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September 2007

*Policymaking and the “CNN Effect”*

Media technologies have greatly increased our ability to communicate across borders. Because of technologies such as the telephone, television, and now the Internet, international communication is in real time. Messages – both text and visual – can be transported around the globe in a matter of minutes. While this phenomenon has led to increased interdependence amongst nations, the ubiquity of communication technology has impacted foreign policymaking in unintended ways.

The expansion of global all-news television networks such as CNN, BBC, Sky, and Fox News, and even non-Western networks such as al-Jazeera, has created a news environment that is 24 hours a day, transmitted in real time, broadcast and received across the globe, and headline and live-event dominated. This news environment has affected the ability of policymakers to make sound judgments in what some scholars have termed the “CNN effect” (Gilboa 2005, Seib, 2005). The theory argues that a type of “mediacracy” developed as news media outpaced government in terms of public influence; thereby garnering the ability to dictate policy on headline issues, especially breaking news stories such as international conflict. The most broad interpretations of the “CNN effect” contend the decision making process at the highest levels of government is controlled, limited, and condoned by media (Seib, 2005, p 17).

The fast pace of global television news presents difficult dilemmas to all the participants in deliberations on policymaking in international conflict including politicians, officials, journalists, and editors. These include the shortening of time for official response, the inherent media impatience and demands for immediate assessment of policies and events, and the pressure on reporters to constantly transmit pictures and reports even when their sources are questionable and the context is lacking (Livingston, 2005, p 48).

The “24-7” news media environment has constrained policymakers in several instances. In fact, the term “CNN effect” first appeared in newspapers during the 1991 Gulf War, and was initially used to describe the adverse psychological, economic, and financial consequences of CNN’s war coverage (Gilboa, 2005, p 3). Commentators specifically noted that CNN’s coverage had reversed the American policy of non-intervention in the Kurdish uprising after the war. This was later extrapolated to explain the US reversal of policy with regard to non-intervention in the Somali civil war (Gilboa, 2005, p 4).

Along with scholars and commentators, some policymakers have also cited the “CNN effect” as influential in their decision making process. In 1993, then US Ambassador to the UN, Madeline Albright evoked the CNN effect: “Every day we witness the challenge of collective security on television – some call it the CNN effect...Aggression and atrocities are beamed into our living rooms and cars with astonishing immediacy. No civilized human being can learn of these horrid acts occurring on a daily basis and stand aloof from them.” (Gilboa, 2005, p 4). Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger further expanded on this idea stating: “The public hears of an event now in real time, before the State Department has had time to think about it. Consequently, we find ourselves reacting before we’ve had time to think. This is now the way we determine foreign policy – it’s driven more by daily events reported on TV than it used to be.” (Gilboa, 2005, p 4).

In sum, the policymaking process is constrained and bounded by the news media environment. Of course, not all policy created within this context is “bad policy.” However, in times of crisis,

as illustrated above, policymakers act within a certain news media landscape that can adversely affect their decision making process.

*Works Cited*

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