives of Osama bin Laden approached Al Jazeera, an Arab news

network with a videotaped message from bin Laden. Al Jazeera in turn passed the tape along to the American media, and in a competitive frenzy, bin Laden's statement was run immediately, completely unedited. Obviously, the government protested. " 'At best, Osama bin Laden's messages are propaganda calling on people to kill American s,' intoned White House spokesperson Ari Fleisher.... 'At worst, he could be issuing orders to his followers to initiate such attacks'" (CNN.com). National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice asked the networks to "use judgment" in airing taped messages, and they quickly agreed. Reliable Sources host, Howard Kurtz, posed this question to guest Tom DeFrank:

KURTZ: Yesterday, another one of those Osama bin Laden videotapes was released through Al Jazeera television and interestingly CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News showed a still photo of bin Laden, read a couple of quick excerpts and that was it....Is that a good journalistic decision?

DEFRANK: I don't think so, Howard. I think there's a difference between exercising restraint and exercising journalistic judgment. I think the pendulum has swung the other way and I think there's been an over correction. ("War on Terrorism")

Airing bin Laden's statements unedited arguably shows bad judgment, but not even airing soundbites from those statements is bad journalism. Is what Osama bin Laden has to say newsworthy? Absolutely. Is it more politically correct to silence him? Definitely. Is there a certain danger in factoring popularity, political and partisan, into how to cover a story? Without a doubt.

The voracity with which the networks approached the material from Al Jazeera could well be an indication of mounting frustration over the lack of material coming from within the United States. ABC news correspondent John McWethy says the Pentagon only provided the press with "small bits of relatively vague information on the bombing

strike” (Johnson). “I’m not an idiot,” says McWethy. “I understand that covert operations only work if you keep them out of public view, but this is going to be a huge operation. And when American soldiers go into combat and when they die, it’s going to be necessary in some fashion to describe that to the American people” (Johnson).

The root of the negative coverage goes deeper than the lack of information coming from the United States, although that certainly does not help the situation. “Journalists demand news. If the United States fails to provide in the form of measurable success, journalists will make that failure news” (Saletan). The problem with that theory is that the campaign in Afghanistan has not been a failure up to this point. “Since Oct. 7, we’ve killed a lot of Taliban infrastructure without losing an American soldier in combat. But according to the media, that’s not the story. The story is that we’re falling short of ‘expectations’...Expectations, like doubts, appear and grow like magic” (Saletan).

In the weeks preceding the fall of the Taliban regime, words like “quagmire” and “bogged down” were used to describe our progress. A Los Angeles Times headline read “New Sense of Impatience is Emerging.” The next day, ABC’s Cokie Roberts began her interview with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by addressing the perception that “after three weeks this war is not going well” (Saletan). The chain reaction continued from there, until the fall of the Taliban.

The coverage changed direction and became overwhelmingly positive at that point, but this improvement might only be a temporary state. “The Taliban has collapsed and been replaced by a plausible coalition government. This has occurred with extraordinary speed...the pessimists, however, have declined to retreat into their caves” (Weisberg). Perhaps the media is not being pessimistic so much as cautious. They may

consider it their job here to play devil's advocate. "This is the essence of the expectations game...it's preferable to prepare for the worst and have the worst not occur than it is to explain why you underestimated those hazards going in" (Weisberg). Whatever the motives, this situation could turn out to be the CNN effect in action. Should the media begin to heavily suggest that we are once more not meeting expectations in Afghanistan, it is highly possible that public support of the war could decline.

Allowing the press to be involved in ground operations could be an important factor in keeping a positive tone in their coverage of Operation Enduring Freedom. The transition from air strikes to ground operations presents the media with new opportunities to get better pictures and information. In air strikes, there are legitimate reasons to deny the press access. There is a limited amount of space in the aircraft. Bulky camera equipment might overload the aircraft and cause an accident. In such a tight space, reporters and crew might distract military personnel from their mission. These objections are less relevant in a ground operation, and yet news operations have yet to match the footage Americans saw a decade ago.

The American public has seen nothing like the vivid video that came back from the Persian Gulf War, no picture of American correspondents on rooftops in Kabul, providing play-by-play on incoming missiles. A seminal moment came when CNN had it's split screen between its live 'exclusive' Nightscope pictures of Afghanistan, showing what appeared to be nothing, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld saying not much more. (Johnson)

Surprisingly, the public is not angered by the lack of details and visual confirmation. In fact, it appears to be just the opposite. "Viewers have been flooding TV stations with complaints they are disclosing too much information. All of this might suggest that we are better off if the military keeps a tight lid on all information about

terrorism. But this is a dangerous thought....information is essential for democratic oversight” (Etzioni 15A). In other words, even if the press and the public are content, with this level of information, who is best served by this arrangement?

The function of the press is more than reporting information to the public. It’s safeguarding their interests as well, acting as their eyes and ears. The media’s presence equals accountability. No individual politician would admit fear of scrutiny is what keeps he or she from becoming corrupt, but it is what keeps the system as a whole from becoming corrupt. Now more than ever, that safeguard needs to be present. “Military operations involve moral decisions in which the public and its elected officials ought to participate....In the longer run, keeping the American people in the dark will undermine support for the war, make it easy to cover up foolish operations and make the war even dirtier than it needs to be” (Etzioni 15A).

There are no easy answers in this situation. Every day, the campaign in Afghanistan takes a step forward, but it seems to be far from over. There are no easy answers to the media debate either, no quick solution for the CNN effect or ways to improve relations between the press and the government. They will continue to struggle where issues of information and security are concerned. Yet for all the flaws in the system, their inability to work together at times, one cannot exist without the other. They are both necessary to ensure our freedom and safety. We would certainly not be better off without them.

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