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Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics

Models of Media Influence on Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Debate over the extent to which the mass media serves elite interests or, alternatively, plays a powerful role in shaping political outcomes has been dogged by dichotomous and one-sided claims. Some attribute enormous power to the news media (the so-called CNN effect) while others claim the media 'manufactures consent' for elite policy preferences. This article reviews existing theories of media–state relations, in particular the work of Daniel Hallin and Lance Bennett, and highlights theoretical and empirical shortcomings in the manufacturing consent thesis. The article then outlines two models, a model of media influence and Gadi Wolfsfeld's 'political contest model', that serve to reconcile contrasting claims over the power of the news media. The model of media influence is then applied to the Vietnam War in order to reconcile contrasting claims (Hallin vs David Culbert) regarding the role of the media during this conflict. It is argued that the two models, taken together, provide a starting point for a two-way understanding of the direction of influence between media and the state that builds upon, rather than rejects, existing theoretical accounts.

Key Words CNN effect, indexing, manufacturing consent, media influence, media–state relations, world politics

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Overview

In recent years the need to understand the relationship between the media and world politics has become more pressing. Many commentators attribute enormous power to news media, claiming they have the ability to 'move and shake governments' (Cohen, 1994: 9). Such views have found clearest expression in the debate over the CNN effect concerning the apparent ability of news media coverage to drive western intervention during humanitarian crises. Although doubt has been cast on the validity of the CNN effect thesis (Gowing, 1994; Strobel, 1997), politicians continue to assert the importance of news media coverage in shaping policy responses to humanitarian crises (Blair, 1999; Holbrooke, 1999). At the same time, other commentators, and indeed much media theory, continues to downplay or deny the possibility of the media shaping or influencing government policy-making. In its most totalizing formulation, the 'manufacturing consent' school of thought maintains that, almost without exception, the media functions primarily to mobilize support for the policy preferences of dominant elites (Chomsky and Herman, 1988; Hammond and Herman, 2000; Herman, 1993). More mainstream accounts, represented by the work of Daniel Hallin (1986) and Lance Bennett (1990), still maintain that media have little, if any, independent influence on elite policy debates over foreign policy (see also Mermin, 1999; Zaller and Chui, 1996).

The aim of this article is to both review our current conceptual understanding of media–state relations and to discuss two theoretical advances which introduce greater scope for recognizing the importance of media in shaping, and at times determining, political outcomes. In doing so, the goal is to offer the beginnings of a theory of media–state relations that can provide a two-way understanding of the direction of influence between the media and world politics. I start by outlining manufacturing consent theory, noting in particular two distinct versions of it. Empirical and theoretical problems with manufacturing consent theory are then discussed in more detail. In particular I note the inconsistency between manufacturing consent and the wealth of evidence that highlights the pivotal role news media coverage can, at times, play in shaping government policy. I then outline two theoretical advances. The first, my own work, builds directly upon the work of Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990) but specifies the conditions, via a policy–media interaction model, under which the media might play a key role in influencing political outcomes. The utility of the theoretical framework is demonstrated by using it to reconcile contrasting claims made by Daniel Hallin (1986)

and David Culbert (1998) with regard to media influence on US policy during the Vietnam War. The second advance is represented in Gadi Wolfsfeld's (1997) political contest model. The distinctions between Wolfsfeld's model and my own model are discussed. It is argued that both theoretical advances provide the potential for generating a nuanced, two-way understanding of the direction of influence between media and the state that takes us beyond current, totalizing theories of media–state relations.

Manufacturing consent

A wealth of critical literature written over the last 25 years maintains that the political and economic positioning of major news media institutions leads to a situation in which news accounts tend to support dominant perspectives. More specifically, this literature emphasizes the ability of government to influence the output of journalists and the tendency of journalists to both self-censor and perceive events through the cultural and political prisms of their respective political and social elites. I refer to this literature as 'manufacturing consent' only loosely. While some arguments about manufacturing consent (see in particular Chomsky and Herman, 1988) are controversial, the thesis that news media coverage is 'indexed' (Bennett, 1990) to the frames of reference of policy elites receives substantial empirical support (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 1991; Hallin, 1986; Mermin, 1999; Sigal, 1973; Zaller and Chui, 1996). Broadly speaking, this critical literature understands the news media as being influenced by, and not influencng, government policy (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Chomsky and Herman, 1988; Entman, 1991; Hallin, 1986; Herman, 1993; Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Paletz and Entman, 1981; Parenti, 1993; Philo and McLaughlin, 1993; Williams, 1993; Zaller and Chui, 1996).

Two implicit versions of the manufacturing consent paradigm can be discerned, an *executive* version and an *elite* version.[1] The *executive* version (e.g. Chomsky and Herman, 1988; Entman, 1991; Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Herman, 1993; Philo and McLaughlin, 1993) emphasizes the extent to which news media content conforms with the agendas and frames of reference of government officials where government officials are understood as members of the *executive*. For example, Robert Entman (1991) analysed the divergent US media framing of the Korean Airline and Iran Air shoot downs which occurred during the 1980s. Both of these international incidents were similar, involving mistakes by the military leading to the destruction of civilian airliners and large loss of

life. However, the US news media framed the Iran Air shoot down, for which the US was responsible, in terms of a technical failure, while the Korean Airline shoot down, for which the USSR was responsible, was framed as a moral outrage. According to Entman (1991: 10) overall media coverage was consistent with the policy interests of the respective US administrations. For example, with respect to the relatively high level of news media coverage of the Korean Airline shoot down compared to that of the Iran Air shoot down, Entman argues:

> A continuing judgment of importance likely made a political difference: A continuing high degree of mass awareness of KAL pressured potential elite opponents to the Reagan administration to remain silent or hop on the 'Evil Empire' bandwagon . . . lower mass awareness of the Iran Air incident diminished a political resource White House foes might otherwise have used to convince other elites to abandon the administration's Persian Gulf policy. (Entman, 1991: 10)

Importantly, according to the executive version, the news media do not function to criticize or challenge executive policy lines. Accordingly this vein of the manufacturing consent literature makes a strong implicit claim that the conformity between news media coverage and executive policy interests prevents news media influence on executive policy.

The second, *elite* version of the manufacturing consent paradigm (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986) holds that news media coverage conforms to the interests of political elites in general whether they are in the executive, legislative or any other politically powerful position in society. The seminal study of elite manufacturing consent theory is Daniel Hallin's *The Uncensored War*. Examining the claim that during the Vietnam War the news media played an oppositional role to official US policy, Hallin finds that critical news media coverage occurred only after sections of the Washington political elite turned against the war. Hence, perhaps the event most cited as a case of news media influence on government policy actually turns out to be a case of political elites becoming divided over policy with critical news media coverage merely being a reflection of this. Drawing upon these findings, Hallin develops the concept of three spheres, one of consensus, one of legitimate controversy and one of deviance. These exist with regard to any given political issue. He argues that news media coverage, taking its cues from political elites, rarely produces coverage within the deviant sphere but rather either reflects elite consensus on an issue or elite 'legitimate[d] controversy' (Hallin, 1986). Hallin's work receives further conceptual clarification through the work of Lance Bennett (1990). Bennett argues that 'mass media news is indexed implicitly to the dynamics of govern-

mental debate' (Bennett, 1990: 108). When news media coverage highlights executive policy problems or failures, that is to say it is critical of executive policy, this simply reflects a 'professional responsibility [on the part of the journalist] to highlight important conflicts and struggles within the centers of power' (Bennett, 1990: 110). Bennett's theory receives substantial empirical support via Mermin's (1999) study of news media coverage, elite debate and post-Vietnam US military interventions and Zaller and Chui's (1996) analysis of news media coverage of foreign policy crises between 1945 and 1991. Both Zaller and Chui (1996) and Mermin (1999) find that, consistent with predictions of elite manufacturing consent theory, the news media have rarely moved beyond the confines of 'official' Washington policy debates.

An important claim of elite manufacturing consent theory is that news coverage which criticizes or challenges executive policy occurs when there exists elite conflict with regard to that policy. Hence, contrary to the executive version of the manufacturing consent paradigm, the possibility that news media coverage might be *critical* of executive policy is allowed for. An implication of this possibility is that news media coverage might have the ability to *influence* executive policy processes when there is elite conflict over an issue. This is an important implication of elite manufacturing consent that contrasts with the implications of the executive version and which will be returned to. However Hallin (1986), Bennett (1990) and, more recently, Mermin (1999) do not explore this possibility and tend to equate a passive news media with reliance on political elite sources whether executive, legislative or otherwise.[2] For example, having analysed the lead up to US intervention in Somalia during 1992, Mermin (1999)[3] finds that news coverage followed, not led, elite calls for intervention in Somalia. This leads him to de-emphasize the importance of the news media in causing US policy-makers to intervene in the crisis. He writes:

> Stories on Somalia were broadcast just after the articulation of demands for US intervention in Washington in the summer and fall of 1992. Journalists made the final decision to cover Somalia, of course, but the stage had been set in Washington. The case of US intervention in Somalia, in sum, is not at heart evidence of the power of television to move governments; it is evidence of the power of governments to move television. (Mermin, 1999: 137)

With respect to Hallin's (1986) finding that news media coverage followed elite division over Vietnam, although he is careful not to dismiss out of hand the possibility of media influence, he too uses this finding to de-emphasize the possible importance of the news media. He writes:

> The behavior of the media . . . is intimately related to the unity and clarity of the government itself, as well as to the degree of consensus in the society at large. This is not to say that the role of the press is purely reactive. Surely it made a difference, for instance, that many journalists were shocked both by the brutality of the war and by the gap between what they were told by officials and what they saw and heard in the field. . . . But it is also clear that the administration's problems with the 'fourth branch of government' resulted in a large part from political divisions at home. . . . In a sense, what is really remarkable . . . is that the press and the public went as far with American Policy in Vietnam as they did. (Hallin, 1986: 213)

In short, in that both deny, or do not explore the possibility that news media coverage might play a key role in policy formulation, the elite version of the manufacturing consent literature is correctly located alongside the executive version that denies the existence of any independent news media effect on policy.

News sources do not disprove news effects

There exist, however, both theoretical and empirical problems with the manufacturing consent paradigm. I deal with each in turn.

Theoretically speaking, manufacturing consent theory is limited in two ways. First the theory, in particular as articulated by Bennett (1990), is rooted in an understanding of the relationship between journalists and official sources. As noted earlier, finding that news media coverage is indexed to elite opinion is equated, to all intent and purpose, with a passive and non-influential news media. News sources, however, do not disprove news effects, and by focusing upon the relationship between news sources and journalists, the theory 'black boxes' the dynamics between media coverage and any given policy process.[4] To explain this shortcoming more fully it is useful to consider Mermin's (1997) study of US intervention in Somalia. As noted earlier, Mermin equates media reliance on elite sources with non-influence. In doing so, however, he leaves two important questions regarding the role of the media unanswered. First, Mermin cannot provide evidence either for or against the thesis that, by compelling senior policy-makers to respond to emotive reporting of suffering people, news media coverage actually plays a key part in causing policy-makers to intervene during a humanitarian crisis. This is particularly important for those in humanitarian circles who wish to know why western states intervene during humanitarian crisis. Also, while news media coverage has been associated with recent interventions

it has also accompanied instances of non-intervention, for example non-intervention during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Analysing the sources of news reports might be able to explain why journalists covered, for example, both the Rwandan genocide and the civil war/famine in Somalia. But it cannot explain why news media coverage appeared to cause intervention in Somalia but appeared unable to trigger intervention in Rwanda. Answering this question requires us to move beyond news sources to an analysis of news media content and its influence on the policy process.

The second theoretical limitation concerns how underpinning manufacturing consent theory is the assumption that because journalists tend only to replicate elite views, they cannot play an independent role during debates between elites. While journalists are undoubtedly subjected to a variety of pressures and rarely have an entirely free hand in deciding what to cover and how, it seems unreasonable to assume that they play no independent role during political debate. As Timothy Cook (1998: 12–13) argues, journalists should not be considered the passive recipients of official information but as active participants functioning as a political institution in their own right. Important to our concerns here, this assumption means that elite manufacturing consent theory tends to ignore the possibility that journalists might actually take sides (either consciously or unintentionally) during elite debates over policy, or even take the side of non-elites, and in doing so become active and powerful participants in a political debate.

Empirically speaking, the implication of both elite and executive manufacturing consent that the media does not influence government policy, at least to any significant extent, is challenged by a wealth of anecdotal and research evidence that points to news media coverage playing a key role in the creation of policy. For example, taking again Mermin's analysis of news media coverage and US intervention in Somalia, while his study leads us to ignore the possible importance of news media, several key policy-makers claim to have been heavily influenced by news media coverage of suffering people in Somalia. For example, White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater has stated, 'I was one of those two or three that was strongly recommending he do it, and it was very much because of the television pictures of these starving kids' ('Reliable Sources, How Television Shapes Diplomacy', CNN, 16 October 1994, cited in Minear et al., 1997: 55). More recently, George Bush Senior has pointed to the pivotal importance of news media coverage in persuading him to launch the intervention:

> Former President Bush conceded Saturday that he ordered US troops into Somalia in 1992 after seeing heart-rending pictures of starving waifs on television. . . . Bush said that as he and his wife, Barbara, watched television at the White House and saw 'those starving kids . . . in quest of a little pitiful cup of rice,' he phoned Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 'Please come over to the White House,' Bush recalled telling the military leaders. 'I – we – can't watch this anymore. You've got to do something.' (Hines, 1999: A11)

With respect to Hallin's analysis of the Vietnam War, historian David Culbert (1998) has directly engaged with Hallin's non-effect claim arguing instead that news media coverage played a crucial role in helping to change the course of US policy towards Vietnam. Culbert asks: 'how does one reconcile the persuasive conclusions of Daniel Hallin . . . that in general, television followed elite opinion, or had little demonstrable impact on policy-making in Vietnam, with the testimony of those who insist that . . . footage did affect them' (Culbert, 1998: 430). Focusing upon the impact of the infamous footage of General Loan (chief of police for Southern Vietnam) summarily executing an armed civilian, which was broadcast across the world, and the claims of various actors that they were influenced by the coverage, Culbert (1998: 437) concludes:

> The Loan execution is the most visually significant footage to come out of the war; it merits careful attention precisely because it defines the potential of the medium for influencing elite and mass opinion. . . . Its impact related to a changing climate of opinion which found policy-makers as well as average citizens worried as to whether the USA's Vietnam policy merited continued support. In this moment of doubt and uncertainty, a visual microcosm purporting to show the actual practice of justice by the government of South Vietnam offered persuasive . . . evidence which gave people looking for factual reasons to justify a change in policy an opportunity to do so.

To summarize, manufacturing consent theory fails to examine closely the link between media coverage and policy formulation. This leaves a gap in our understanding of the role media might come to play in policy formulation and exacerbates the tendency for debates over media impact to be characterized by unproductive effect/non-effect dichotomies – for example, that between historian David Culbert and Daniel Hallin on the question of media influence on US policy during the Vietnam War. What is badly needed, and to which we turn next, is a theoretical understanding of media–state relations that can account for instances when news media coverage can influence policy formulation.

Ways forward

In the latter part of this article I want to discuss two theoretical advances. The first is my own proposal for a policy–media interaction model that is designed to build directly upon the work of Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990). The second is a review of Gadi Wolfsfeld's political contest model. Both offer different ways of theorizing instances of media influence and both offer us the potential to understand instances of media influence by building upon, rather than rejecting, manufacturing consent theory.

Developing a theory of media influence

We can start by theorizing that, in accordance with manufacturing consent theory, when there exists elite consensus over an issue news media are unlikely to produce coverage that challenges that consensus. To put this in Hallin's terms, critical journalism is unlikely to surface with respect to issues that fall within a sphere of consensus. However, when there exists elite dissensus with respect to an issue, as predicted by both Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990), news media coverage reflects this debate and we can expect to observe a variety of critical and supportive news media coverage. It is in this scenario that news media has the potential, at least, to start to play a more active and influential role in policy debate and formulation because the possibility exists for news media coverage to actually take sides in the elite debate. When and if this occurs, by promoting a particular policy line advocated either by elites outside the executive or particular members of the executive itself, news media can play a key role in causing policy change. Before proceeding, however, we need to identify more precisely the conditions under which news media coverage comes to influence elite debate during periods of elite dissensus or 'legitimate controversy' (Hallin, 1986).

Media framing and elite debate

First and foremost, we need to explain precisely what is meant by news media coverage 'taking sides' in an elite debate. Here the concept of framing is useful. The concept of framing refers to the 'specific properties of . . . [a] narrative that encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them' (Entman, 1991: 7). As 'mentally stored principles for information processing' (Entman, 1991: 7), frames offer ways of explaining, understanding and making sense of events.

Relating framing to elite debate, this concept enables us to understand how news media texts do not simply replicate reality, but can actually be constructed so as to produce a particular understanding or perception of a problem. In terms of covering elite debates, the extent to which news media coverage adopts one particular framing of a problem can be said to be indicative of the extent to which media coverage has taken sides in that debate. For example, during the early part of the 1992–5 war in Bosnia, US policy-makers sought to avoid direct engagement in the conflict. In order to justify non-intervention, policy-makers regularly employed a particular framing of the conflict. For example, William Shawcross (2000) describes how US Secretary of State Warren Christopher employed a frame of 'ancient ethnic' hatreds when justifying US non-involvement during the early part of the Bosnian War:

> Christopher told Congress that the conflict had 'evolved into a war of all against all . . . as struggle between three groups . . . each possessing deep distrust and ancient hatreds for each other'. He believed that the Bosnian combatants were not ready to make peace and that it would therefore be dangerous for Clinton to insert US troops between them. (Shawcross, 2000: 83)

This particular framing left unclear the causes of the conflict and, because all sides were perceived as being equally to blame, justified non-intervention. At this time during the war, news media coverage tended to reflect and reinforce this frame (e.g. Campbell, 1998: 51–4). As the war progressed, however, increasing numbers of congress persons, the executive and the public were outraged at the violence and brutality in Bosnia and actively sought direct US involvement. Towards the end of the war, the prevalent frame became one of Serbian nationalist brutality against the Bosnian government and news media coverage started to reflect this interpretation of events. Importantly, this framing, unlike that of ancient ethnic hatreds, demanded that something be done and focused blame on Serbian nationalism. To the extent that journalists framed media reports in this fashion, they also contributed to the political ambitions of those who sought greater involvement in Bosnia. In doing so, news media coverage became an active player in redefining the conflict in Bosnia as one the US should do something about. With respect to the impact of this coverage on policy formulation, one leading US official involved in Bosnia, Richard Holbrooke, recently stated in an article titled 'No Media – No War': 'Let's be clear: the reason the West finally, belatedly intervened was heavily related to media coverage' (Holbrooke, 1999: 20).

Policy uncertainty

Media coverage that adopts the reference frames of one side of an elite debate, however, is not sufficient alone to start to account for instances when media coverage influences policy processes. Here the concept of policy certainty can be employed in order to theorize the circumstances under which the policy process is most susceptible to media influence. Recent research into the CNN effect (Gowing, 1994; Strobel, 1997; Shaw, 1996; Minear et al., 1997) has consistently pointed to the importance of the level of policy certainty in determining whether or not news media coverage can influence the policy process. For example, journalist Nik Gowing quotes Kofi Annan on the impact of media coverage at points of policy uncertainty: 'When governments have a clear policy, . . . then television has little impact. . . . When there is a problem, and the policy has not been thought [through] . . . they have to do something or face a public relations disaster' (Gowing, 1994: 85–6). Similarly, Martin Shaw (1996: 181) argues that a 'loss of policy certainty' in the 'aftermath of the Cold War' may have 'opened up a particular window for the media', while Warren Strobel (1997: 219) notes that 'the effect of real-time television is directly related to the . . . coherence . . . of existing policy'. The idea of media influence at points of policy uncertainty is also consistent with the broader policy studies literature that points to a correlation between dissensus among policy-making elites and the ability of 'external' actors to influence policy formulation (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Hall, 1993; Schattsneider, 1961). For example, discussing economic policy formulation in Great Britain during the period of economic crisis and uncertainty during the 1970s, Peter Hall argues:

> Finally, the 1970s saw a vast expansion in the outside market place for economic ideas. The media and City brokerage houses were important participants in this marketplace, but they were not the only ones. Fuelled by the release of the Treasury's econometric model, new research institutes sprang up, and a host of pamphlets about economic policy began to circulate. In short, where once there was virtually no external commentary on macroeconomic policy, something similar to a 'policy network' or 'issue network' sprang up to provide outsiders with influence over a formerly closed policy process. (Hall, 1993: 67)

Substantial theoretical work is also available which helps us to define more precisely what we mean by policy certainty. For example, Hilsman has developed a political process model which 'sees a number of different individuals and organizations involved in the policy-making

process. Each of these has power. Some have more power than others, and the power of each varies with the subject matter' (Hilsman, 1987: 82). In terms of policy creation, the different power centres 'attempt to build coalitions among like-minded power centres. . . . Sometimes they succeed in getting their ideal solution adopted; sometimes they succeed in getting the half also they estimated was the best they could do' (Hilsman, 1987: 82–3). Importantly, Hilsman (1987: 82–3) notes that (1) sometimes, the outcome of this bargaining process is 'a policy that none of the power centres really wanted but a compromise that achieves something less than half a loaf for all' and (2) not always is the 'resultant policy always completely logical or internally consistent'. Similarly, Alexander George argues that:

> Efforts at rational calculation of policy take place in three interrelated contexts or subsystems within the policy making system: *the individual context* (e.g. the chief executive, secretary of state); the *small group context* of the face to face relationships into which the executive enters with a relatively small number of advisors; and the *organizational context* of hierarchically organized and coordinated processes involving the various departments and agencies . . . in the executive branch. (George, 1980: 11; emphasis in original)

George also notes, however, that the central danger for 'rational' decision-making is that policies emerging from the 'play of intra-governmental politics within the executive . . . may be more responsive to the internal dynamics of such a policymaking process than to the requirements of the foreign-policy problem itself' (George, 1980: 114). Drawing upon a typology of 'distorted' policy developed by Schilling (1962), he specifies the types of 'faulty' policy that might emerge from intra-governmental politics. These include (1) no policy at all; (2) compromised policy, when the direction that policy should take is left unclear, or the means for achieving a well enough defined objective are left unclarified or unfocused; and (3) unstable or blind policy, when the internal struggle over policy is not really resolved (George, 1980: 114).

In short, through the work of George (1980) and Hilsman (1987), we can understand policy-making as the outcome of a complex bargaining process between a set of subsystems in government. Building upon this theory we can define policy certainty as a function of the degree of consensus and coordination of the subsystems of the executive with respect to an issue. If an issue suddenly arises and no policy is in place, or if there is disagreement, conflict of interest or uncertainty due to an ambiguous policy between the subsystems of the executive there can be

said to be policy uncertainty. Conversely, policy certainty is the result of agreement and coordination between the sub-systems of the executive.

The policy–media interaction model

We are now in a position to conceptualize more precisely the conditions under which news media coverage comes to influence the policy process. When there exists elite dissensus with respect to an issue, there is the possibility that news media coverage might actually take sides in that elite debate by adopting the reference frames of one side of an elite debate. In effect, journalists become promoters, either consciously or otherwise, of one particular elite group. Set in this context of negative news media coverage, government is confronted with (1) the possibility that public opinion might be influenced by the negative media coverage, (2) associated damage to government image and credibility caused by the 'bad press' and (3) policy-makers might themselves start to question the cogency of existing government policy. Crucially, the greater the level of uncertainty over policy within the executive, the more vulnerable the policy process is to the influence of negative media coverage. In this scenario, a number of factors related to the existence of policy uncertainty might come into play. First, if it is disagreement among the executive policy subsystems over policy that is the cause of policy uncertainty, critical media coverage might provide additional bargaining power to those policy-makers seeking a change in policy direction. Second, if it is the case that policy uncertainty is the result of there simply being no policy in place, policy-makers are liable to feel pressured to respond to critical coverage or else face a public relations disaster and criticism for being 'caught on the hop'. Here policy might be formulated, at least in the first instance, primarily as a way of counteracting negative publicity. Finally, not only does policy uncertainty make policy-makers susceptible to media influence, it also means that government is ill-equipped to respond to journalists by drawing upon its substantial public relations apparatus. In other words, without a clearly articulated policy line with which to respond to critical coverage, policy-makers become even more vulnerable to a hostile press.

Alternatively, if government policy is decided on, policy-makers are likely to resist the pressures of negative media coverage. Indeed, policy-makers are more likely to work harder to sell existing policy by drawing upon their substantial resources and credibility as an information source in order to influence media debate. Here we might expect the level of critical media coverage to subside, although parts of the elite might

Table 1 The policy–media interaction model and theories of media–state relations

Level of elite consensus	*Media–state relationship*	*Role of the media*
Elite consensus	Media operates within 'sphere of consensus' (Hallin)	Media 'manufactures consent' for official policy
Elite dissensus	Media operates within 'sphere of legitimate controversy' (Hallin)	Media reflects elite dissensus as predicted by Hallin and Bennett
Elite dissensus *plus* policy uncertainty within government and critically framed media coverage	Media takes sides in political debate and becomes an active participant	Media functions to influence direction of government policy

continue to help generate some critical news reports. A summary of the model that highlights its relationship to manufacturing consent theory can be found in Table 1.

By way of example, let us apply this theory of influence to US policy towards the Vietnam War. Hallin's analysis highlights how news media coverage of the war in Vietnam, up until 1968, was largely supportive of the war and rarely published material that criticized or questioned official US policy. This, according to Hallin, reflected the elite consensus regarding US policy towards Vietnam. During this period we can characterize media coverage as manufacturing consent for official policy (row 1 of Table 1). During 1967 and 1968, however, concern was growing among foreign policy elites and within the US administration as to the viability of US intervention in Vietnam. As Culbert points out, 'Large numbers of Americans – policy-makers, soldiers in the field and average citizens – had serious doubts about the wisdom of America's Vietnam policy by Autumn 1967' (Culbert, 1998: 434). More specifically Hallin (1986: 159–60) argues:

> A basic disagreement had thus emerged over US strategy. Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs believed increased military pressure would raise North Vietnamese and NLF losses to the point that they could no longer go on with the war. Their civilian opponents, concentrated primarily in the Office of Systems Analysis, argued that the North Vietnamese could sustain indefinitely the losses they would suffer even with substantial increases in US military activity.

On 31 January 1968, forces from North Vietnam launched the Tet offensive, an attempt to encourage a general uprising throughout South Vietnam against the US-sponsored government. Although the offensive was a military failure, it was an embarrassment for the US government, that had been maintaining that the war in Vietnam was being won. The offensive also provided a wealth of dramatic and shocking news reporting as the Vietnam conflict spilled over onto the streets of Saigon. The execution of the armed civilian was the most graphic and brutal image of this offensive, and also perhaps of the whole war. One of the most notable journalistic judgements during this period was made by CBS commentator Walter Cronkite:

> To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only reasonable, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then would be to negotiate, not as victors, but as honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend Democracy, and did the best they could. (CBS special broadcast 27 February 1968, quoted in Culbert, 1998: 430)

In short, during this period of crisis, elite dissensus started to be reflected in media coverage (row 2 of Table 1). However, the aforementioned divisions within the subsystems of the US executive suggest that dissensus was also present within the US executive itself. In terms of our theoretical model, this suggests that the policy process would have been susceptible to outside (i.e. media) influence. With respect to media coverage, while much coverage clearly challenged official policy, in effect adopting the perspective of those opposed to escalation in Vietnam, whether or not overall news media coverage took sides in the debate over Vietnam is beyond the scope of this speculative article. However, some of the evidence provided by Daniel Hallin (1994) does suggest media coverage adopting the perspective of those opposed to official policy. For example, Hallin's framing analysis indicates twice as many unfavourable editorial comments vis-a-vis administration supporters as there were against the critics of the war (Hallin, 1994: 44). Also, after the Tet offensive, there were 10 times as many negative references to the democratic credentials of the US-sponsored government in South Vietnam as there were positive and 5.8 times as many negative references to the morale of US troops as there were positive (Hallin, 1994: 45). Hallin's figures also show that during the Tet offensive critics of the administration were quoted twice as often as supporters of the administration.

Overall, while this evidence is not conclusive, it does suggest a prima facie case that media coverage during and after the Tet offensive took sides in the elite debate over whether to escalate, or seek negotiation and withdrawal. In short, the conditions of policy uncertainty and critically framed media coverage would appear to be present in this case therefore indicating the possibility of media influence on policy (see row 3 of Table 1).

We can now start to make sense of both Culbert's evidence regarding influence and Hallin's thesis that media coverage only followed elite cues. The combination of policy uncertainty and critical news media coverage meant that policy-makers were susceptible to news media influence during this period. Culbert documents the influence of the media in the following quote:

> Harry McPherson, counsel to the President, . . . feels that the Cronkite special 'had a huge impact on Johnson and his sense of crumbling public support for the war'. McPherson feels that Johnson 'liked and trusted' Cronkite, a fellow Texan, . . . McPherson thinks that Johnson watched television not so much for information as to 'gauge what its impact on the public would be'. (Culbert, 1987: 227, cited in Culbert, 1998: 432)

In doing so, media coverage, having passively reflected elite consensus prior to 1968, became an active participant in elite debate by adopting the side of those opposed to the war and, in the presence of executive policy uncertainty, influencing key policy-makers to move to withdrawal. In short, Hallin is most likely correct in arguing that critical news media coverage followed rather than caused elite dissensus over Vietnam. But Culbert might also be correct because this coverage actually took sides during the elite debate over policy, and in doing so helped shift US policy towards withdrawal. By theorizing the conditions under which media influences policy but building upon manufacturing consent theory, the policy–media interaction model enables us to make sense of both arguments.

Wolfsfeld's political contest model

In his 1997 work *The Media and Political Conflict* Wolfsfeld develops a political contest model of the media. Similar to the policy–media interaction model outlined in the preceding section, Wolfsfeld's goal is to identify the conditions under which news media coverage comes to play an active role in the formulation of policy. In doing so, his goal is to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the news media and government. It is not my intention here to offer a

detailed appraisal of the specifics of Wolfsfeld's excellent work. Rather, my aim is to provide the reader with a summary of his argument so that I can (1) distinguish his work from my own and (2) in doing so offer a more comprehensive overview of the ways in which the media might play a more influential role than is suggested by manufacturing consent theory.

Wolfsfeld's focus of concern is the relationship between news media, groups in society that seek to challenge authorities and political change. His central claim is that while news media normally function to reflect, and even mobilize support for, dominant views in society, there are times when they serve the interests of marginalized groups. The bulk of the first section of his book is devoted to specifying more precisely the conditions under which marginalized groups, what he refers to as 'challengers', can come to both set the media agenda and influence political outcomes. Out of a number of variables which determine whether or not challengers are able to seize control of the media agenda, he argues that 'The authorities' degree of control over the political environment is the key situational variable that determines whether the news media will play an independent role in a political conflict' (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 24). He also employs the concept of framing in order to highlight how media coverage can effectively take the side of challengers by promoting their particular perception of the political issue at stake.

As one example of an instance during which a challenger was able to attain control of both the media agenda and the way in which media coverage was framed, Wolfsfeld analyses the case of the Palestinian Intifada during 1987. Summarizing, Wolfsfeld (1997: 167–8) argues that during this period of unrest in the occupied territories, the Israeli government lost control of the media agenda because (1) 'they were unable to take control over the political environment', (2) the internationalization of the Palestinians' struggle levelled the balance of power between Palestinians (the challengers) and the Israeli government (the authorities) and (3) the access of journalists to the sites of civil unrest meant that the resulting footage of unarmed Palestinians engaging with Israeli soldiers cast the Israelis, on balance, in a negative light. As a result, a frame of 'injustice and defiance' (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 168) prevailed in media reports that favoured the Palestinians' cause.

I wish to draw attention to several aspects of Wolfsfeld's work. The first concerns the question of media influence on policy. While Wolfsfeld's study aims to develop an interactive theory of media–state relations, his political contest model focuses primarily on explaining when and how challengers can come to set the media agenda. As such, the model relates

largely to the question of the relationship between news sources and the news. For example, the entire chapter detailing his study of the Palestinian Intifada deals with explaining how and why the Palestinians were able to secure favourable media coverage. The question of whether this favourable (from the Palestinians' point of view) coverage actually influenced political outcomes is tackled in Wolfsfeld's conclusion. However, even here Wolfsfeld does not consider in any significant depth the question of whether official Israeli policy was changed by the pro-Palestinian media coverage. He does highlight how the actions of the Israeli authorities, in particular the military, were shaped by concern over media coverage (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 206):

> Israeli authorities were especially concerned with the damage the *intifada* was doing to their image . . . the Israelis spent a considerable amount of time and effort attempting to control the damage from the news reports coming out of the territories. . . . One of the clearest examples of Israeli adaptation to the news media occurred in the field. The presence of the news media had a direct influence on restraining soldiers' behavior.

Wolfsfeld also highlights the influence of the media coverage on the Palestinians (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 207–8). However, Wolfsfeld (1997: 208–9) only starts to tackle the question of media impact on policy on the last page of his discussion regarding the Intifada when he claims that (1) media coverage changed the balance of power between the Palestinians and the Israelis and (2) that it was media coverage which caused the US to intervene diplomatically in the crisis although he references another researcher's study as evidence for the latter claim. However, at no point does Wolfsfeld make explicit the effect the media coverage had on the actual substance of Israeli policy. In short, Wolfsfeld's political contest model and case studies provide a strong theoretical account that explains why challengers can come to set the media agenda, but it does not theorize the link between the resulting media coverage and actual policy outcomes. This is where the policy–media interaction model can serve as a useful additional component to Wolfsfeld's work by theorizing precisely when media coverage might influence policy outcomes.

The second point I wish to make concerns the scope of potential media influence. Unlike my proposed policy–media interaction model that posits the possibility of an influential media as part of the elite debate, Wolfsfeld's model highlights the processes by which non-elites (i.e. the Palestinians) were able to secure favourable press coverage. Although this is likely to occur only infrequently, it remains important to understand the ways in which the news media can come to play a part in

broader scale social and political change during which non-elite groups succeed in achieving political change. As such Wolfsfeld's model plays an important part in completing our theoretical understanding of the media–state relationship.

Concluding remarks

Taken together, the policy–media interaction model and Wolfsfeld's political contest model provide us with the theoretical tools that can help us explain when and how the news media can come to play an important part in the formulation of government policy. At the same time, both models build upon existing and well-tested media–state theories and in doing so avoid an unproductive continuation of effect/non-effect arguments. The theoretical models can be used, as demonstrated when examining the Vietnam example, to reconcile contrasting claims regarding the role of the media. With respect to the frequency and significance of media influence, the policy–media interaction model would suggest that media influence is likely to be a frequent occurrence within the context of elite debate over policy. Contrastingly, Wolfsfeld's analysis of non-elites securing the media agenda is likely to occur more rarely although when it does the significance of media influence (in terms of causing large-scale political change) might well be argued to be greater. In either instance, the importance of the media regarding political outcomes is far greater than allowed for by existing manufacturing consent theory.

Debate and analysis of the media–state relationship have been dogged by simplistic and dichotomous argument. The theoretical models outlined here should provide the starting point for a research agenda that can move us beyond this state of affairs through the generation of a nuanced, two-way understanding of the direction of influence between media and the state.

Notes

Thanks to Eric Herring for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. It should be noted that the distinction introduced here, developed jointly with Eric Herring, serves as a conceptual device to delineate two possible aspects of the manufacturing consent paradigm. It is not suggested that the work of the authors cited as examples either (1) fits neatly into either category or (2) explicitly describes itself as belonging to one or other version of the manufacturing consent paradigm.

2. In the book *Media, Power, Politics*, Paletz and Entman (1981: 20) do note that elites can utilize the news media in order to redistribute power among themselves, although this remains a relatively undeveloped hypothesis in their work which, as with Bennett, Hallin and Mermin, tends to de-emphasize the possibility of independent news media influence.
3. This argument was originally published in Mermin (1997).
4. Unlike Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990), Chomsky and Herman (1988) analyse in some detail the policy–media interface and as such cannot be accused of black boxing this dimension of media–state relations. They do not, however, consider in detail instances when media coverage might influence and change policy, but rather focus on media coverage as a reinforcement of government policy.

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