

*The News Media and Intervention:
critical media coverage, policy uncertainty
and air power intervention during
humanitarian crisis*

PIERS ROBINSON

School of Politics and Communication Studies
University of Liverpool

e-mail: piersgr@liverpool.ac.uk

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Abstract:

It is widely asserted that news media coverage of suffering people has played a pivotal role in causing policy-makers to launch military intervention during humanitarian crisis. Yet research so far has failed to offer clear and non-anecdotal evidence for these claims. This paper reports the findings of a research project the central aim of which was to search for evidence of media driven intervention and to offer guidance as to when and how far media coverage can drive intervention during humanitarian crisis. The study employs a policy-media interaction model that hypothesises the conditions under which media coverage can drive policy making. The US responses to humanitarian crises in Somalia (1992), Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) are examined. In the case of US troop deployment in Somalia it was found that media coverage, rather than causing intervention actually followed the decision by the Bush administration to intervene and functioned to mobilise support for the intervention. In the case of US air power intervention to protect the Gorazde 'safe area' in Bosnia the research found that a combination of policy uncertainty in the US executive and critically framed media coverage were key factors in causing policy makers to intervene. Finally, in the case of Kosovo, it was found that high levels of policy certainty in the US executive were able to head off media pressure to deploy ground troops/close air support in order to protect Kosovar Albanians. Overall, the research indicates that media coverage can drive policy when there exists policy uncertainty and critical and empathising media coverage. Alternatively, when there exists policy certainty, not even critical and empathy framed coverage can force a policy change. With regard to the scope of media impact on policy, it appears that media coverage can trigger air power intervention during humanitarian crisis but not the deployment of ground troops.

It is widely asserted that news media coverage of suffering people, often and erroneously referred to as the ‘CNN effect’,ⁱ plays a pivotal role in causing military intervention during humanitarian crisis. Interventions in Northern Iraq 1991 and Somalia 1992-93 are widely cited as evidence for media driven intervention. More recently, the plight of Kosovar Albanians and Operation Allied Force against Serbia have forced the issue of ‘humanitarian’ intervention and the media to the forefront of debate. Yet recent analyses of the relationship between media coverage and intervention, based largely on anecdotal evidence, offer unclear assessments of media power (Carruthers 2000: 207, Livingston 1997, Robinson 1999, 2000). Studies by journalists Gowing (1994) and Strobel (1997) question how influential the media really are. On the other hand academics such as Shaw (1996) argue that media impact is profound. This paper reports the findings of a research project the central aim of which was to search for evidence of media driven intervention.ⁱⁱ Examining recent US responses to humanitarian crises, including Kosovo 1999, the research offers conclusions regarding evidence for media driven intervention and guidance as to when and how far media coverage can drive intervention during humanitarian crisis.

In order to provide a theoretically informed approach to assessing media influence I developed a policy-media interaction model that hypothesises the conditions under which media influence occurs. Two cases of intervention and one case of non-interventionⁱⁱⁱ were selected for analysis. The cases were the US deployment of ground troops in Somalia 1992, the US threat to use force in Bosnia 1995 in order to defend the Gorazde ‘safe area’ and the failure to deploy either ground troops or close air support to protect Albanian Kosovar refugees during the 1999 NATO air war against Serbia. I start by outlining the policy-media interaction model. An outline of the research for each case is then followed by the key research findings. Overall, the research indicates that media coverage can drive policy when there exists policy uncertainty and critical and empathising media coverage. Alternatively, when there exists policy certainty, not even critical and empathy framed coverage can force a policy change. With regard to the scope of media impact on policy, it appears that media coverage can trigger air power intervention during humanitarian crisis but not the deployment of ground troops.

The Media influence Model: hypothesising the conditions under which media causes intervention

In order to examine the impact of news media coverage during humanitarian crisis I devised a policy-media interaction model. The model was developed, in part, from recent research by Gowing (1994), Strobel (1997) and Minear et al (1997). The model posits that media influence on policy occurs when there exists (1) policy uncertainty (Gowing 1994: 38, Strobel 1997: 219, Minear et al: 73) and (2) extensive and critically framed media coverage. Policy uncertainty occurs when the executive has *no* policy with regard to an issue or when policy makers are *divided* over the appropriate course of action to take. Extensive and critically framed coverage is characterised by front page news stories and headline TV news persisting for several days that both empathises with suffering people (empathy framing) and criticises (either explicitly or implicitly) government inaction. For example, Shaw (1996: 88) describes how media coverage of the 1991 Kurdish crisis was framed so as to pressure western leaders to intervene. 'The graphic portrayal of human tragedy and the victims' belief in Western leaders was skilfully juxtaposed with the responsibility and the diplomatic evasions of those same leaders'. In this situation, uncertain of what to do and without a clearly defined policy line with which to counter critical media coverage, policy makers can be forced to respond to media driven public pressure or the fear of *potential* negative public reaction to government inaction.^{iv}

Alternatively, if a decision has been taken to intervene for non-media related reasons we would expect to observe high levels of policy certainty with the executive drawing upon its substantial resources in order to try and influence the news agenda. In this scenario we would expect to observe media coverage *following* decisions made by the executive. Whilst press coverage might still criticise government policy even when the government is working hard to 'sell' policy, such criticism tends to only surface when there exists elite dissensus over policy (Bennett 1990, Hallin 1986, Mermin 1999). However with policy makers set on a particular course of action, critical media coverage is unlikely to influence policy. Instead policy makers are more likely to work harder to promote their chosen course of action through press briefings and public announcements.

The policy media interaction model fits within the broader theoretical framework of press-

state relations devised by Hallin (1986) and Bennett (1990). The thesis advocated by these writers is that US media content tends to reflect the agendas of elites, particularly in relation to 'foreign' affairs. When a consensus exists between elites media coverage tends to reflect that consensus with the content of media reports remaining relatively uncritical and unquestioning of executive policy agendas. However, when there exists elite dissensus over policy media coverage will reflect this and contain a mix of critical and supportive coverage. Generally speaking however, Hallin and Bennett do not consider in detail the circumstances under which media coverage might effect and change executive policy. This is where the policy-media interaction model contributes. By hypothesising media influence on policy when media coverage becomes critical of executive policy (rather than containing a balanced mix of supportive and critical reports) and executive policy is uncertain, the possibility for media coverage playing a key role in policy formulation occurs. In other words the model accounts for the possibility that media coverage might actually 'take sides' during elite debates over policy. By promoting a particular policy line advocated either by elites outside the executive or particular members of the executive itself, the media can play a key role in causing policy change.

Used as a tool to assess the claim that press coverage causes intervention during humanitarian crisis, if we find policy uncertainty and critical and empathizing media coverage preceding intervention during humanitarian crisis, our confidence in the assertion that media coverage triggers intervention will be increased. Inferences based on the model are cross-referenced with other accounts of the policy decision-making process. If indications provided by the policy-media interaction model are consistent with other accounts of the policy process then conclusions regarding the level and kind of media influence can be stated with confidence.

The Cases

The first case selected for research was that of US intervention in Somalia during 1992-3 (Operation Restore Hope) which involved the deployment of 28 000 US troops to aid the delivery of food to starving people. Restore Hope is widely understood to have been caused, at least in part, by media coverage of suffering people impelling policy makers to 'do something' (Kennan 1994, Strobel 1997, Gowing 1994). Research by Livingston and Eachus (1995) and Mermin (1997), whilst questioning the extent to which journalists alone

‘discovered Somalia’, also assumes that media coverage triggered Operation Restore Hope. As such, the case was initially understood as an easy one for the media driven intervention thesis.

Focusing upon the lead up to the November 25 decision to deploy ground troops in Somalia (the media had ignored Somalia for most of the Autumn months due to the 1992 presidential election campaign) levels of policy certainty and media framing were assessed. Contrary to expectations only marginal amounts of media coverage could be found prior to President Bush’s November 25 decision to intervene in Somalia. The combined average number of articles per day for the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* was 0.8 and Somalia received front page coverage on only two occasions. CBS evening news devoted a mere 3 minutes and 30 seconds to Somalia in the entire three weeks running up to Bush’s intervention decision. In short coverage was too little for it to have compelled policy makers, as is widely asserted, to intervene. However, after the intervention decision was made, media attention to Somalia increased dramatically. Between November 25 and December 9 (the date when the first US marines landed ashore in Somalia) *Washington Post* and *New York Times* coverage increased to an average of 9 articles per day whilst CBS devoted 131 minutes and 40 seconds to Somalia. In terms of news content, journalists framed reports in a way that was supportive of Bush’s decision. Coverage empathised with the people of Somalia and focused upon the positive aspects of the intervention decision, rather than the potential pitfalls. In doing so coverage helped build support for Bush’s policy of intervention whilst marginalizing those who opposed the operation. In short, in the case of Somalia, rather than driving policy, the news media actually tended to follow the agenda of the executive, and moreover, helped to build support for that agenda.

US intervention in Bosnia 1995 to defend the Gorazde ‘safe area’ was the second case selected for analysis. This intervention (involving a threat to use airstrikes) followed the fall of the Srebrenica ‘safe area’ to the Bosnian Serb Army. The immediate aim of the intervention was to prevent the fall of the Gorazde ‘safe area’ to Bosnian Serb nationalists (Holbrooke 1998: 72, Christopher 1998: 348). The case was considered a hard one for the thesis that media coverage causes intervention because the prevailing explanation for US intervention in Bosnia during 1995 was to avert the collapse of the UN mission (see Holbrooke 1998: 66-67).

The research focused on the period between the fall of the Srebrenica 'safe area' on July 11 and the US threat to use force two weeks later on July 23 (Blechman and Wittes 1999: 21). High levels of media coverage were present during this period. The Washington Post and New York Times averaged 8 articles per day between July 11 and 18 whilst CBS treated the fall of the Srebrenica 'safe area' as the leading headline between July 11 and 14. In terms of framing, media coverage empathised with the refugees from Srebrenica. It was also critical of Western policy for having failed to protect the 'safe area'. Journalists employed descriptors such as 'doing too little too late', 'one humiliation after another' and 'sickly' to describe the state of western policy. During the same period policy was uncertain with policy-makers debating whether or not any further violations of UN 'safe areas', specifically an attack on the Gorazde 'safe area', should be responded to with the use of force. Hence, policy uncertainty and critical 'do something' media coverage were found to be present in the run up to the intervention decision. The theoretical insight of the policy-media model indicates that policy-makers would have been under pressure to respond to the critical and emotive coverage and did so by defending Gorazde. The findings were then cross-referenced with other available accounts of the policy process in question which also highlighted the impact of media coverage (Woodward 1996: 261, Holbrooke 1999: 20) on the US decision to intervene. Overall, although initially considered a hard case for the media driven intervention thesis, the research findings indicated that media coverage was likely to have been a key factor in motivating US policy-makers to defend the Gorazde 'safe area'.

The final case analysed was Operation Allied Force in Kosovo 1999. The principle aim of this case was to determine whether policy certainty and media framing vary across cases of intervention and non-intervention. Using Operation Allied Force as an instance of non-intervention during humanitarian crisis requires explanation. Operation Allied Force was principally an act of coercive diplomacy aimed at securing Milosevic's compliance with US demands and was not designed to directly alleviate the immediate humanitarian crisis within Kosovo (White House Press briefing 24 March 1999). What is of interest is the impact of media coverage on policy once the air campaign had begun when a massive refugee crisis developed as Milosevic accelerated sharply the expulsion of Albanian Kosovars from the region. It was during this period that desperate images were transmitted back from refugee camps and a debate occurred in Washington over whether ground troops (and close air support) were required to both offer immediate protection to the Albanian Kosovars and, in the long term, to ensure their return. The debate was brought to a head in the failed attempt

by Senator John McCain to force an escalation to a ground war via a congressional vote in late April. At no point did the US intervene directly on the ground in order to prevent attacks on the Albanian Kosovars. Indeed, Clinton failed to even authorise the use of ground attack helicopters, requested by NATO commander Clarke, in order to offer protection to Albanian Kosovar refugees. As such the case represents one instance when it appears extensive media coverage was unable to force policy-makers to intervene during a humanitarian crisis.

The research period covered the bulk of the campaign (April 1 to May 26) and the crucial period during April when the ground war debate occurred. Media coverage, as expected, was vast. Between the above dates over 1000 articles were run in the New York Times and Washington Post on Kosovo. Coverage topped CBS evening news bulletins almost every day. In terms of framing, coverage empathised with the plight of the Albanian Kosovars throughout the two-month period. During April news-paper coverage was critically framed overall, reflecting the belief of many in Washington that the air war could not reverse the expulsion of Albanian Kosovars alone but CBS coverage remained mixed regarding this debate. After the debate subsided in late April with the collapse of Senator McCain's bill, press coverage became mixed. In terms of policy certainty, the Clinton administration adhered to its certain policy line that the air war was working and that there would be no ground invasion.^v So, in terms of the policy-media interaction model, policy certainty against a ground war was set against critical and empathy framed press coverage. Whilst the theoretical insight of the model indicates that policy makers, in the presence of policy certainty, would have been resistant to media influence, the presence of critical 'do something' press coverage placed the US executive in a difficult position.

What do these findings tell us? The variation in policy certainty between this case and the Bosnia study is as predicted by the model. In the case of intervention and media influence (Bosnia), policy was uncertain whilst in the case of non-intervention and non-media influence (Kosovo) there existed policy certainty. However there was no variation in the framing variable. In both the Bosnia and Kosovo cases coverage was critical and empathy framed. This finding suggests that of the two variables policy certainty and media framing, policy certainty is the stronger. When the executive is decided on a course of action, even critical and empathy framed coverage cannot influence policy.^{vi} This is consistent with the hypothesis that when policy makers set on a particular course of action, critical media

coverage is unlikely to influence policy and that instead policy makers are more likely to work harder to promote their chosen course of action.

The News Media and Intervention During Humanitarian Crisis; critical media coverage triggering the use of air power when there is policy uncertainty

The implications of the above findings fall into two categories regarding (1) the explanation of when and why media coverage can drive policy and (2) the question of whether media coverage can trigger intervention during humanitarian crisis. With respect to the first category, the Bosnia case study and the Kosovo case study support the hypothesis that policy certainty is a key variable in determining media impact on policy. The hypothesis that media influence occurs when policy is uncertain and framing is critical was supported by the Bosnia case study in which critical media coverage helped cause policy-makers, uncertain of whether or not to intervene, to move to defend the threatened Gorazde 'safe area'. The hypothesis that media influence is unlikely when there exists policy certainty was supported by the Kosovo case study. Despite critical and empathy framed media coverage within the newspapers, the US did not prevent the attacks on, and expulsion of, the Albanian Kosovar population. Instead the Clinton administration stayed with an air campaign that was aimed at applying pressure on Milosevic rather than offering direct protection to suffering people. With regard to media framing, critical and empathy framed media coverage is also a necessary factor in determining media influence. However, as we saw in the Kosovo case study, it is not sufficient to drive policy when there exists policy certainty.

With respect to the central research question, whether media coverage triggers intervention during humanitarian crisis, the findings are mixed. Critical framing and policy uncertainty preceded intervention in Bosnia but in the apparently easy case of intervention in Somalia the media actually tended to follow executive decisions and, indeed, help build support for them rather than cause policy. So the research does support the thesis that media coverage can cause intervention during humanitarian crisis. At the same time the research alerts us to the fact that media coverage is not always the cause of intervention during humanitarian crisis. Indeed, the Somalia case study highlights the extent to which media coverage can function to mobilise support for an executive intent on intervening during a humanitarian crisis. Also,

the findings suggest a useful distinction to be made between types of forcible intervention. The case of Bosnia involved the threat to use air power whereas in Somalia and Kosovo the type of forcible intervention at stake was the deployment of ground troops. Hence it appears that media coverage can trigger the use of air power but not the deployment of ground troops during humanitarian crisis. Further research should delineate between these types of forcible intervention. Having found that media coverage can trigger the use of air power, but not ground troops, further research should test this claim by examining other instances of ground troop deployment during humanitarian crisis.

In summary, the research indicates that the media influence occurs when there exists policy uncertainty and critical and empathising media coverage. With regard to the scope of media impact on policy, it appears that media coverage can trigger air power intervention during humanitarian crisis but not the deployment of ground troops. Claims regarding a media driven foreign policy are therefore not without substance.

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ⁱ The term "CNN effect" is often used as shorthand for the media driven foreign policy thesis largely because CNN epitomised the globalized real-time environment and certainly not because it was only CNN itself that commentators thought was driving policy. Accordingly, I avoid using this label here as it often misleads. The focus of debate is the post cold-war impact of the mass media, not just the impact of one news channel on the foreign policy process.

ⁱⁱ Intervention is defined here as the threat/use of force during a humanitarian crisis.

ⁱⁱⁱ Analysing a case of non-intervention allows us to test how the independent variables (i.e. those variables hypothesised to lead to media influence on policy) vary across cases of intervention and non-intervention.

^{iv} It is important to note here that media driven public pressure (fear of, or actual) is not the only route by which the mass media might have an effect on the policy process. As Livingston and Riley (1999) have pointed out, policy makers might also be *personally* effected by random but highly provocative media reports. However, as Livingston and Riley suggest, this route of influence is likely to produce only a mild effect on the policy process with decision makers perhaps becoming *minded* to do something rather than being *compelled* to intervene by the negative political consequences of inaction. This might well suggest a weaker variant of the media driven foreign policy thesis; the focus of this study however is on whether media coverage can drive or compel policy makers to act, a strong media influence thesis. For this to happen media coverage must be extensive enough to be politically damaging to a governments image.

^v It should be noted that there is anecdotal evidence that Clinton decided in late May/early June to launch a ground offensive. The implications of this possibility for the research here need to be briefly considered. If policy did suddenly change in late May/early June was this likely the result of media coverage. Probably not, the critical coverage occurred in April but became mixed in May whilst policy certainty re no ground war existed throughout April. If media coverage were to have changed policy we would expect it to have occurred here not in late May when coverage was far more mixed. Moreover, the causal link between media coverage and the *possible* policy change is significantly weakened by the two month delay between critical media coverage starting and the policy changing. In short, even if policy did change in late May, this does not appear to challenge the central finding here that critical media coverage was unable to change US policy throughout the air campaign.

^{vi} Because the framing analysis indicated TV news coverage remained mixed regarding the ground war debate, the possibility exists that *if* TV news coverage had also been critically framed, policy-makers would have been forced to change policy. Further research is necessary to establish whether this possibility has any support. As the research stands, the finding that policy makers were able to ride out critical newspaper coverage is suggestive of policy certainty being able to prevent critical media coverage influencing policy.