

Indirectly Potent

Media's effect on foreign policy

Anne-Katrin Arnold | Recent events in North Africa have intensified speculations about the role of the media—traditional mass media as well as communication technologies—in shaping political events and cultures across the world. Media influence on policy, foreign or domestic, has been the subject of some research, but is not generally taken seriously in the relevant disciplines. The lack of systematic research and acknowledgement of media influence on foreign policymaking may be due to the indirect nature of this effect. Media do not necessarily influence policymakers directly, but may work through public opinion by shaping what people know and believe about foreign politics. Public opinion, embodied, for instance, in predominant political views or in election results, can have considerable influence on policymakers that need approval from the electorate.

Since the advent of new media, reflections on the role of the media for policymaking have been numerous. There is a multitude of works hailing the democratic possibilities of new communication technologies—and as many works that deny such possibilities. John Simpson's carefully re-

searched book *Unreliable Sources: How the 20th Century Was Reported*, addresses both sides. This is a cautious and well-researched chronicle of British journalism from the Boer War through Britain's involvement in Iraq. Simpson, world affairs editor at the BBC, presents a wealth of information and historical analysis showing that throughout the last century the British media, well capable of shaping public opinion, mostly shaped it in favor of the government's foreign policy. While journalists seem to have been respected by politicians and the public until the First World War, since then tabloid press and poor fact checking appear to have damaged journalism's rapport with their audience, and certainly with the political powers. Few prime ministers have been friends of the press, and this animosity persists today. Tony Blair's famous speech on the media as a "feral beast" in 2002 is a bitter attack on the shortcomings of journalism—while at the same time an acknowledgment that the media has substantial influence on politics via shaping public opinion.

Simpson argues that the press did have substantial influence not only on

public opinion but on policymakers themselves in the build-up to the First World War. He cites the *Daily Telegraph's* interview with Kaiser Wilhelm II, which upset politicians and voters alike about what they perceived to be German hostility toward their country (“You English...are mad, mad, mad as March hares.”). For this period, Simpson implies massive direct media effects ranging from German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow’s resignation to political reactions to the shooting of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Then again, Simpson takes an ambiguous position toward media influence on foreign policy in general: he assumes that the press had direct influence on policymakers in the build-up to major military conflicts, but at the same time dismisses the press as a mouthpiece for government ideology. He assumes a strong press influence on politicians immediately before a war, but not once a war has started. This may imply that foreign policymakers are more vulnerable to public opinion shaped by the press than are military strategists, who take over in the field once an armed conflict starts. Indeed, “propaganda” is the big keyword for the role of the British press during conflict: Simpson shows how censorship and government propaganda turned the media into a government puppet during the worst times of conflict, keeping the British public at heel.

Simpson does not credit the British media with much independence and originality. However, it seems that in the second half of the 20th century the press started showing its teeth by influencing elections. The power of the press during elections becomes

rather apparent from the moment newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch, in particular the *Sun*, started to clamorously support candidates—first Margaret Thatcher and then Tony Blair—with much influence on readers.

While Simpson’s chronicle tells us about mass media reporting on foreign policy, Philip Seib’s *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics*, discusses “new” media, in particular satellite television and the Internet. Seib, a professor of public diplomacy at the University of Southern California, showcases the media’s ability to shape public opinion not in support of current foreign policy, but rather as a force that may change international politics. His Al Jazeera effect expands the idea of the CNN effect, coined in the 1990s, which posits that since the second Gulf War, the international ubiquity of CNN has shaped international public opinion and thereby, indirectly, foreign policy. Seib takes the CNN effect a step further, describing the unprecedented possibilities provided by communication technologies that connect and link communities. Seib’s main idea is the “virtual state:” disperse communities, such as the Muslim ummah or the Kurdish people, achieve an unprecedented cohesion that puts them on the political map internationally. Satellite media and the Internet foster “virtual sovereignty” by cultivating a shared identity among disperse members of ethnic or religious communities. This is relevant for foreign policy because virtual states can affect the stability of traditional states and regions. The global Islamic community in particular, if



John Simpson, *Unreliable Sources: How the 20th Century Was Reported* (Macmillan, 2010)



Philip Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (Potomac Books, 2008)

connected or even partially unified through media, would be a formidable actor on the international political stage, and policymakers would be wise to acknowledge that. Seib recommends that, if policymakers want to take advantage of the media's power to create communities, cooperation is a better approach than competition, and international media, such as Voice of America and Deutsche Welle, become a relevant tool of foreign politics.

Seib is particularly enthusiastic about Al Jazeera. He describes the Qatar-based and Sheikh-owned satellite news channel as a democratizing force in the Middle East, providing new perspectives to an audience that is mostly served by heavily censored media. He tells the story of how, in 2005, Al Jazeera journalists showed distraught Jewish settlers leaving Gaza, broadcasting moving and sympathetic pictures of Jewish settlers into Arabic homes. This would have been impossible on other channels. This, he argues, shows the power of media to alleviate tensions and prejudice by providing new perspectives. On the flip side, of course, media can also exacerbate tensions and conflict by playing to fears of their audience. In both cases, media influences the opinions of its audience that will in turn, Seib is convinced, influence a government's position on the issue.

Simpson and Seib provide mostly anecdotal evidence and theoretical arguments. Bella Mody presents a systematic and rather technical analysis in *The Geopolitics of Representation in Foreign News*, examining the coverage of the genocide in Darfur by ten news organizations in Africa, China, Europe, and the United States. Mody

starts from a strongly normative perspective, arguing that an informed citizenry is necessary, although not sufficient, for preventing conflict and humanitarian crises. According to her argument, media influences foreign policy by putting issues on the public agenda and by framing them in a way that catches the attention—and sympathy—of a large audience, which then demands action from their elected representatives. Mody argues that both the Somalia humanitarian crisis and the conflict in Darfur were not on the agenda of international politics until the media started paying attention. She understands media as “mobilizing conscience,” shaming policymakers into reacting to a crisis; creating incentives to act while at the same time raising the risk of not acting. Interestingly, Mody argues that media does not actually need to influence public opinion to reach policymakers: The communication instinct of media savvy politicians kicks in as soon as they see a headline that frames a conflict as humanitarian disaster, actual public opinion notwithstanding.

However, media's role in mobilizing conscience is constrained by its own environment. Mody and her colleagues identify four main factors that influence reporting on Darfur: geopolitical history, national interest, state ownership of the media, and audience. These factors explain almost all the variation in reporting on Darfur between 2003 and 2004. The researchers found the most intense coverage of Darfur in *Le Monde*, from the BBC, and in the *New York Times*. Two government-owned Chinese dailies, *China Daily* and *People's Daily*, paid the least attention to the conflict. China



Bella Mody, *The Geopolitics of Representation in Foreign News* (Lexington Books, 2010)

arguably has a stronger interest in Sudan than France, Britain, and the United States, and may therefore tread more lightly.

None of the examined news organizations attempted much analysis of the conflict. Causes such as inequality, ethnic struggle, and global warming were rarely reported. News outlets were cautious to assign blame to specific groups. The Western media was quicker in pointing their moral finger at the Sudanese government, while China preferred to portray the rebels as culprits. In the end, Mody hopes news coverage will provide sufficient knowledge to the public and therefore sufficient motivation for policymakers to restructure states (Sudan) and international organizations (UN) so that conflicts like Darfur can be prevented in the future. However, she also acknowledges that so far, not much has happened and that the media have been strongly aligned with national, rather than humanitarian, interests.

None of the authors discussed here provide causal evidence for media effects on foreign policy, and all caution not to overestimate the power of media. Nevertheless, all three books start from the assumption that media influences foreign policy by shaping

public opinion. Democratic governments need to be accountable to their citizens since they regularly face the ultimate accountability tool: elections. Since the electorate gets most of their information on foreign politics through the media, media influence on politics can be substantial. Simpson and Seib both support this argument in their books but take two opposing positions: Simpson posits that the British media has mainly supported the ruling ideology with regard to most 20th century conflicts. Seib, on the other hand, shows that the media can be an opposing force to the political status quo. Mody is somewhere in between. She shows how the media is constrained by national politics, but also presents a strong logic for media effects on foreign policy. All three books, however, clearly urge policymakers to pay attention to the media: If they do not, their constituents certainly will.



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