

ISSUE



Does the Media Drive Foreign Policy?

YES: Patrick O’Heffernan, from “Sobering Thoughts on Sound Bites Seen ‘Round the World,” in Bradley S. Greenberg and Walter Gantz, eds., *Desert Storm and the Mass Media* (Hampton Press, 1993)

NO: Warren P. Strobel, from “The CNN Effect,” *American Journalism Review* (May 1996)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Patrick O’Heffernan, senior fellow at the Center for International Strategy, Technology, and Policy, Georgia Institute of Technology, claims that television news plays an ever more important role in determining the course of international relations.

NO: Warren P. Strobel, a reporter for the *Washington Times* who covers the White House, recognizes that news organizations do have an impact on what people know but contends that the supposed effects of television and other news sources are overestimated.

An axiom of politics is that information is power. Information gives people the ability to know what is happening. Information provides the necessary foundation for deciding what policy to favor. By the same logic, if anyone can control information, then that individual has the potential ability to control what others know about events and thus the decisions they make.

It is also undeniable that the mass media plays a pivotal role in the flow of information from event to citizen. Sometimes the various news media are passive conduits of information generated by others. When the newspaper prints the president’s State of the Union speech or when television broadcasts hearings in Congress, then the media are vehicles. More often though, the press is an active conduit that makes the choice about what events to cover and how to portray those events.

In sharp contrast to the general agreement about the importance of the media, there has been and continues to be sharp disagreement about the impact of the press. There have been many, past and present, who believe that journalists are essential to democracy. President Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787 that inasmuch as “the basis of our government . . . [is/ought to be] the opinion of the

people,” then, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.”

Others, however, have portrayed the press as biased in favor of its own political perspectives. They have also charged that it is overly negative and irresponsibly sensational in its attempts to win readers, listeners, or viewers and, thus, advertising dollars. They also assert that at times the press is too cozy with politicians because it needs access to them. In contrast to Jefferson’s laudatory view of the press, another president, John Quincy Adams, once characterized reporters as “assassins who sit with loaded blunderbusses at the corner of streets and fire them off for hire or for sport at [anyone] they may select.”

There are two distinct roles that the media can potentially play in the political process. One is called “agenda setting.” The political agenda is what the politicians and the citizenry is concerned about at any given time. Arguably, by emphasizing one concern over another, the press plays a role in deciding what matters will be addressed by the political system and what matters will languish. Some events, such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, are so momentous that they have their own news momentum. But for each of these, there are many other events for which the amount of attention that gets paid depends significantly on the press. The question is what do journalists pay attention to and what determines which events get extensive coverage and which get little or no coverage?

The second potential role of the press is in how it depicts events. Some people charge that consciously or unconsciously, the press skews events through its reporting. One charge is that the press tends toward the negative, often making things seem worse than they are. Another charge is that the press can be biased, that it may like or dislike certain individuals, or that it may favor one policy or another and tailor the images and analyses it presents to accord with its preexisting preferences or opinions.

Both of the following articles emphasize the effects of television. The role of the media has long been a topic of discussion, but the television era has focused that debate even more sharply. There are two reasons. One is that surveys show that more people get news and information from television than any other source and, also, that for people who get news from only one source, television is overwhelmingly that source. The second reason that television is so important is because it is so graphic. It is one thing to read in a newspaper or magazine about a terrorist attack, or even to hear on the radio the intermingled wails of the injured and of responding emergency vehicles. It is a far more powerful thing to see with one’s own eyes the images of terror or any other dramatic event.

In the first of the two articles that follow, Patrick O’Heffernan uses the way the media dealt with the Persian Gulf crisis and war to support his thesis that what the citizenry sees, hears, and reads is not necessarily the truth. Warren Strobel presents what he characterizes as a series of myths about the impact of the media and seeks to debunk each of the myths.

Patrick O’Heffernan



Sobering Thoughts on Sound Bites Seen 'Round the World

Plain old American TV is more powerful than any military weapon. In fact, it should become our avowed way of making war. Call it the thermo-media battlefield: hard news, hard rock, tough talk and Coca-Cola commercials. No bullets, no bloodshed—no way we can lose. (Marash, 1979, p. 17)

The Gulf Crisis was unquestionably a watershed event for television. It crystallized hot new trends in the cool medium that have been growing for as long as 20 years. It forever changed our perception of television in world politics. It generated many firsts in news coverage and stimulated an unprecedented examination and self-examination of the relationship between television and government. In some ways, if the crisis had not occurred, television would have had to invent it.

Media analysts will examine the Gulf War and its coverage for years to come, but it is clear now that the entire Gulf Crisis and its coverage effectively solidified three major developments that have been emerging in television and its role in world politics since the end of the Vietnam War:

- Television has become the crisis communication system of international relations
- Television is now firmly established as a player in world politics
- Television can—under some conditions and in some situations—replace or forestall violence as a tool of national power.

Television and the world political system are linked in a co-evolutionary development process, each stimulating and responding to change in the other. Television’s new global political role springs both from changes in the world political structure and from technological and organizational evolution in the medium itself. The globalization of television news has paralleled international interdependence. The decrease in size and cost of electronic news gathering (ENG) equipment has tracked the increased speed of international travel. The spread of cable, direct broadcast satellite (DBS), and other forms of receiving

From Patrick O’Heffernan, “Sobering Thoughts on Sound Bites Seen 'Round the World,” in Bradley S. Greenberg and Walter Gantz, eds., *Desert Storm and the Mass Media* (Hampton Press, 1993). Copyright © 1993 by Hampton Press. Reprinted by permission. References omitted.

signals from anywhere in the world has preceded, stimulated, and reinforced the growing porosity of national borders. The Gulf Crisis was a key event in this ongoing co-evolutionary dynamic, compressing and highlighting the changes in both television and the global political system. At the same time, it also raised critical long-term questions about the nature of the interdependent and mutually exploitive media-government relationship that is co-evolving on our screens. Before turning to those questions, the trends crystallized in television by the Gulf War deserve examination.

Presidents George Bush and Saddam Hussein raised the sound bite to a worldwide diplomatic art. But unlike secret cables, television broadcasts messages to friend and foe simultaneously, sometimes forcing swift action. The Soviets discovered this when western television flashed satellite photographs of the Chernobyl melt down around the world while Soviet officials were still denying the seriousness of the accident (*New York Times*, 1988).

During the standoff with Saddam Hussein, President Bush ordered a mobile downlink for his political trips in order to be able to watch CNN. President Hussein and his ministers monitored American television both for changes in U.S. positions and intelligence on the U.S. military. The Department of State used television to transmit embassy telephone numbers to Americans hiding in Kuwait, and some of the Americans called CNN to broadcast their description of conditions in Kuwait City.

Television's global crisis communication role has been growing for over a decade. President Carter and Prime Minister Bani Sadr sent coded negotiating messages through radio and television newscasts when no other form of communication was available during the Iran hostage crisis (as told to the author by Jimmy Carter; see O'Heffernan, 1991a, for excerpts from the interview). Lebanese Defense Minister Nabih Berri used television as a constant negotiating channel on the fate of the TWA 847 hostages. Berri not only communicated on television with U.S. officials, but maintained the negotiating initiative through skillful staging and timing of hostage interviews.¹ While this crisis communications role is not new, the almost hourly exchange of messages, threats, and images on television between the U.S. and Iraq during the Gulf Crisis embedded it in modern diplomacy.

Second, the Gulf Crisis firmly established television as a player in international politics. Television has been a player since the Vietnam War, but largely due to its ability to influence public opinion. With the emergence of live global broadcasts, television now operates in international politics on several different levels:

- It opens the door to private organizations such as Amnesty International and ethnic interest groups to influence foreign policy.²
- It speeds up decision making and reduces time for both analysis and delay in policy making.
- It dilutes the secrecy in diplomacy, principally by giving every party in a specific set of talks a way to instantaneously communicate their version of the other side's offers.

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- It sometimes adds new, often multinational, issues such as global warming, to a largely bilateral foreign policy agenda. Most importantly, television is a tool routinely used by foreign ministries to develop and implement their policies, a use uncharacteristically visible during the Gulf Crisis. In doing so they can often level a diplomatic playing field because television is a tool that can be employed as well by a poor country with skill and cunning as by a rich one with technology and power.

But television is not a neutral player—it has its own agendas. During the Gulf War and other crises, television anchors assumed the mantle of quasi-diplomats, a practice which became embarrassingly obvious when *Nightline* anchor Ted Koppel used “we” several times to refer to the U.S. government.³ Television discussion shows on CNN, the American broadcast networks, and on many European national news programs took television’s quasi-diplomatic role for granted and debated its implications without questioning its existence.

But a diplomatic status of any kind assumes a position or an alignment, an uncomfortable place, it would seem, for American news organizations that pride themselves on “balance” and “objectivity.” Unfortunately, balance and objectivity went out the window quickly as American television organizations sensed the opportunities inherent in “supporting our men and women in the desert” and the dangers in looking too closely at the lack of rationale for a popular war promoted by a popular President. The pro-war, pro-America slant of most American news organizations was underscored by the widespread use of former military or diplomatic officers as “experts” brought in to “explain” the war. This practice produced two popular impressions:

- It gave copious air time to men (very few women were used) who were seen as and were in many cases former administration spokesmen, reinforcing the administration’s perceived credibility.
- By failing to provide any meaningful time to experts with opposing opinions, it left the impression that all of the facts, knowledge, and expertise lay with the pro-war administration and therefore they must be right.

The result was a clear diplomatic alignment within the American and the global media. Whether or not this kind of diplomatic alignment will exist in the next war or international crisis remains to be seen. But with the major impetus of American television *networks* (not necessarily news organizations) being to deliver audiences to advertisers rather than information to audiences, alignments that assure strong audiences and little controversy will be hard to resist, despite any diplomatic impacts that may result.

Television diplomacy is also not new; Walter Cronkite was instrumental in setting the stage for the Camp David talks in a televised electronic meeting between Sadat and Begin, and many reporters, most visibly Barbara Walters in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, have served as message carriers between political foes

who were not otherwise talking.⁴ The Gulf Crisis crystallized the role and made it part of world politics in the post-Cold War era.

This role has diplomatic ramifications. The more television is used for diplomatic communication, the more television can inject its own messages and gatekeep the governmental players. Hussein learned this when CNN broadcast his first hostage encounter with disclaimers, including an interruption by Reid Collins to tell the audience this was Iraqi propaganda. Other Iraqi tapes were broadcast with “bugs” and “crawls,” alerting the audience to their official origin and diluting what Hussein undoubtedly hoped would be their impact. Other tapes were simply not run because they were not considered news. Media organizations in the Middle East exercised the same kind of gatekeeper role, depending on their political alignment or the influence that Iraq had cultivated with them in the past. In a number of extreme cases, CNN footage was run by pro-Iraqi stations in the region with voice-overs describing nonexistent cultural or military atrocities by Coalition troops. In most cases, however, the diplomatic role of Middle Eastern news organizations was exercised by the omission of stories on Iraqi misdeeds, or even losses.⁵

American and global television exercised this power in the Gulf Crisis primarily against Iraq. President Bush was generally allowed by television (and to a lesser extent, by the print media) to frame the arguments and set the terms of discourse in the first month of news broadcasts. American television crisis coverage often strayed into jingoism, with generous and unquestioning coverage of U.S. military operations and policy, including a glowing package on *60 Minutes* on Middle East Commander General Schwarzkopf aimed directly at Hussein's officers, in essence saying, “here is the son of a bitch who can destroy you.”⁶

While many argue that this is natural in the early stages of a crisis and moreover is appropriate when U.S. troops have been deployed, it carries the danger that policy mistakes will go unchecked by popular complaint and lead to scandals such as the Iran-Contra affair. In fact, the failure of the media to initiate a broad and influential discussion of President Bush's decision not to remove President Hussein or defend the Kurds allowed those decisions to go forward. In retrospect, the wisdom of abandoning the Kurds was dashed with Bush's later decision (forced by media coverage) to assist the Kurds, and the decision to leave President Hussein in power was subject to relentless examination during Bush's campaign for reelection.

Third, television functioned as a surrogate for violence during the early days of the crisis—a new kind of power exercised in a new kind of war. Television enables opposing leaders to compete with one another before a global audience. Rather than territory or other physical spoils of war, the strategic target is world opinion and with it the ability to influence without using force decisions in international organizations and other nations.

The conversion of the cool medium into a substitute for a hot war or a weapon of war may be the most profound impact on television of the Gulf Crisis. This conversion is consonant with other political trends. Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye's concept of “soft power,” that is, the ability of one nation to determine the wants and needs of other nations without force, is one such trend (Nye, 1990). In Nye's thesis, soft power is just as important as the

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“hard power” of economic clout or military force because it rests on a nation’s ability to shape the preferences of another nation and to lead rather than force consensus.

This theory argues that nonmilitary influences can either strategically or accidentally change the internal political and cultural dynamics of a nation, regardless of efforts by its leadership. Economic influences such as the penetration of markets by exports and services of another country can concomitantly create a bias in that country toward the exporting nation. Strategic economic pressures purposefully exerted by one country on another can be used to change foreign policy or even internal policy toward another country, without resort to force. Most important, however, may be the pervasive impact of imported media on a nation’s culture, economy, and eventually its political system. The spread of American rock-and-roll music through records, cassettes, and now MTV and videos has carried with it the values of capitalism, commercialism, democracy in some forms, and a general admiration for things American. This influence has been reinforced in the past decade by the proliferation of American movies and television in the entertainment industries of virtually all nations. This form of cultural soft power contributed to the fall of the Communist regimes in Germany and Eastern Europe without the firing of a shot.

President Hussein turned to television’s soft power because he was stalemated militarily. Television was the weapon of choice in a media blitzkrieg, and President Bush responded in kind. The generals in this war of images were Iraqi Information Minister Nizar Hamdoon, American media guru Roger Ailes, and Hill and Knowlton Public Relations for the Kuwait government in exile. Hussein aimed his television fire at three principal targets: the masses of the Middle East to stimulate a popular Pan-Arabic movement united behind his leadership; the American public to generate sympathy for the hostages and popular pressure to negotiate for their return; and, finally, President Bush in a contest for world opinion.⁷ Bush’s targets included the people of Iraq and the Middle East, the members of the United Nations whose support he needed for the boycott, the Security Council, and, of course, his American audience.

Television may also delay resorting to violence in a crisis, giving negotiations more time. The media war can distract the belligerents from physical force, and the presence of television may make them reluctant to be the first to shoot before a worldwide audience. This was true for a time while Bush and Hussein hurled press releases and videotapes at each other in the Gulf, with no fighting. While an international entourage of ENG crews and reporters were stationed in Baghdad and Saudi Arabia, and amateur tape trickled in from the Kuwait resistance, both sides held their fire. As Winston Churchill observed, “To talk is better than not to talk. Jaw, jaw is better than war.” If he were alive today, he might add that television is also better than war. Unfortunately, as events proved, television’s ability to substitute for or delay violence will always be limited by other considerations, and, in some cases, it may actually provide an excuse for violence.

At some point, either diplomacy or violence must resolve the aftermath of the Gulf War. The position of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey and Iran, the

relationship of Iran to Iraq, the United States and the Arab Middle East, the outcome of Shiite resistance to Hussein may all be settled by hard, not soft, power. Surrounding these questions will be the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians over lands they both claim. But regardless of how these issues are resolved, if ever, the television roles and trends crystallized by the crisis force us to ask hard questions about the long-term relationship between media and national governments in world politics.

First is the dilemma of television's responsibility when its broadcasts may be injurious to its home nation's announced or unannounced foreign policy. In a world of global glasnost, television-delivered information may be harmful to some nations, helpful to some, and benign to others. When that information may save lives in one nation but undercut foreign policy objectives in one's own nation, television's responsibility may be divided.

President Bush signaled early in the Gulf Crisis that if the embargo did not work and military force was required to force Hussein out of Kuwait, the hostages could be sacrificed as normal casualties of war. But televised interviews with hostages undercut policy when the TWA hostages being held in Lebanon pleaded with President Reagan on television not to use force to rescue them. As it turned out, the sympathy generated by the television interviews from Baghdad did not generate widespread opposition to the administration's military intentions. But if this situation arises in other hostile events involving Americans trapped abroad, where must television place its loyalty? To whom is it responsible? What has a higher calling—administrative policy or the immediate protection of American lives? What about non-American lives, or even the lives of "enemies"? Can news producers take it upon themselves to organize their broadcasts in such a way that people die because they are the current administration's "enemy"?

Equally difficult will be the question of timing. If television's loyalty is to its nation's policy (setting aside the issue of the media's role of questioning policy decisions), when should it curtail hostage coverage? When the policy is announced? When the policy seems obvious from diplomatic signals? When the White House asks it to? The questions are not new, but are now more urgent.⁸

Another facet of the question of loyalty and responsibility would have emerged in the Gulf had the embargo been continued in place of military action, causing widespread suffering in Iraq. In that case, Hussein's best media strategy would have been to release pictures of starving hostages and Iraqi citizens, generating popular sympathy in the United States and giving other nations an excuse to break the embargo. The possible scenario of a global rock concert to raise food and medical funds for starving Iraqi mothers and children is not unrealistic in this circumstance, but it would be an embarrassing defeat for the United States. In the event that such a program was produced and distributed by satellite, should U.S. networks take part? What about non-American MTV franchises? Should Americans have been asked on television for money to help civilian Iraqi embargo casualties they saw suffering on their living room screens? Administration officials would likely call such appeals treasonous, but

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are not “enemy” civilians as human as “friend” civilians? They certainly look that way on television.

The question—“should American news crews in the Middle East have shown the pain caused in Iraq by an extended embargo?”—raises other questions. What about images sent to local U.S. stations by foreign producers, satellite syndicators, and other nation’s networks? Should they be banned on U.S. television when they are being seen in other countries? Could they be banned? Who has that power? Should anyone have that kind of prior restraint power? Does the Supreme Court’s decision on the Pentagon Papers apply to broadcast media whose impact may be broader and more immediate? Is there any reason that it should not, television’s impact notwithstanding?⁹

Second, what is live television’s responsibility in war? Can it report from both sides and not be unpatriotic if its home country is involved? Can it report objectively from both sides during a war in which its home country is a belligerent? Even news organizations that broadcasted only critical reports from North Vietnam were criticized for giving publicity to the enemy. In the Gulf Crisis, the potential for a war starting while American reporters were working in both countries makes this a very unhypothetical question. Live (or tape-delayed) satellite reports from Iraq by American television may be unprecedented, but they are news and are protected morally and legally by the American peoples’ right to know. Should Americans report live from the enemy camp or even air reports which have been aired in other nations that may be injurious to American military security or morale? These questions have been asked in the past and frequently answered with the understanding that one’s first duty is to one’s country. But that was before the existence of global, interconnected, multinational live television with contributors and audiences in dozens of countries. If television has made national borders porous, how long can national loyalty remain impervious?

CNN may have to face this question more immediately than other television organizations because of its position as the global wire service for everyone and the standard setter for world journalism. CNN’s audience, employees, contributors, affiliates, constituencies, and influence are truly global. During a crisis, and even on a day-to-day basis, millions of people and governments around the world rely on CNN for immediate and sometimes critical information. Should CNN’s loyalty lie with its global viewers during a crisis? If U.S. national interest conflicts with the information needs of its world audience and the work of its non-U.S. contributors, which comes first? The immediate answer is that loyalty is always first to the United States. But as CNN continues to co-evolve with the global political system, that answer may have to be reexamined. If CNN had been operating during the Vietnam war when a majority of our allies and the American people opposed official policy, would it have carried live press conferences by Ho Chi Minh? If other national news organizations ran footage considered unpatriotic by the U.S. government, would CNN have run it? Would CNN’s news exchange program World Report have taken stories from China or Vietnam, as it does now?

These are hypothetical questions for the “World’s Most Important Network,” but scenarios can be developed that pit U.S. foreign policy against

CNN's responsibility to its world audience and international contributors. If those scenarios ever materialize, should CNN Center in Atlanta be declared international territory like the United Nations building in New York, and should all of its employees receive world citizenship to operate freely and objectively in the global news environment?¹⁰ While it sounds far-fetched, CNN itself was called far-fetched by virtually everyone in television 10 years ago.

Television news and government need and exploit one another. Government manipulates television news to set political agendas, influence public opinion, and communicate with other governments. Television news takes advantage of government to get low-cost information and access to newsmakers and news events. Moreover, behind the scenes, the television industry wants government to free it from regulation while protecting it from competition. Television's audience—the nation's polity—is also enmeshed in this relationship, receiving a glut of information and emotion, but a dearth of perspective and understanding. The Gulf Crisis has exposed some of the cracks in the love-hate alliance between media and government and forced us all to think about where we are going with it. If we don't, we may get there and realize we don't like what we find.

Notes

1. Berri conducted intermittent negotiations with Robert McFarland by telephone, while sending messages, setting the agenda, and stimulating public opinion pressure on the White House with television.
2. David Dickson (1990) details the mechanics of ethnic group pressure and media use.
3. ABC produced and ran a promotion spot referring to Koppel as a television statesman, but quickly pulled it when Koppel complained.
4. However, the communications role should not be overstated. In the Gulf Crisis, as in others, the United States communicated with its nemesis through third parties, such as Gorbachev and its Ambassador in Washington. During the TWA hostage crisis, the National Security Advisor negotiated with Berri by telephone, while Berri used television to keep the initiative.
5. In general, the Middle Eastern print media was more aggressively pro-Iraqi than the electronic media. Part of this was due to years of cultivation by President Hussein through trips to Iraq, gifts of cars or other luxuries to editors and reporters, and the political ideologies of the groups supporting the papers.
6. See Kevin Goldman (1990) for the first of what will undoubtedly be many content studies of Gulf Crisis news coverage on television. His analysis finds that the four news networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC) were far better at resisting Iraq's propaganda than Bush's.
7. Based on the New York Times/CBS News Poll, he lost on this front. The September 8, 1990, poll showed 76% general support for Bush's policies, rising to 84% among those who followed the crisis closely on the news. This level of support is consistent with other polls taken during the crisis period.
8. To not overstate the case, communication is also taking place through intermediaries from the UN, Russia, and other nations.

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9. In reality, the answer may now hinge not so much on patriotism or ethics, but on money. There were scattered instances of journalists losing their jobs for not following the popular line of support for war. In one case, an NBC camera crew traveling with Ramsey Clark in Baghdad sent in highly newsworthy exclusive footage of Coalition bomb damage, only to see it cut from the evening news by pressure from the business office. When the same footage was sent to another network and edited in for broadcast, the editor was fired in the middle of night and the clips pulled from the show—again, under pressure from the business office that did not want to anger the White House or antagonize audiences that supported the war and did not want to hear that the White House claims of pinpoint bombing on military targets were false. . . .
10. This question applies to other global and regional networks like the BBC.



NO 

Warren P. Strobel

The CNN Effect

It's May 31, 1995, there's another flare-up in the long-running Bosnia crisis and the Defense Department spokesman, Kenneth Bacon, is sitting in his office on the Pentagon's policy making E Ring. A clock is ticking over his head. On the wall right outside the door to Bacon's inner office is a television. Aide Brian Cullen glances at it from time to time.

On the bottom of the screen is the familiar CNN logo. Above it is the equally familiar figure of Peter Arnett in flak jacket and helmet, reporting breathlessly from Bosnia, analyzing the latest NATO airstrikes and the Bosnian Serbs' retaliation by taking U.N. peacekeepers hostage. Arnett is answering questions for the host and audience of CNN's interactive "Talk Back Live." Some of that audience is in cyberspace, sending in questions via CompuServe. At the top of the hour, Bacon will escort a "senior Defense Department official" to the podium of the Pentagon briefing room to explain to skeptical reporters why the Clinton administration's latest apparent policy change toward Bosnia is not a change at all.

Here it is, the nexus of media power and foreign policy, where television's instantly transmitted images fire public opinion, demanding instant responses from government officials, shaping and reshaping foreign policy at the whim of electrons. It's known as the CNN Effect.

It's a catchall phrase that has been used to describe a number of different phenomena. Perhaps the best definition, used by Professor Steven Livingston of George Washington University, is a loss of policy control on the part of policy makers because of the power of the media, a power that they can do nothing about.

Or is it the best definition? I'm here to ask Bacon that question. Bacon, a former journalist, is a precise man. He wears a bow tie and wire rim glasses, and looks like he doesn't get ruffled easily. On a day like today, his response is telling. "Policy makers," he says, "are becoming more adept at dealing with the CNN factor."

Bacon's opinion is one heard, in one form or another, over and over in the course of nearly 100 interviews during the last year with secretaries of state, spokespersons and everyone in between. I talked with officials from the Bush and Clinton administrations, the United Nations and relief agencies; military

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officers who have been in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda; and journalists who have reported from those places. It is possible, of course, that they are all lying (the officials, that is). After all, who would want to admit that their authority has been usurped, their important jobs made redundant? To paraphrase legendary diplomat George Kennan's almost plaintive diary entry from the day U.S. troops landed in Somalia: If CNN determines foreign policy, why do we need administrators and legislators?

But the closer one looks at those incidents that supposedly prove a CNN Effect, where dramatic and/or real-time images appear to have forced policy makers into making sudden changes, the more the Effect shrinks. It is like a shimmering desert mirage, disappearing as you get closer.

A growing body of academic research is casting doubt on the notion that CNN in particular, or television in general, determines U.S. foreign policy the way it might seem from a quick glance at the live broadcasts from Tiananmen Square in 1989 or the image of the U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993 (see "When Pictures Drive Foreign Policy," December 1993). What officials told me closely parallels the findings of Nik Gowing, diplomatic editor for Britain's Independent Television Network, who interviewed dozens of British and American officials for a Harvard University study. Even many military officers, who might be expected to criticize media performance, have found the CNN Effect to be less than it is billed. But no one is arguing that CNN has had no effect on journalists, government officials, and the way both conduct their business.



Virtually every official interviewed agrees that the rise of Cable News Network has radically altered the way U.S. foreign policy is conducted. Information is everywhere, not just because of CNN, but through other developments, such as the increasingly sophisticated media systems in developing nations and the explosive growth of the Internet. "It's part and parcel of governing," says Margaret Tutwiler, assistant secretary of state for public affairs under James A. Baker III. During her days at the State Department podium, Tutwiler knew that the most important audience was not the reporters asking the questions, but the array of cameras at the back of the briefing room, which sent her descriptions of U.S. policy to leaders, journalists and the public the globe over.

Baker says CNN has destroyed the concept of a "news cycle." In his days as a political campaign director, the news cycle was much longer, which meant the candidate had more time to respond to an opponent's charges. Now officials must respond almost instantly to developments. Because miniaturized cameras and satellite dishes can go virtually anywhere, policy makers no longer have the luxury of ignoring faraway crises.

These changes also affect modern U.S. military operations, which increasingly involve peacekeeping or humanitarian activities, and in which there is no vital U.S. interest at stake and thus less rationale for controlling the news media. The journalist-military debate over news media pools and other restrictions that date from Grenada and the Persian Gulf War has been eclipsed by

the Somalias and Haitis, where the news media were so pervasive that reporters were often providing information to the military rather than vice versa. U.S. Army Maj. David Stockwell and Col. Barry Willey, the chief military spokesmen in Somalia and Haiti, both described this media presence as alternately helpful and annoying, but in the end an inevitable piece of what the military calls the “operating environment.”

But to say that CNN changes governance, shrinks decision making time and opens up military operations to public scrutiny is not the same as saying that it determines policy. Information indeed has become central to international affairs, but whether officials use this or are used by it depends largely on them. The stakes are higher for those who must make policy, but the tools at their command are also more powerful.



How, then, does the CNN Effect really work? One way to answer that question is to look at some common myths about the network, and at what government officials who must deal with it on a daily basis say really happens.

Myth No. 1

CNN makes life more difficult for foreign policy makers.

For those government officials who know how to use it, Ted Turner’s round-the-clock video wire service can in fact be an immense boon. This was seen most vividly during the Persian Gulf War, when the Bush White House, knowing that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s top aides were reluctant to bring him bad news, got into Saddam’s living room via CNN. And because CNN carried Pentagon briefings in Saudi Arabia and Washington live, officials were talking directly to the American public for hours on end. A study of commentators featured on the network during the gulf war found that the majority of them were retired military officers or other “elites” who by and large supported the administration’s view of the crisis. Saddam, of course, used CNN too, as illustrated by the controversy over Peter Arnett’s reporting from Iraq. This challenged the administration—but also provided a useful window into what the man in Baghdad was thinking.

It doesn’t take a massive confrontation and half a million U.S. troops in the desert for CNN to perform this favor for officials. “Everybody talks about the CNN factor being bad,” Pentagon spokesman Bacon says. “But in fact, a lot of it is good.” If the Pentagon disagrees with a report by CNN Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre, Defense Secretary William Perry can and will call him to try to put his spin on events. In the good old days of the 6 o’clock evening news, officials would have to wait 24 hours. By then it was usually too late. With CNN, they get many chances throughout the day to try to shape public perceptions.

Because of its speed, CNN also provides a convenient way for administration officials to leak new policies in the hope that they’ll define the debate before political opponents do. Many a White House reporter knows that CNN’s

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Wolf Blitzer is a frequent recipient of such leaks. Blitzer is on the White House lawn, repeating to the camera what he's just been told by unnamed officials, while newspaper reporters are still fretting over their leads.

The images of strife and horror abroad that are displayed on CNN and other television outlets also help foreign policy officials explain the need for U.S. intervention. CNN may be the last defense against isolationism. The press "makes the case of the need to be involved sometimes more than we can," says Richard Boucher, State Department spokesman under Baker and former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger.

Myth No. 2***CNN dictates what's on the foreign policy agenda.***

Somalia, of course, is the prime example cited. There was equal suffering in southern Sudan in 1992, the common wisdom goes, but the Bush administration was forced to pay attention to Somalia because the TV cameras were there.

While journalists undoubtedly were drawn to the drama of the famine in Somalia, they had a lot of help getting there. Much of this came from international relief agencies that depend on TV images to move governments to respond and the public to open its wallets. "We need the pictures. Always the pictures," says one official who works with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There isn't anything sinister about this. These private and intergovernmental agencies do good work under dangerous conditions. But for that very reason they are seen by many journalists as lacking the motives that most other sources are assumed to have. In the case of Somalia, these organizations were joined by U.S. government relief agencies and members of Congress interested in Africa in a campaign to generate media attention and government action.

One of the leaders of that campaign was Andrew Natsios, then an assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, known for his rapport with reporters. Natsios and his aides gave numerous media interviews and held news conferences in Africa and in Washington in early 1992. "I deliberately used the news media as a medium for educating policy makers in Washington and in Europe" about how to address the crisis, Natsios says. And he says he used the media "to drive policy." Once reporters got to Somalia—sometimes with the UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross and others—they of course sent back graphic reports of the famine that increased the pressure on President Bush to do something.

"It started with government manipulating press," says Herman Cohen, former assistant secretary of state for African affairs, "and then changed to press manipulating the government."

A quick look at the patterns of television reporting on Somalia also raises questions about the media's agenda-setting powers. There were very few television reports on Somalia (15 on the three networks to be exact) prior to Bush's August 1992 decision to begin an airlift. That decision resulted in a burst of reporting. The pattern was repeated later in the year when Bush ordered 25,000 U.S. troops to safeguard humanitarian aid. When they weren't following the

actions of relief officials or members of Congress, the cameras were following the troops. CNN, in fact, was less likely than the networks to do independent reporting when Somalia was not on the Washington agenda.

Myth No. 3

Pictures of suffering force officials to intervene.

Televised images of humanitarian suffering do put pressure on the U.S. government to act, as was seen in northern Iraq following the gulf war, in Somalia and in Rwanda. Part of the reason for this, officials say, is because the costs of lending a hand are presumed to be low. (The U.S. foreign policy establishment was disabused of this notion in Somalia, an experience that probably permanently shrunk this facet of the CNN Effect.)

But something interesting happens when the pictures suggest an intervention that is potentially high in costs, especially the cost of American casualties. Images of civil wars, no matter how brutal, simply don't have the same effect as those of lines of refugees or malnourished children at a feeding station.

In the summer and fall of 1992 the Bush administration was under intense pressure from Congress and the U.N. to do something to stop the outrages perpetrated against Bosnia's Muslims. In August, *Newsday* reported the existence of a string of detention camps where Bosnian Serbs were torturing, raping and killing. Within a few days, Britain's ITN confirmed the worst when it broadcast images of emaciated men trapped behind barbed wire. Yet by this time President Bush and his aides had concluded that intervening in the Bosnian civil war would take thousands of troops who might be mired down for years. CNN and its brethren did not change this calculation.

"It wouldn't have mattered if television was going 24 hours around the clock with Serb atrocities. Bush wasn't going to get in," says Warren Zimmermann, the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia. Former Secretary of State Eagleburger confirmed this, saying: "Through all the time we were there, you have to understand that we had largely made a decision we were not going to get militarily involved. And nothing, including those stories, pushed us into it. . . . It made us damn uncomfortable. But this was a policy that wasn't going to get changed no matter what the press said."

The pressures that Eagleburger spoke of were very real. But rather than alter firmly held policy, in Bosnia and many other places, officials, in essence, pretended to. They took minimal steps designed to ease the pressure while keeping policy intact. These responses probably account for much of the perception that CNN and television in general change policy. Bush administration concern with the media "only extended to the appearance of maintaining we were behaving responsibly," says Foreign Service officer George Kenney, who resigned publicly to protest the lack of real U.S. action to save Bosnia. Roy Gutman, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Bosnia for *Newsday*, concurs. "What you had is a lot of reaction to reports, but never any policy change."

Images of the brutal slaughter of half a million people in Rwanda in 1994 did not move governments to intervene with force. This was true despite the fact that there was more television coverage of the slaughter than there was of

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Somalia at any time in 1992 until Bush actually sent the troops. According to officials at the Pentagon and elsewhere, once the slaughter in Rwanda ended and the massive exodus of refugees began, what had seemed like an intervention nightmare became a relatively simple logistical and humanitarian problem that the U.S. military was well-equipped to solve.

Interestingly, the public reacted the same way as the Pentagon did. According to a top relief representative, private relief agencies “got virtually no money whatsoever” from the viewing public when television was broadcasting images of Rwandans who had been hacked to death. Contributions began to pour in when refugees flooded across Rwanda’s borders and there were “pictures of women and children . . . innocents in need.”

Myth No. 4***There is nothing officials can do about the CNN Effect.***

To the contrary, whether or not the CNN Effect is real depends on the actions of government officials themselves. As ABC News’ Ted Koppel puts it, “To the degree . . . that U.S. foreign policy in a given region has been clearly stated and adequate, accurate information has been provided, the influence of television coverage diminishes proportionately.” In other words, the news media fill a vacuum, and CNN, by its reach and speed, can do so powerfully and quickly.

But this gives officials a lot more sway than Kennan thinks they have. The officials I interviewed did not identify a single instance when television reports forced them to alter a strongly held and/or well-communicated policy. Rather, the media seemed to have an impact when policy was weakly held, was already in the process of being changed or was lacking public support.

There is little doubt that the image of a dead U.S. soldier being desecrated in October 1993 forced President Clinton to come up with a rapid response to calls in Congress for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia. Often forgotten, however, is that by September 1993 the Clinton administration already was making plans to extract U.S. troops. Just days before the images of the dead soldier were aired, Secretary of State Warren Christopher had told U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Washington’s desire to pull out. Congress had withdrawn its approval, and public support for the mission, documented in opinion polls, began falling well before the gruesome video started running on CNN.

What was most important about the imagery, however, was that it could not be explained by U.S. foreign policy makers. The Clinton administration had casually allowed the mission in Somalia to evolve from humanitarian relief to nation-building without explaining to the public and Congress the new costs, risks and goals. The images were the coup de grace. “The message was not handled properly from the administration,” says one U.S. military officer who served in Somalia. The images were “a graphic illustration of the futility of what we were doing.”

This ability of CNN to alter a policy that is in flux was graphically demonstrated again just a few months later in February 1994 when a mortar shell slammed into a marketplace in Sarajevo, killing 68 people and wounding many

more. The images of the “market massacre” caused outrage around the world. The United States abandoned a year-old hands-off policy toward the Balkans and, a few days later, persuaded NATO to declare a zone around Sarajevo free of Bosnian Serb heavy weapons.

But what looks like a simple cause-effect relationship looked different to those making the policy. Here again, just days before, Christopher had presented to his senior government colleagues a plan for more aggressive U.S. action in Bosnia. He and others had become alarmed at the way U.S.-European disputes over Bosnia were debilitating NATO.

A senior State Department official was in a meeting on the new Bosnia policy when the mortaring occurred. He recalls worrying that the new policy would be seen, incorrectly, as a response to the massacre. The images did force the Clinton administration to respond quickly in public and ensured that an internal policy debate that might have lasted for months was telescoped into a few days. But the episode also provides additional evidence that CNN helps officials explain actions they already want to take. The images provided a moment of increased attention to Bosnia that could help justify the administration’s policy response. “It was a short window. We took advantage of it. We moved the policy forward. And it was successful,” then-White House spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers recalls.

Myth No. 5

The CNN Effect is on the rise.

Sadly, there is at least preliminary evidence that the public and officials are becoming inoculated against pictures of tragedy or brutality coming across their television screens. “We are developing an ability now to see incomprehensible human tragedy on television and understand no matter how horrible it is, we can’t get involved in each and every instance,” says White House spokesman Michael McCurry. “We are dulling out senses.”

When a mortar again struck the Sarajevo marketplace in August 1995, the images were familiar: pools of blood and shredded limbs. For that reason, McCurry says, they had less impact. The policy response—bombing Bosnian Serbs—was driven instead by NATO’s pledge a few weeks earlier to use air power to protect remaining U.S.-declared safe areas. NATO knew it had to make good on the pledge if it was to have any credibility left at all. McCurry’s point about the dulling of our senses can be heard in what a viewer told an NBC audience researcher: “If I ever see a child with flies swarming around it one more time, I’m not going to watch that show again.”

As with any new technology, people are learning over time to adapt to real-time television. While the danger remains that officials will respond to instant reports on CNN that later turn out to be wrong, several current and former spokespeople say that governments are becoming more sophisticated in dealing with time pressures. “As often as not, we buy ourselves time when things happen,” Boucher says. “If we think we need the time to decide, we take the time to decide.”

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Pentagon spokesman Bacon says, “We do not have a big problem with saying, ‘Yeah, this looks really awful, but let’s find out what the facts really are.’”

On that day last May when I interviewed Bacon, media images had not pushed the United States further into the Balkan tangle. Rather, NATO bombing and the prospect that U.S. troops might go to Bosnia to rescue U.N. peacekeepers had sent journalists scurrying back to Sarajevo. The story was heating up again.

The CNN Effect is narrower and far more complex than the conventional wisdom holds. In a more perfect world, the news media—especially television—would be a more independent force, pointing out problems and helping set the public agenda. In reality, CNN and its brethren follow newsmakers at least as frequently as they push them or make them feel uncomfortable. The struggle between reporters and officials continues as before—just at a faster pace.



POSTSCRIPT



Does the Media Drive Foreign Policy?

There is an old question: If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it, has any sound been made? At least in a policy sense, this question can be applied to events. Certainly events happen whether they are reported or not. But if they are not reported, if no one “hears” about the event or if the event is so little “amplified” by the press that few hear of it and it seems far away, then it is unlikely that there will be any or much of a policy response. Similarly, the policy response will vary depending on whether an event seems dangerous or inconsequential. One good place to start a further exploration of this topic is with Doris Graeber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (CQ Press, 1997). To further understand American opinion in a military situation, specifically the Gulf War, consult Lance W. Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). Also see, Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?* (St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

Another factor to consider is whether and to what degree it makes a difference in public opinion even if the media *does* to some extent set the agenda and distort the news. Whatever the potential influence the media may have on public opinion concerning foreign policy, it is moderated substantially by two facts. First, the public does not normally pay a great deal of attention to foreign policy. One recent survey of Americans found that only 20 percent of them say they follow foreign news closely. Second, the public expresses a great deal of distrust toward journalists. A survey conducted in 1999 found that by an almost two-to-one margin, Americans said that journalists were politically biased. A plurality of the public still thinks the press protects democracy, but only by a narrow margin (45 percent to 38 percent). To learn more about public attitudes toward the press, consult, “Big Doubts About News Media’s Values,” February 25, 1999 at the Web site of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press at <http://www.people-press.org/>.

A third factor that intervenes in the media’s impact on policy is the lack of a strong relationship between what the public thinks and which policies are adopted. The issue is complex, but suffice it to say here that the public preferences are often either not understood or they are dismissed by policy officials. For more on this, see Philip J. Powlick, “The Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials,” *International Studies Quarterly* (Fall 1995) and “Washington Leaders Wary of Public Opinion,” April 17, 1998, at the Pew Research Center Web site http://www.people_press.org/.