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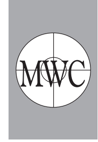

Guest Editor's Introduction

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The CNN effect reconsidered: mapping a research agenda for the future

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Twenty years have elapsed since the passing of the Cold War era and the events which precipitated renewed scholarly and political debate about the influential relationship between news media and foreign policy formulation, the so-called CNN effect. The term, perhaps misleadingly, came to be used to refer to the impact of news media (both domestic and global) in general and not just that of CNN. But, at least in the early 1990s, CNN's focus on breaking live coverage of international crises meant that it became the best representative of an apparently more influential media. Of course, debate over the relationship between media and foreign policy had a history before that (e.g. Cohen, 1963), but it was the high visibility of real-time TV reporting of events such as the 1991 Gulf War, Tiananmen Square and humanitarian crises in countries such as northern Iraq (1991) and Somalia (1992-1993) which suggested that something new and significant was occurring. There were two essential claims to this debate. The first was that news media were an important and influential element of foreign-policy formulation and world politics. The second was that media had become capable of independently driving and influencing policy formulation, at times against the interests and wishes of foreign-policy establishments. Decisions to become militarily involved in humanitarian crises in northern Iraq (1991) to protect the Kurds and again in Somalia (1991-1992) to help aid agencies deliver food aid epitomized this dynamic; both of these situations appeared to involve graphic and emotive media reporting of suffering people influencing policy-makers to conduct humanitarian interventions. Since then, across the events of 9/11 and subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of which were highly mediatized and have provoked large-scale public debate and controversy, debate over the impact of media upon world politics has rarely been far from view. Indeed, according to some commentators, including BBC World's Nik Gowing in this special issue, media are more than ever major influences upon world politics. In short, the issue of media influence on foreign policy has not gone away.

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The 20-year anniversary is as good a time as any to consider the existing state of knowledge vis-à-vis the media-state/world politics relationship. To this end, this special issue has drawn together a range of scholars, published and noted for their contribution to this debate, in order to provide a range of contemporary analyses on the relationship between media and world politics. As a prelude, this introduction considers key issues surrounding the debate in hand: specifically, the reasons for researching the issue of media impact on foreign policy, what has been established thus far and, drawing upon some of the arguments advanced in this special issue, an agenda for future research on this topic.

Reasons for researching media influence: what is the point in all this?

Keeping a weather eye on the reasons why we conduct any particular type of research is important, if only to ensure that we are aware of for whom our research might be of use, and to what end it might be put. In scholarly terms, the relevance of the CNN-effect debate can be located in a number of academic fields and sub-fields. For communication studies, first, the CNN-effect debate can be seen as part of a long-running debate over the relationship between news media and political power (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Focusing upon the idea of media as a catalyst for political action, this debate has, with varying degrees of success, offered a challenge to well-established arguments about the elite-domination of news media. At the very least, the debate has contributed to our understanding of those circumstances in which patterns of official/elite-dominance of the news can come to be challenged. The CNN-effect debate has also helped to cement a range of research that has genuinely bridged the fields of communication studies and political science. Second, foreign policy analysis has long involved the exploration of the various influences upon the foreign policy decision-making process. By attempting to measure the influence of one variable – media – the CNN-effect debate adds to our understanding of how foreign policy decisions are made.

More broadly, International Relations (IR) and World Politics scholarship has, from a number of angles, often assumed the analytical importance of media. On the one hand, classical realist and neo-realist accounts have implicitly or explicitly denied either the acceptability of media influence, in the former case, or the significance of its influence, in the latter case: for classical realists, news media are a potentially dangerous influence upon elite foreign policy-making, distorting rational decision-making and leading policy makers away from pursuit of the national interest. Neo-realists argue that the anarchic nature of the international system forces all states, whether democratic, totalitarian or authoritarian, to pursue their self-interests: policy-makers act in accordance with calculations over relative capabilities and the balance-of-power, with domestic factors such as media being of little consequence. On the other hand, liberal approaches, including neo-liberalism, place considerable emphasis on media both as an important influence on state action and as part of 'complex interdependence' (Robinson, 2008: 148–149). For example, the influence of media is implicated in arguments about the democratic peace thesis, which identifies both public opinion and independent media as effective constraints upon a democratic state's likelihood of going to war. Constructivist approaches

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to IR also, as discussed in Steven Livingston's article in this issue, point toward the significance of deliberation, discourse and the socially constructed nature of the world. From this perspective, media are a key player in terms of the creation, propagation and dissemination of the discourses which shape the world around us. However, whilst often assuming the importance of media, these IR-based approaches have rarely had a strong empirical handle on the actual role and influence of news media. More often than not, the role and function of media have been assumed. For example, when Joseph Nye wrote in 1996 that 'America's increasing ability to communicate with the public in foreign countries literally over the heads of their rulers via satellite, provides a great opportunity to foster democracy' (Nye and Owens, 1996), he did so with little evidence of both how, and to what extent, this was actually occurring.

But, as the saying goes, theory is always for someone and some purpose (Cox, 1981), and this is no different with the debate over media power. Beyond the scholarly debate discussed earlier, research into the influence of media on foreign policy has hinged upon competing concerns and normative positions regarding the efficacy of media influence. For some, research has sought to address the extent to which media has unsettled elite influence over the policy agenda, reflecting the concerns of classical realist scholarship noted earlier. As such, this research is of particular use to policy-makers and officials concerned with attempting to manage what is often seen as an unhelpful and sometimes downright dangerous influence coming from news media. Perhaps the more prominent tendency, however, has been for researchers to reflect the aspirations of those holding progressive liberal and cosmopolitan attitudes, such as those advocating humanitarian responses (e.g. Shaw, 1996). Here, research into the CNN effect has been sought by those seeking to harness the potential of media to both facilitate humanitarian action and to avert catastrophes such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when the international community stood to one side as up to a million people were murdered. Virgil Hawkins's contribution to this special issue, which addresses the failure of news media to pay attention to some of the worst crises in the world, is a good representation of these laudable normative aspirations. This research strand is more closely associated with the liberal and constructivist approaches discussed earlier. So, from either realist or liberal perspectives, a better understanding of the processes by which media influence the policy agenda is seen as a path to greater control, albeit to very different ends.

The state of the field: what do we know so far?

In 2005, Eytan Gilboa commented that, for all the research conducted into the CNN effect, very little had been achieved in terms of understanding the phenomenon. However, there are reasons to think that the state of the knowledge is a little healthier than that. In a number of ways, research into the CNN effect has established a number of important insights. I shall deal with each in turn.

Most importantly, the majority of researchers would agree that news media do not have the transformative influence attributed to them at the height of the 1990s CNN-effect debate. A more general point can be made here about the predisposition of some to announce, with great flourish, the emergence of a political sphere that has been radically transformed first by the arrival of 24-hour news, then the internet, and now the so-called

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'new (*digital)* media environment'. But, if there is one thing that the CNN-effect research on news media and humanitarian intervention during the 1990s teaches us, it is that once one peels back the layers, it quickly becomes apparent that there is much more to political phenomena than can be understood through reference to media. Indeed, the reining-in of the wilder claims circulating about media power was a key contribution of early scholarship (e.g. Gowing, 1994; Livingston 1997; Robinson, 2002; Strobel, 1997). What was manifest by the end of the 1990s was that the idea that news media representation of humanitarian crises had single-handedly driven in a new era of humanitarian intervention was a gross simplification of what had actually been going on. Media influence was far more partial and conditional than had been widely assumed by advocates of the CNN effect. Of course, as set out in this special issue in the articles by both Nik Gowing and Steven Livingston, there are good reasons to maintain a continued focus on developments in media technology and I shall return to the question of how we should research questions of media influence in today's fragmented and pluralized media environment later. But the essential cautionary note remains that research into the impact of media and communication processes needs to be done with due attention to the multiplicity of non-media processes that shape political actions and outcomes.

With this sober realization, research has focused on trying to understand the circumstances in which media becomes more, and less, influential. In short, understanding the variability of influence has become a central research goal. Here there are some reasonably well-established claims.

First, and foremost, the idea that elite disagreement (policy uncertainty) provides an important opportunity for media influence to occur was an early and frequent claim emanating from CNN effect research (Gowing, 1994; Robinson, 2002; Strobel, 1997). Whilst some have questioned the cogency of this claim (for example, see Van Belle and Potter in this special issue and Babak, 2007), this insight is consistent with the key theoretical and empirical literature on media–state relations that has emerged over the last 15 years. For example, Gadi Wolfsfeld's (1997) *political contest model* and Robert Entman's (2004) *cascading activation model* both identify elite dissensus as a key situational variable which allows greater media independence. Most recently, Baum and Groeling's (2009) theoretical contribution to understanding the dynamics of wartime media–state relations and public opinion acknowledges elite criticism of the White House as an important factor in leading news media to play a more influential role. Indeed, for them, a large part of the significance of media in terms of influencing public opinion and policy lies in its propensity to over-report officials (elites) who criticize a president's wartime policies. Of course, the corollary of this position is that high levels of elite-consensus (policy certainty) are likely to inhibit media influence. Here, there exists substantial evidence for the tendency of media to become submissive when governments and elites are clearly decided on a course of action. Consistent with this, there is little evidence to date of a media-driven policy U-turn whereby news media coverage has forced unified officials to alter course. The events in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when US media largely suspended its critical faculties as the White House aggressively promoted the idea that Iraq posed a credible WMD threat, are a powerful testament to the ability of determined governments to influence media when they are firmly decided on a particular course of action. Indeed, these events are an important reminder of the frequent tendency

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of media to serve the interests of political elites (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

A second insight from the CNN-effect literature regards the variability of media influence across different policy types. As established in a number of studies (e.g. Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2002), not all policy areas appear amenable to significant media influence whilst others are likely to invite significant amounts of influence. For example, as Livingston (1997) has described, decisions to go to war, or indeed end a war, are unlikely to be driven by media if only because of the multiplicity of concerns (national interest, security issues, international laws and alliances) that inevitably accompany such decisions. So, for substantive-level policy issues, media influence is likely to be more marginal. Another way of formulating this insight is to argue that those policies with high potential costs (both economical and political) are the least likely to be strongly influenced by media pressure (Livingston, 1997; Robinson, 2002). On the other hand, 'soft[er]' foreign policy decisions over procedural policy issues (or policies with low potential economic and political costs), for example where to supply humanitarian aid, might well be significantly determined by media. For example, as Van Belle and Potter document in their contribution to this special issue, the actual influence of media might well be more frequently found with respect to already established policies whereby media become one factor, amongst many, that shape bureaucratic decisions over the execution of existing policy. In their insightful article, it is decisions over where to allocate disaster relief aid that are subtly, but persistently, influenced by news media. In sum, media influence is likely to be more commonly found in relation to procedural-level issues and those policy areas associated with lower economic and political risks.

What emerges from existing research, then, is an intricate pattern of media influences that vary in size and intensity across both various policy types (especially substantive through procedural policies and high-cost through low-cost policies) and conditions of elite dissensus/consensus. Adding a further layer to this and, as eruditely described in Balabanova's article in this special issue, the particularities of different national contexts are also worth evaluating. Whilst the CNN-effect literature has remained all too often fixated on US, and to a lesser extent, UK cases, exploration of new national contexts yields a greater understanding of how and why levels of influence might vary across different countries. Finally, the issue of policy stage (Gilboa, 2005) is another route into understanding the variability of media influence, although this is relatively under-researched at this time. But the idea that media influence might well be greatest at particular points of the policy stage, for example at the early agenda setting stage, and less at later stages, such as the policy implementation stage, is a cogent one and worth exploring.

If all this, then, represents the current state of knowledge upon which future research can usefully build, where do we go from here? Concerning future directions, five issues regarding methodology, public opinion, theory, mechanisms of influence and the new media environment are important to flag up.

Matters for future research to address

In terms of methodology, much of the research on the CNN effect and media influence has hinged upon detailed case studies whereby analysis of media content and policy

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processes is usually combined across a limited number of cases in order to measure media effects. Whilst this approach has proven rich and useful, the studies here by Van Belle and Potter, Bahador and Hawkins highlight the utility of more broadly-based statistics in terms of gaining insight into questions of media influence. In particular, the application of regression analysis across a large number of cases, as demonstrated by Van Belle and Potter, is able to reveal subtle but important media effects. Future research would do well to explore more fully the benefits of quantitative and statistical methods whilst, at the same time, continuing to take advantage of the qualitatively rich and valid findings emerging from detailed case study analysis.

The issue of the relationship between public opinion, media and policy is another area currently under-researched across the CNN-effect literature. Whilst policy-makers often use media reports as a proxy measure for public opinion, it is worth exploring the extent to which public opinion might mitigate media influence, in circumstances where the two might diverge; for example, where politicians allow themselves to be guided by public concerns even when media appear uninterested. More broadly, the significance and potency of so-called global publics, and their relationship to the global news media providers such as CNN and Al Jazeera, is worthy of close consideration.

With regard to theory, I noted earlier that the CNN-effect debate has offered a challenge to the idea that media only ever serve as passive receptors and transmitters of elite views. At the same time, and as discussed in the preceding section, a future research agenda needs to find ways of exploring the variability in media influence across different policy areas, stages and contexts. In order to do this, a theoretical base that allows us to capture this variability without, crucially, artificially privileging claims either that there is elite-domination of media or, alternatively, that the news media are driving officials, is needed. Whilst specific models, such as Entman's *cascading activation* (2004) and the policy–media interaction model (Robinson, 2002), provide possible frameworks for researching cases, a broader theoretical context which enables us to think of media as both potential drivers of policy (the CNN effect) and as reflective of official/elite interests is required. Here, work in recent years by scholars such as Cook (1998), Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Benson (2006), partly inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and often referred to as new institutionalism, offers a productive way forward. Briefly, field theory conceptualizes media as being *partially* autonomous from political power. In part this is because media systems are governed by their own rules and structures, in part because the professional autonomy of journalists offers some resistance to elite influence. At the same time, field theory recognizes the powerful political and economic constraints that act upon media. At least as a theoretical point of departure, field theory and new institutionalism provide starting points for thinking about the interplay of forces that shape levels of media autonomy and influence and, importantly, thinking about how that interplay might vary across different circumstances and contexts.[1]

To date, much of the CNN-effect literature has tended to work with the idea of 'media influence' as occurring when policy-makers, in the face of a barrage of media criticism, decide to adopt a particular course of action. Whilst this is a reasonable assumption to work with, it is possible that this focus on the more dramatic and high-profile phenomenon, in which massive media coverage ran hand in hand with policy changes, has led

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scholars away from serious consideration of other, more subtle, processes by which media exert their influence. For example, even in the absence of actual media attention to an issue, media might still exert influence through policy-makers being aware of the likely media response to particular policy initiatives: this might lead both to some policies being seen as 'undoable' whilst other, 'media friendly', policies are preferred. So, for example, anticipation of negative news coverage of military casualties might deter policy-makers from intervening in a humanitarian crisis. By the same token, belief that good publicity might flow from supporting a humanitarian food aid effort might open the door for that policy to be realized. More generally, and nodding towards the final point regarding the new media environment, today's reality of a globally interconnected digital media space, occupied by the dizzying array of communication technology, creates a backdrop against which both national and global actors operate. As Livingston points out in his contribution to this special issue, we should be asking how the nature of this information environment is influencing the nature of global governance. Merely the knowledge that news can spread at speeds unthinkable in an earlier era, coupled with the multiple audiences that policy-makers seek to engage in the global political sphere, may create an awareness of both the limits and possibilities of political action which, in turn shapes political behaviour. In short, future research needs to be more open to the various routes by which influence might be occurring.

And this brings us to a final point, and perhaps one that is appropriately described as the elephant in the room, that of the new media environment. We are undoubtedly witnessing major shifts in terms of how news is produced, communicated and consumed. The arrival of the internet, global media and the proliferation of hand-held communication devices has created a seemingly diverse and pluralized information sphere. For some, such as Nik Gowing in this issue, this change is nothing short of profound (see also Castells, 2009), whilst for others, such as Livingston's analysis of the exploitation of mobile phone technology by political activists, new technology provides at least the potential for greater pluralization of political power (see also Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). There is no question that future research needs to take seriously these changes and, in doing so, attempt to understand how they might be changing the dynamics of both media–state relations and global political processes. At the same time, it is important that we do not, in our enthusiasm, make the same mistakes as the early proponents of the CNN effect made, that of over-claim. As much as things are changing, there are also important continuities: a relatively small number of major mainstream news providers still dominate, many people continue to access news from what we would all describe as the traditional giants, whilst both national, cultural and language barriers still keep most of the world's public attuned to their national media. Moreover, even if global media systems may become more diverse and pluralized, it is equally plausible that this might actually disempower media, reducing its potential 'power to move and shake governments' (Cohen, 1994: 6). As Bennett and Iyengar (2008) have discussed, the new media environment may simply fragment and reduce the potential power of media to influence both policy makers and publics. Indeed, it would be fascinating to compare the relative scope and influence of pre-internet era protest movements, such as the UK- and US-based anti-apartheid movements of the 1980s, with internet era movements such as Nelson Mandela's 46664 campaign to combat HIV and AIDs in order to assess their relative

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potency. Overall then, research needs to keep open to the contradictory, but fascinating, complications of today's information environment.

Summing up

These are indeed exciting times for scholars engaged with understanding media-political dynamics. As described here, at least some things have been learned from the CNN-effect debate, whilst some of the gaps in this literature provide important issues for future research. Taken together, the articles in this special issue help to highlight some of these key areas as well as point the way towards new research areas. Most importantly, the goal of the continued CNN-effect research agenda, or whatever label we want to use, needs to hold to a bifurcated, nuanced, approach, one which attempts to understand the potentials of media influence, and the limits of communication technology in terms of shaping political processes, as well as the ways in which media can reinforce powerful interests.

Note

1. For a fuller discussion of field theory and new institutionalism, see Robinson et al. (2010: 35–50, 176–178); and on variability of media performance, see Robinson et al. (2009).

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