

The University of Liverpool
Department of Social and Environmental Studies
School of Politics and Communication

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Lecturer: Dr Piers Robinson

Essay:

What impact does the news media have on the foreign policy making process?

Student: Felix Poetschke
Student ID: 200153008
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After the collapse of the USSR and the concomitant end of the Cold War a new age in foreign **policy making had begun**. Gone was the certainty with which politicians, and journalists alike, could go and frame conflicts in the everlasting fight between the good West and the evil eastern Communism. And as the certainty vanished, so many believed, the control over policy matters slid out of the politician's hands. A new principal took over: the media. After rehearsing during the Ethiopian famine in 1984 they finally started shaping the policy agenda in big style: Iraq 1991, Somalia 1993 – the media seemed to have managed to force the US government into humanitarian intervention, even including ground troop deployment . The CNN effect myth was born.

However, research over the last years has shown that not all what was perceived as pure media power could indeed be accounted for by them. There is a multitude of other factors involved in every decision and often policies are decided behind closed doors; the impression given on television being effectively completely different from the 'truth'.

The key questions then are what essentially can be regarded as a CNN effect – if anything like that does indeed exist? And how big can the influence of the media in situations of crises really be?

Two completely different concepts of the CNN effect exist. The first is used, for instance, by Mermin (1997) and Livingston and Eachus (1995). For them the CNN effect consists of the media's ability to influence the policy agenda, by reporting issues and thereby pushing these issues in priority. They are convinced that the media can indeed influence policy decision making. Livingston and Eachus (1995) claim: "At some level media have this capacity ...". But this is not so much the question: "The question at heart of the CNN effect is, Who controls this capacity?"¹. For Mermin this is "of central importance in understanding the scope and character of television's influence on foreign policy formulation."² The point made is, that whoever sets the media agenda and draws the attention to certain problems or crises, also determines in course how decisions in government about these issues are eventually made: "To the degree that foreign policy is reactive to news content, the key decisions made are those by reporters, producers, and editors."³

¹ Livingston & Eachus 1995, p. 415.

² Mermin 1997, p. 386.

³ Livingston & Eachus 1995, p. 415.

The second possible conceptualisation of the CNN effect is employed, for example, by Gowing (1996) and Robinson (2002). This approach is what is commonly understood as CNN effect. Here the point is not who sets the agenda in the first place. It can be politicians, government officials, the media. It is about how media coverage of a crisis affects policy decision making. This can be either *during* a crisis but also before a crisis, thereby triggering an intervention. Critical television coverage of government action or inaction would in this concept drive officials either to pursue one specific of various policy options or change policy completely⁴: “The assumption ... is that real-time television coverage ... not only creates a demand that ‘something must be done’, but also drives the making of foreign policy.”⁵ And Robinson is in “search for evidence of news media influence on intervention during humanitarian crisis.”⁶

A variety of different scholars has so far tried to assess the extent of the CNN effect and its impact. Not only, as outlined above, have they conceptualised the effect differently, they also went on to examine it employing various methodologies. The findings are ambiguous and varied. Due to the limited scope of this essay, though, it is not possible to give a complete overview of research on the CNN effect. I will therefore concentrate on the work of Gowing (1996) and Livingston and Eachus (1995), as these studies are some of the most cited so far.⁷ Furthermore their research does not only employ different conceptualisations but also different approaches, as Robinson (2002) points out.: they can be distinguished into theory and non-theory based research.

Gowing (1996) represents the non-theory based research. He draws solely on interviews as research method, and on his own experience as television journalist. No specific research question is pursued nor does he employ any theories of media-state relationship⁸. Gowing interviewed about 100 “diplomatic and military insiders”⁹ and questioned them about media impact, mainly during the Bosnia crisis. He did not examine any news media content in any systematic fashion; when he talks about media content, it is rather from his memory and never systematically examined.

⁴ It seems obvious that a CNN effect can only occur when there is *critical* coverage. As the CNN effect is all about change or implementation of policies, positive and supportive coverage of government policies could certainly not be regarded as having such an effect on the government. This is also reflected in Robinson’s (2002) notion of media framing as a factor in shaping the possibility of media influencing policy processes.

⁵ Gowing 1996, p. 81.

⁶ Robinson 2002, p. 1.

⁷ For an overview of other research, see Robinson 2002.

⁸ Robinson 2002, p. 17.

⁹ Gowing 1996, p. 82.

His findings are rather ambiguous. His first conclusion is that by and large television does not drive policy making. “Only rarely is there a change to overall strategy...”¹⁰ However, as Robinson (2002) points out, Gowing’s concept of ‘overall strategy’ is never really defined. It is possible, though, in view of his examples where he sees media impact on policy, to understand the ‘overall strategy’ as a general decision of government or organisations (UN, NATO), to intervene or not to during a crisis. However, this is not what a research piece should be like – main results only to be found by inference. Gowing’s other findings are that there are impacts on a lower level: he distinguishes between ‘cosmetic’ and ‘tactical’ effects. However, these terms are not properly defined, either. Still, as shown further down, these are findings that can be. Cosmetic effects are such as the ‘Baby Irma airlift’, mounted by PM John Major after a myriad of phone calls flooded Downing Street. Obviously this did nothing to general strategy and the only really beneficiary was Baby Irma. Tactical effects are such as the sudden intervention of British forces to relieve the situation in a mental hospital, which happened after a report of Kate Adie in November 1992. Although the troops had been aware of the situation for some time, the report put pressure on them to act.¹¹ Effectively this delayed UNHCR operations for two days and so had also a rather negative effect. However, Gowing leaves it open if larger actions such as airstrikes would fall into the ‘tactical’ category.

His second major finding is that during moments of “policy panic”, the possibility of the media influencing policy processes is higher¹². Interestingly Gowing now claims that during these moments media can have a “pivotal effect on policy-making – both tactical and *strategic*.”¹³ This contrasts with other remarks about the media not being able to influence the overall strategy, as described earlier. However, policy panic, or “policy uncertainty”¹⁴ appears when “events occur unexpectedly.”¹⁵ He quotes Kofi Annan confirming the observation of the media’s greater impact on policy in such moments: “... when the policy has not been thought” through “they have to do something or face a public relations disaster.”¹⁶ This finding is an important factor in developing a more thorough theory of the relation between the media and foreign policy, as we shall see later.

¹⁰ Gowing 1996, p. 88.

¹¹ Gowing 1996, pp. 90-91.

¹² Gowing 1996, p. 89.

¹³ Gowing 1996, p. 86. My emphasis.

¹⁴ Robinson 2002, p. 26.

¹⁵ Gowing 1996, p. 86.

¹⁶ Gowing 1996, p. 86.

Obviously Gowing's approach does have quite a lot of possible flaws. As it is solely based on interviews, it is also affected by all the problems interviews bear, without having the chance to check the results via other sources. Not only is there a high probability of deliberate bias on the side of the interviewee, obviously also the problem of memory exists. Furthermore, "interviews with different actors tend to yield divergent accounts of what happened and why."¹⁷ Still this would be **compensable** if Gowing had employed other sources for his research, such as documentary evidence or media coverage. By not doing so, his findings are problematic, and, as detailed above, not very conclusive, either. Still, in identifying different possible impacts and developing, even though rather skeletal, the concept of policy (un-)certainty, Gowing's work has contributed greatly to help developing a theory of media impact on foreign policy.

Livingston and Eachus (1995) have a different approach to the CNN effect. As noted earlier, their concept of the CNN effect is the question of agenda setting. They start off with the observation that the predominant view of the CNN effect as the new player in foreign policy presumes "an independent media ... in an environment free of official cuing to distant trouble spots around the world." This, however, "contradicts many of the findings over the last 20 years of media and foreign affairs research, the most important of which is that officials, not media, set and maintain news agenda."¹⁸ They explicitly draw on Lance Bennett's theory of 'indexing', which states that the agenda of the news media is mostly set by government officials, as journalists use them most of the time as news sources. Also does the intensity of a debate about a particular topic in the news follow the intensity with which it is fought on official level.¹⁹ "In the absence of official debate the news media will not generate it independently."²⁰

The CNN effect, however, would predict that, in Livingston's and Eachus's conception, journalists had independently decided to cover the issue of Somalia and had not relied on their elite sources on that. Therefore, to find out if a CNN effect was at work in Somalia, the task is to find out how the issue came on the media agenda in the first place and if "changes in policy follow changes in media content"²¹ or if the media followed the official debate.

¹⁷ Robinson 2002, p. 18.

¹⁸ Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 415.

¹⁹ Bennett 1989

²⁰ Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 415.

²¹ Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 416.

Their findings are rather straightforward: It was politicians and government officials who set the agenda in Somalia, and the decision to intervene was the result of diplomatic and bureaucratic action. Media did not discover the issue and bring it to the government's attention but the politicians had to struggle to get the story into the papers and bulletins and in the mind of the people. Livingston and Eachus do therefore find further evidence for Bennett's 'indexing'-theory, both in respect of 'who follows whom' and in respect to intensity of coverage. In fact, politicians and officials used the media to get the story discussed on a higher level. In Livingston's and Eachus' conceptualisation the CNN effect was not at work in Somalia: "... media content came in *response* to official initiatives, and not the other way round."²²

However, there are still some unclarities regarding this research. If the CNN effect is essentially an agenda-setting effect then it would be not necessary to pursue media interest on the issue over time but it would be sufficient just to clarify who effectively set the agenda. Other problems include that with this conceptualisation of the CNN effect it is not possible to explain policy reactions on suddenly occurring events, as for example the mortar bombing of the market place in Sarajevo – which would have been covered by the media anyway, which **renders** the question of agenda setting redundant. Furthermore, as Livingston and Eachus (1995) see the CNN effect not in action in Somalia, they still acknowledge that the media has had an impact in this crisis: "... media content was an important factor in eventually expanding the U.S. role in Somalia."²³ Unfortunately it is not clear how this is supposed to be understood. Does it mean that by helping mid-level officials getting the story heard on higher levels, the media helped in this way? Or that officials were directly influenced by the media? For both of these possibilities the question remains if this could not as well be accounted for as a CNN effect – and why Livingston and Eachus (1995) do not consider this possibility. One other point is unclear: the big Somalia crisis and intervention came way after the period examined by Livingston and Eachus (1995). They examined the relief efforts, called Operation Provide Relief. But the troop deployment only happened with Operation Restore Hope, in early 1993. This is not what they look at, and their conceptualisation does not allow for it, either. For them the point is clear – this intervention was a logical effect of the previous

²² Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 427. Original emphasis.

²³ Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 427.

agenda-setting by officials. “The die was cast”²⁴, not acknowledging that many circumstances had changed: There was a different president now.

However, this piece of research is much more clear-cut and understandable than Gowing’s. In formulating a clear research question, basing the research on theory and employing replicable methods, further evidence for Bennett’s ‘indexing’ theory is found and it is shown, that in the case of Somalia, at least for the first period of events, politics, not media, set the agenda.

Drawing on points made by Gowing and Livingston and Eachus (1995), namely policy certainty and the further utilisation of the indexing theory, Robinson (2002) delivers the most recent and thought through account of the CNN effect. Added to these two points is the notion of media framing and manufacturing consent theory as developed by Hallin (1986). From that Robinson develops the “policy-media interaction model”²⁵, which I want to explain briefly now.

The point made by Robinson is that there are two major factors shaping possible media impact on foreign policy: policy certainty and media framing. These two play together in restraining or supporting media influence. The prediction is that the greater the policy certainty within the elite and government, the less it is possible for the media to influence decision making. Policy certainty can be expressed either as the government having a inconsistent or undecided policy, no policy at all, or “wavering”²⁶ policy. Inconsistent policy occurs when different actors in the government or on official level have different opinions on how to shape a policy. No policy is simply when there does no policy exist regarding a particular issue, and wavering policy is present when policies change easily because of the actors lacking commitment to them.²⁷ However, the second factor contributes as well: distant and neutral media framing decreases the likelihood of the media influencing the politicians whereas empathy framing increases it. This media reporting, though, is thought to reflect the level of elite consensus as predicted by Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1989) and further supported by Livingston and Eachus (1995) and others.²⁸

²⁴ Livingston and Eachus (1995), p. 426.

²⁵ Robinson 2002, p. 30.

²⁶ Robinson 2002, p. 27.

²⁷ Robinson 2002, p. 27. Whether this definition, particularly of the ‘no policy’ option, is useful, will be explored further down.

²⁸ See also Zaller and Chiu (2000).

Robinson distinguishes between several kinds of CNN effects. The kind of effect labelled most often as CNN effect is what he calls a *strong* CNN effect. Here “media reports helped drive or push policy-makers down a particular path”, being “a significant influence on the policy process.”²⁹ **This to be the case** there would have to be considerable media coverage, sustained over several days. A *weak* CNN effect could occur when “policy-makers are *personally* affected by random media reports that highlight a particular crisis.”³⁰ This would certainly not result in launching an intervention, but might draw a politician in a certain direction. However, this is “unlikely to have a large effect on any policy process.”³¹ The *accelerant* effect is said to “speed up the media process”³², but is not to be regarded as a strong CNN effect as it presupposes that inevitable decisions just happened fast, instead of influencing any policy outcomes. The *impediment* effect, on the other hand, is not a CNN effect in the pure sense, as it cautions politicians about getting involved in a crisis. Also called the body-bag effect it refers to the problem of (possible) casualties undermining support at home. The notion of ‘possible’ casualties here refers also to the problem of the *potential* CNN effect, which might occur in anticipation of “potential future news coverage when formulating policy”³³, thereby, for example, trying to avoid a public relation disaster.

To test his theory Robinson sets out to interview several key decision makers, but also uses archival material, and most important, includes media content and framing analysis, thereby avoiding the problem of a solely interview based research, as present in Gowing (1996). His findings are rather straightforward on the one hand, problematic on the other. Indeed does he find evidence that his policy-media relationship model is applicable, but then there are so many other factors involved in most of the decisions, that it can hardly be agreed which one was decisive. Obviously there is not one decisive factor – it is the mixture that shapes the decisions. However, there is evidence that the factors ‘policy certainty’ and ‘media framing’ do have a great share in this mixture, and also in the way that Robinson conceptualised them.

Generally he finds more evidence for the claim that the media do not have a very great impact – very often decisions are already made, i.e. policy certainty exists. Also it can be found that, when distance framing **exists**, a CNN effect is most likely not to occur. For the example of Rwanda, explaining why there was no CNN effect at work, Robinson states:

²⁹ Robinson 2002, p. 37.

³⁰ Robinson 2002, p. 38. Original Emphasis.

³¹ Robinson 2002, p. 38.

³² Robinson 2002, p. 38.

³³ Robinson 2002, p. 40.

... policy certainty (reflecting an impediment effect) against intervention, coupled with few attempts to publicise the killing of civilians by the UN security council and US executive, ran hand in hand with distance framing which implicitly supported a policy of withdrawal. As such ... the case of Rwanda highlights the unlikelihood of media influence on policy when the executive is decided upon a particular course of action. ... Rwanda also highlights the extent to which media coverage remains deferential to executive policy unless there exist alternative elite sources willing to challenge official policy.³⁴

However, there is also evidence that there are instances when a strong CNN effect is at work. Robinson finds this, for example, for the US policy following the mortar bombing of a Sarajevo market place in 1994. After this bombing, he claims, a combination of undecided policy together with critical and empathy-framed media coverage enables “those policy makers ... who advocate intervention to sell their policy to other members of the policy-making elite.”³⁵ However, already before the bombing there had been policy efforts towards a more active stance of the US, for example by Secretary of State Warren Christopher or Secretary of Defense William Perry³⁶, and immediately after the bombing Clinton’s national security advisor urged to do something. In view of the very immediate reaction, the question remains if it really was TV coverage that made Clinton act or maybe “it was the massacre itself ... that catalysed a diplomatic process that had been underway for several weeks, as Gowing (1996: 85) suggests, implying rather an accelerant than a strong CNN effect.

Generally the question remains of how the impact of television pictures actually works. Is it a direct process, with the pictures being seen by officials and politicians, thereby sometimes urging them to do something? Or is the process an indirect one, influencing the policy makers via public opinion? For Robinson public opinion is not pivotal for studying the CNN effect for two reasons. Firstly, policy-makers and elite groups are “more attentive than the wider public to foreign affairs news” and secondly, they do not rely on public opinion polls for their assessment of public opinion but often “rely upon ‘perceived public opinion’ that is in turn largely formed via the media.”³⁷ Anthonsen, however, states that “public opinion does matter for foreign policy” as “it set[s] the frame for which foreign-policy behaviour is perceived as allowable by decision-makers.”³⁸ Indeed, most of the possible CNN effects outlined above have a direct relation to public opinion, except for the strong and the weak CNN effect. As

³⁴ Robinson 2002, p. 116.

³⁵ Robinson 2002, p. 92.

³⁶ Robinson 2002, pp. 87-8.

³⁷ Robinson 2002, p. 3.

³⁸ Anthonsen 2003, p. 13.

Anthonsen observes, “media can only *accelerate* decision making, if decision-makers perceive a certain pressure for action. Likewise, media can only *impede* decision making, if they manage to undermine public support for government action.”³⁹ Interestingly also Robinson acknowledges that, when he relates the impediment effect “to the fear of policy-makers that, once casualties are taken, public support for an intervention will rapidly wane.”⁴⁰ The effect obviously directly linked with public opinion is the potential CNN effect, as this occurs when policy-makers act in anticipation of bad news making the headlines or in hope for good news as they show humanitarian interest, in both cases hoping for a positive public reaction.⁴¹ Therefore public opinion is not a side factor in the debate about the CNN effect but, especially in the light of only few evidence for a strong CNN effect, a big factor which has to be taken into account.

In conclusion of these arguments two observations can be made. Firstly, the media can have an impact on foreign policy. But, secondly, there are a multitude of other things involved in the foreign policy making process, which affects the possible influence of the media. One that we have discussed on length here is the notion of policy certainty. Another is public opinion, which as a factor in foreign policy making is so far underdeveloped in current research. However, a big case for the strong CNN effect can not be made.

In outlook it seems likely, that a certain kind of CNN effect is going to have more importance in the next years: the potential CNN effect. As it is based mainly on public opinion or the anticipation of public opinion, and as public opinion is getting more and more paramount in policy considerations – the context of political marketing, permanent campaign and scientific campaigning – policy-makers will more and more look at possible impact of policy decisions on public opinion. And while this may be less the case with the United States, who regained foreign policy certainty in pursuing the War against Terror, this certainly makes sense for ‘old’ Europe. The refusal of Germany’s Bundeskanzler Schröder to engage with the US in a war against Iraq and thereby winning a long lost election can pose as an example here.

³⁹ Anthonsen 2003, p. 31. Original emphasis.

⁴⁰ Robinson 2002, p. 39.

⁴¹ Robinson 2002, p. 39.

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