

8

The role of media and public opinion

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Reader's guide

This chapter introduces students to debates on the relationship between public opinion, media, foreign policy, and international politics. The first three sections discuss the interconnected influences between public opinion, the media, and the making of foreign policy. Here, the extent to which both public opinion and the media can influence foreign policy formulation in a bottom-up fashion and, conversely, the way in which governments can influence media and public opinion is reviewed. The fourth section integrates these debates with theoretical frames used in the study of IR, namely realism, liberalism, and critical approaches. The chapter concludes by discussing contemporary debates concerning new media and the 'war on terror'.

Introduction

Do public opinion and the media matter for our understanding of foreign policy and international politics? To most observers the answer appears obvious. We live in a world of instantaneous communication facilitated by technologies such as the Internet and satellite-based communication as well as the arrival of 'global', 24-hour news channels such as CNN, and Al Jazeera. Indeed, it sometimes seems that little of any importance happens in the world that is not subject to the gaze of both the media and the public. Politicians continually claim to have to manage the pressures created by media criticism and public disapproval. At the same time, political actors from the President of the United States to fundamentalist Osama Bin Laden appear to utilize media to project power. For example, in May 2003, US President George Bush alighted upon a US aircraft carrier to declare 'mission accomplished' in Iraq. The aim, at least in part, was to create a visible symbol of success for both the American public and a global audience. At the same time, it is likely that those who planned the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 were aware of how the ensuing destruction would be relayed around the world and how the stunning pictorial quality of the attacks would be a factor in their foreign policy impact.

If the role of the media and public opinion matter, how have academics approached them? Perhaps surprisingly, the discipline of International Relations tends to pay little attention to public opinion and media. The dominance of realism (see Chapters Two, Nine, and Fourteen), with its focus upon inter-state relations and tendency to discount the domestic-level workings of states, is in part to blame. More importantly, International Relations academics have often lacked theoretical and conceptual tools available to Communications scholars. This has left many scholars of IR with a loose sense that both the media and public opinion are key variables in analysing foreign policy, but without the tools with which to understand

how and why. Providing a start toward rectifying this particular shortcoming is one aim of this chapter.

In contrast, the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), with its focus upon explaining decision-making, accords media and public opinion far greater analytical significance. Here, consideration of media and public opinion has been one part of a growing literature analysing the impact of *societal groups* upon foreign policy making (Hudson, 2005: 19). Also, individual-level explanations focusing on the psychology of decision makers have shown how *some* decision makers value public opinion and, therefore, come to be influenced by it when formulating foreign policy (e.g. Foyle, 1999). More generally, analysis of the interaction between public opinion, media, and foreign policy contributes to the ability of FPA to provide the complex 'ground' (Hudson, 2005: 1) upon which the often abstract study of International Relations rests. In other words, understanding foreign policy *processes* at the international level requires a detailed examination of the influences on foreign policy *decisions* made at the state level.

Two perspectives dominate academic debate, the pluralist model and the elite model. The pluralist model assumes that power is dispersed throughout society (including across the media and the public) so that no one group or set of interests dominate. As such, pluralist accounts maintain that media and publics are independent from political influence and, as such, can (and should) act as powerful *constraints* upon governments. As will be examined, recent debate revolves around the CNN effect, whereby independent news media coverage pressures policy makers to pursue a particular course of action during a crisis. Conversely, the elite model, assumes that power is concentrated within elite groups who are able to dominate politics and society. As such, elite accounts maintain that both the media and public opinion are subservient to political elites. From this perspective, media have a rather less independent form of influence—acting merely as mouthpieces for

government officials, operating to mobilize publics in support of respective policies.

This chapter has two aims. The first is to introduce concepts, arguments, and theories relating to public opinion, media, and foreign policy. The second is to integrate these with existing theoretical frameworks in International Relations. I begin by discussing the two distinct areas of enquiry that traditionally structure academic analysis. The first section examines whether public opinion influences foreign policy formulation, as argued by the pluralist model, or whether the public are politically impotent, as argued by the elite model. The second section looks at whether the media can influence foreign policy formulation as argued by the pluralist model, or whether the media are fundamentally subservient to the foreign policy process,

as argued by the elite model. In the third section, consideration is given to possible methods of reconciling elite and pluralist perspectives. Analysing these debates provides the foundation for understanding how media and public opinion matter for International Relations. The chapter concludes by examining the role of news media and public opinion as important components in three leading theoretical frameworks; as illustrated, realist, liberal, and critical approaches all have differing assumptions and claims regarding the media and public opinion. Lastly, attention is given to contemporary developments, including new communication technology and recent ideological imperatives including the current 'war on terror', and the potential impact of these upon public opinion, media, and foreign policy.

Public opinion and foreign policy

In a democracy, a government is supposed to be responsive to the public. That is to say, the opinions of people living within a democratic state are expected to be reflected in government policy, including its foreign policy. The processes by which these opinions come to influence government policy include direct elections, opinion polls, and the representation of public concerns via media. As such, the expectation in a democracy is that the pluralist model *should* hold true. It is also useful to note that, with respect to the foreign affairs of democratic states, 'the public' can be divided into distinct categories, each with different perspectives on international affairs. For example, research on US public opinion has traditionally categorized US citizens as either *isolationist* or *internationalist*. Isolationists oppose their government taking an active role in world affairs; internationalists, conversely, prefer a more active role for the US in global affairs and support the idea of the US being involved in organizations such as the United Nations. Other scholars, as we shall see, have differentiated between those citizens who are interested in international affairs and those (arguably the

majority) who pay little attention to matters beyond their own country.

In fact, early academic opinion questioned the wisdom of the pluralist model, arguing that most of the public were too ill-informed to hold coherent, and therefore influential, views on foreign affairs. The most dismissive analysis claiming public ignorance of international affairs came from the pioneering work of Gabriel Almond, who sought to understand the opinions of the American public in the context of post-Second World War debates over isolationism and internationalism. Almond (1950) distinguished between a numerically small *attentive public* and a much larger *mass public*; the former possessed sufficient knowledge to hold coherent views on foreign affairs, the latter was ill-informed and unstable, prone to irrational changes in opinion. At worst, the mass public possessed *non-attitudes* with respect to international politics. Further research during the 1950s and 60s, mainly conducted in the US, supported a further claim, namely that the public, however ill-informed, ultimately had little impact upon foreign policy (Holsti, 1992). Overall, this academic

consensus challenged both the *empirical reality* of the pluralist model and its *desirability* as an analytical framework and, by implication, advocated the *existence* and *desirability* of the elite model. At the same time, it is also worth noting the context of this early research which revolved around concerns within the US foreign policy and political establishment that US citizens were *too* isolationist. The concern was that US policy makers would be unable to take on the global role necessary to counter the 'communist threat' due to an 'irrational' public that failed to 'realize' and indeed support the need for an internationalist foreign policy. As such, an *internationalist* perspective shared between academics and policy makers perhaps shaped the claims being made in favour of the elite model and at the expense of the pluralist model.

Whatever the accuracy of the early consensus around the elite model, the Vietnam War (spanning the 1960s and 70s) provided a new context by which to view the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. US military failure, combined with widespread public opposition to the war, raised questions of whether or not public opinion had undermined US war efforts. Indeed, by the early 1970s, many researchers argued that public opinion was more *rational, stable, and influential* than previously suggested. Consequently, whether because people had become more informed and influential over time, or simply because earlier research had simply been wrong, there existed stronger grounds to support the existence of the pluralist model. The most prominent of such studies was John Mueller's (1973) *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*. Mueller's thesis was simple, but powerfully demonstrated. Analysing the relationship between US public support for the Korean War and the Vietnam War and the number of US casualties during each of these conflicts, he found that as the number of casualties increased, support for each war declined. As such, US citizens responded in an informed and rational manner; as more soldiers were killed, support for the two wars was increasingly withdrawn as revealed through opinion polls, public protests, and ultimately political damage to US Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson

respectively. The implication of Mueller's analysis is that public opinion can matter during wars that become protracted and costly in terms of casualty counts.

Since then, despite intensive research, there remains minimal academic consensus between the contrasting elite and pluralist perspectives. For some who argue the existence of the elite model, public opinion continues to have minimal impact on policy, if only because of the multitude of other factors that influence policy makers. This perspective emphasizes the ability of governments alone to lead, and indeed mobilize, public opinion by actively *promoting* particular foreign policy decisions. For example, in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the British and US governments devoted significant time and resources (including the publication of *intelligence dossiers*) to ensure the British and American public believed that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and constituted a threat. For others (e.g. Margolis and Mauser, 1989), public opinion acts at most as a *broad constraint* on foreign policy formulation, whereby policy makers consciously devise policy with an awareness of what the public will and will not accept. So, for example, during the 1999 air war against Serbia, the Clinton administration's options were limited by the knowledge that political support from sections of the US public, in particular those with isolationist sentiments, could be lost if troops were killed in a war that appeared irrelevant to US interests. As a consequence, the Clinton administration adhered to a policy of air strikes and avoided the riskier option of deploying ground troops (Robinson, 2002: 94–110).

Others, in support of the pluralist model, find evidence that public concerns can, and do, play a major role in foreign policy formulation (Risse-Kappen, 1991), primarily through citizens punishing and/or rewarding politicians via elections. Perhaps more usefully, other pluralist accounts have sought to provide a more differentiated understanding whereby under certain circumstances, public opinion plays a greater or lesser role in policy formulation. For example, in a fascinating analysis, Douglas Foyle (1999) argues that public influence on foreign policy in the US

is dependent upon the normative position of the president regarding the desirability of public influence on their policy, and their need for public support in order to carry through a policy. Some US presidents, who Foyle labels as 'delegates', believe that public opinion is desirable and necessary and thus are indeed influenced by public opinion. Other US presidents, labelled as 'guardians', believe that the public should never be considered when formulating foreign policy and, therefore, are not influenced by public opinion.

Overall, the range of positions on questions of public opinion and its influence upon foreign policy seems daunting and contradictory. In part, this is due to the difficulty of actually identifying and measuring influence; academics *cannot* peer inside the minds of policy makers and see influence at work. Moreover, the task of disentangling a single factor like public opinion, from the wide range of other factors influencing decision makers, is a technically difficult task for researchers. Given this uncertainty, it is perhaps best for foreign policy students to first recognize the diversity of academic opinion, and second concede that there is some truth to all the positions. For those who advocate the elite model, there exist prominent examples whereby governments ignore public opinion on matters of foreign policy. For example, in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, opinion polls repeatedly showed a majority opposition to the war amongst the UK public, and yet the government still proceeded with the war. For those who claim that public opinion

influences politics as indicated by the pluralist model, the rise in both military and civilian casualties has caused large numbers of both the UK and the US publics to perceive the war in Iraq as ill-conceived and wrong, punishing the respective governments of both countries in subsequent elections.

Finally, the greatest limitation of much research into public opinion and foreign policy is its tendency to ignore a crucial intervening variable—the media. And yet the media are clearly central to the public opinion/foreign policy nexus. For example, the pluralist model of public opinion–foreign policy *assumes* that public opinion is *independent* from both government and media. For this to occur, two conditions must be met. First, the media must present *objective* information to the public and not simply views that are defined by foreign policy officials. Second, the public must be capable of consuming and processing the information they read and hear in media in order to form their own *independent* opinion. The elite model, conversely, *assumes* either that media are, along with public opinion, irrelevant to the concerns of politicians and foreign policy makers; or that media function only to communicate the viewpoints of policy makers to a public who then passively absorb what they read and hear. As we shall see, these assumptions about media and their relationship to both foreign policy officials and the public are open to debate. And it is to the question of media that we now turn.

Media and foreign policy

Within democratic states, the media are supposed to facilitate full and open debate on important issues. The term used to refer to this role is that of the public sphere. Within this sphere, news media, including television news, newspapers, and other news formats such as current affairs programming, should help to educate, inform, and facilitate debate. In doing so, a societal consensus can be reached which can then influence government policy. News media are also expected to perform a *watchdog* function,

scrutinizing and holding to account the government and also *representing* the opinions of the public. In order to do this, the media strive to be *objective*. That is to say the aim of news media is to provide neutral and truthful information untainted by political bias. Amongst news media, an important distinction is to be made between *television* media and *print* media. Television news, for example the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) *Six O'Clock News*, focuses upon the reporting of unbiased daily political and social

events. Print news media, conversely, often practise partisan journalism, catering to differing political agendas and perspectives. In Germany for example, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper reflects the interests and values of the right while France's *Le Monde* articulates left-of-centre views. Overall, however, the expectation in democratic states is that, across television and newspapers, power is sufficiently devolved to enable a free and independent media. In other words, media systems are expected to conform to the pluralist model. Conversely, in authoritarian or totalitarian states, news media are subject to state control. For example, within the now defunct Soviet Union, the *Pravda* newspaper acted as the mouth-piece for the Kremlin and was committed to helping mobilize the Soviet public to achieve the goals of socialism. Such media systems are understood to conform to the elite model.

In fact, similar to the early elite model consensus on public opinion and foreign policy, initial analysis of the role of media questioned whether media actually did perform its democratic, pluralist role,

with regard to foreign policy. For example, in *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Bernard Cohen (1963) found that at best media perform an agenda setting role, whereby media caused policy makers to pay attention to issues raised by media, but ultimately had little impact on how policy makers then chose to respond to those issues. The Vietnam War, however, marked the start of new arguments regarding the impact of media on policy formulation. This war, sometimes described as America's first television war, appeared to some to have been lost due to the relentless flow of violent images and critical reporting by US journalists. Indeed, in his memoirs, President Nixon (1978: 350) famously wrote:

“More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war...the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home.” (See the photographs on page 144.)

Whatever the validity of these claims (see Box 8.1), the quantity of studies based on the pluralist model

BOX 8.1 Hallin and US media coverage of the Vietnam War; Cold War ideology and spheres of consensus, controversy, and deviance

Daniel Hallin's (1986) seminal study, *The Uncensored War*, directly challenges the claim that US media coverage adopted an *adversarial*, or *oppositional*, stance toward the US war in Vietnam. Following a detailed content analysis of US newspaper and television news, Hallin found that US media coverage of the war was broadly supportive up until 1968 with coverage serving to highlight the bravery of US soldiers and ignoring the impact of the war on the Vietnamese population. In 1968, however, communist forces launched the Tet offensive which involved an uprising throughout pro-US South Vietnam. As fighting spilled onto the streets of South Vietnamese cities, US journalists were able to witness the extent of communist support throughout South Vietnam which, in turn, raised doubts about US military claims to be winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese.

At this point, according to Hallin's research, critical reporting did start to emerge in mainstream US media. However, this was not so much because journalists were

starting to oppose the war, but because the Johnson administration itself had started to argue publicly over the course of the war. Specifically, the US political establishment had become divided between *hawks*, who believed victory needed to be achieved whatever the cost, and *doves* who argued that the price of victory in Vietnam was not worth paying. Hence, rather than critical reporting being the result of journalists adopting an oppositional stance, it was actually generated by journalists mirroring the debate within the US foreign policy elite. Moreover, US mainstream media rarely reported the views of the anti-war movement in America who argued not that the war was unwinnable, but that it was an immoral and ill-conceived act of aggression. Hallin explains media performance through reference to both the *ideology of objective journalism*, whereby US journalists depend heavily upon official sources in Washington when defining the news agenda, and Cold War ideology which united policy makers and journalists along an anti-communism agenda.

BOX 8.1 Continued

The result of the ideology of anti-communism was that journalists were unable to perceive the Vietnam War as anything but part of a necessary and just struggle against communism. From this study, Hallin developed his concept of spheres to characterize how US media covered international affairs (see Figure 8.1). The sphere of consensus relates to areas where there exists elite agreement over policy (for example Vietnam policy prior to 1968). Here, media coverage remains relatively passive and reflects the consensus in existence. The sphere of legitimate controversy comes into play when elites are in

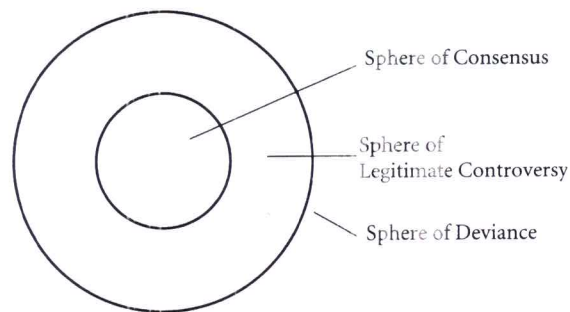


Figure 8.1 Spheres of consensus, controversy and defiance

Source: By permission of Oxford University Press Inc. Originally published in Daniel C. Hallin, (1986) *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York, Oxford University Press) p 117.

increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Two arguments underpinned claims of a more powerful media, in what came to be known as the CNN effect. The first concerned the rise of 24-hour news channels, such as the US-based Cable News Network (CNN), which appeared to have widened the exposure of international events, thereby increasing the pressure on policy makers to respond to issues raised by journalists. At the same time, the end of the Cold War had brought to an end an ideological prism of anti-communism that had bonded policy makers and journalists. Released from the Cold War prism journalists were, it was presumed, freer to criticize foreign policy. As we shall see in our discussion of IR theory, one important component of this debate focused upon the power of media to facilitate humanitarian

disagreement over policy (for example during and after the Tet offensive in Vietnam); here journalists reflect elite disagreement and criticism of policy emerges in media reports. The sphere of deviance relates to arguments and debates which fall outside the boundaries of elite-legitimated debate (for example the arguments of the anti-Vietnam War movement). According to Hallin, US mainstream media, because of their reliance upon US official sources, rarely produce reports which fall into this sphere.

intervention during post-Cold War crises in war-torn countries such as Somalia and Bosnia.

Challenging the CNN effect thesis, however, has been the elite model literature that highlights the close relationship between news media and official sources (Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). For example, Lance Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis, describes how US journalists follow foreign policy elites in terms of both the news agenda and the framing of foreign affairs issues, rather than striking out independently. As Bennett (1990) describes, US journalists tend simply to *index* news coverage to debates occurring within Washington. This arises from the need to avoid upsetting major political and economic interests, the deference of journalists towards official sources, and the vast quantity of information supplied by government to journalists. It is important to note that a variety of formulations of the elite model of media-state relations exist (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988), each with a different degree of emphasis regarding the proximity of media to state elites. All, however, indicate that, far from presenting some kind of objective reality, media coverage of international affairs is largely subservient to elite groups.

In addition to the issue of *indexing*, advocates of the elite model argue that the extent to which audiences are able to consume news and, in turn, form their own, independent opinion is more limited than assumed by the pluralist model. Here, the concepts



Influential images from Vietnam: children fleeing napalm

Source: Photograph taken by Bettman (8 June 1972). Distributed by Corbis.



Influential images from Vietnam: execution of an alleged Vietcong prisoner

Source: Photograph taken by Eddie Adams. Distributed by PA.

of agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Cohen, 1963), priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), and framing (Entman, 1991) indicate ways in which public opinion can be shaped. Agenda setting refers to the media's ability, by focusing on some issues rather than others, to direct people to think about those issues. Priming refers to the ability of media to prepare and direct publics to the issues by which they should judge their leaders. Framing refers to the way solely in which the actual presentation of news information influences how people perceive specific issues. For example, analysing US public opinion, media, and the 1991 Gulf War, Iyengar and Simon (1994) drew upon opinion polls and news coverage in order to demonstrate how media focus on the Gulf crisis led to the public defining the crisis as the most important

political issue at the time. The media had both set the agenda and directed the public as to what was the most important issue to think about. Their analysis also demonstrated that US citizens were, accordingly, primed to judge how well President George Bush Sr handled the war. Finally, Iyengar and Simon (1994) argue that media coverage of the war was framed in terms of event-orientated (episodic) coverage that focused upon military matters, such as military technology and the progress of the war, and tended to downplay thematic coverage that dealt with broader diplomatic issues and matters related to the rationale and justification for war. According to their analysis, this framing of the news tended to increase viewers' support for military action. See Box 8.2.

BOX 8.2 Framing the news: The Korean Airline and Iran Air shootdowns

The concept of *framing* has emerged as a central tool of analysis in identifying and unpacking political bias within news media reports. In essence the concept of framing refers to the way in which the use of language, the selection of facts and images, and the degree of attention devoted to a particular issue can lead seemingly objective news reports to convey a highly politicized and biased representation of that issue. In his seminal study 'Framing US coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents', Robert Entman (1991) shows how US media framed two similar events in dramatically contrasting ways. In this article, Entman analyses US media coverage of two events involving the shooting down of a civilian airliner. The first was the shooting down of a Korean Airliner in 1983 by a Soviet fighter aircraft after it had strayed into Soviet airspace. The second involved the shooting down of an Iranian Airliner in 1988 by a US warship in the Persian Gulf after the airliner flew toward a US navy battle group.

Entman argues that both events were broadly similar in that they involved mistakes by military personnel that led to the destruction of civilian airliners and large loss of life. As such, if news media were objective, coverage of both events should have been broadly similar. US media representation of the two events, however, was strikingly different. In the case of the Soviet shootdown, US media coverage accorded far greater attention than that of the US shooting down of the Iranian Air liner

in terms of column inches and space. For example, the *New York Times* devoted 286 stories to the KAL shootdown and only 102 stories to the Iran Air shootdown. In terms of selection of facts, coverage of the KAL shootdown focused upon the responsibility of the Soviet authorities and the claim that they knowingly ordered the destruction of the airliner. Coverage of the Iran air shootdown, conversely, focused upon the limited information available to US naval personnel regarding the movements of Iranian airliners. Furthermore, the victims of the KAL shootdown were *humanized* whilst those of the Iran Air shootdown were described more often in *neutral* terms. Overall, according to Entman, the variation across both cases in terms of space, selection of facts, language, and visual imagery led to a *moral outrage* framing of the KAL shootdown and a *technical fault* framing of the Iran Air shootdown. Following from this, Entman argued that US media did not cover the two events objectively, but rather represented both events in ways which were conducive to the political interests of the US government. The *moral outrage* frame supported the Reagan administration's 'evil empire' rhetoric levelled at the Soviet Union at that time, whilst the *technical fault* frame served to reduce public criticism of US government policy in the Persian Gulf.ⁱ

ⁱ For further information on framing and news media coverage see Entman's *Projections of Power*.

Procedural versus substantive criticism and influence

The CNN effect thesis appears incompatible with the elite model: If media are beholden to foreign policy elites, how can it be that coverage shapes and influences what those elites do? Part of the problem for researchers has been the difficulty of accurately measuring media influence. As with the question of public influence, researchers cannot directly observe influence occurring within the minds of policy makers and the multitude of factors influencing any given decision complicate efforts to measure the precise impact media has. Moreover, when both policy makers and journalists are interviewed about the influence of the media, differing perspectives and interests cloud their opinions. Policy makers are sometimes prone to blame media influence for unsuccessful foreign policy decisions. For example, the ill-fated intervention in Somalia in 1992 was widely attributed to US media forcing policy makers to respond to the humanitarian crisis in the country. Other policy makers, committed to notions of rational decision-making, are inclined to deny that they are ever influenced by media reports that by their nature are often incomplete and incorrect. At the same time, journalists might be inclined to over-sell their power and importance. These problems introduce a significant degree of uncertainty to elite and pluralist debates over media influence.

For students, however, it is useful to also understand that these apparently divergent positions on the role and influence of media are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather can be understood in greater depth when taking into account their procedural and substantive influence. The term 'procedural' is used to describe media criticism and influence that relates to debates over the actual *implementation* of policy decisions. The term 'substantive' has been used to describe criticism and influence that relates to the underlying *justifications* and *rationale* for particular foreign policies. For example, analysing US media during the Vietnam War, Hallin (1986) found that, whilst media coverage became critical of the

implementation of policy in Vietnam (principally that the war policy was failing), it rarely questioned whether the US was in fact justified in attempting to exert control over the destiny of the Vietnamese population (see Box 8.1). Media influence and criticism remained therefore at a *procedural level* and was never intensified to the *substantive level*.

Once this distinction is introduced, it becomes easier to understand what have at times been somewhat dogmatic debates between academics subscribing to elite models of media–state relations and those who adhere to the CNN effect thesis and the pluralist model. There is evidence to indicate that the media are both critical and influential at a procedural level. For example, Nik Gowing (1994) argues that during the 1992–5 war in Bosnia, the British government responded to media criticism through the implementation of *cosmetic policy* responses, such as short-term humanitarian issues that included the airlifting of limited numbers of injured civilians out of the war zone. Influence on *tactical policy* could be seen in limited military responses to human rights abuses that included limited air strikes on various combatants in the conflict. However, substantive-level influence—of the kind that might have changed the overall strategy aimed at containment of the conflict but not forcing an end to the war—was more limited. In short, media criticism and influence tend to be bounded within certain limits which are, in turn, often set by foreign policy elites.

To sum up, two competing visions of media–state relations dominate the current debate. One, the CNN effect thesis, places significant emphasis upon the ability of media to shape and influence foreign policy decisions. The other, the elite model of media state relations, paints a picture of media subservience to the foreign policy establishment. In fact, both viewpoints possess some truth and the important distinction lies in the *level* of criticism and influence (procedural vs. substantive) being considered. See Box 8.3.

BOX 8.3 Beyond the elite/pluralist dichotomy; new approaches to theorising the media/foreign policy nexus.

Whilst elite and pluralist perspectives continue to influence academic debate, recent research has attempted to develop models that capture both these theoretical perspectives and, therefore, provide a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of media–state relations. For example, many academics now argue that both elite dissensus (Hallin, 1986) (when there exists disagreement within the political and foreign policy establishment) and unexpected events (Lawrence, 2000) that occur beyond the control of governments, can considerably open up the boundaries of media criticism and influence. So, for example, during the build-up to and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, widespread debate raged amongst politicians and within the foreign policy community in the UK over

the justification for the war. As a consequence, media coverage was much more critical and perhaps influential in terms of shaping public and elite perceptions of the war (although, of course, the fundamentals of UK policy in Iraq appear to have remained unchanged to date). At the same time, unexpected or uncontrolled events (such as the abuse of Iraqis by coalition forces) that spread through the world's media meant that the UK and US governments were subjected to varying levels of criticism and dissent from their respective domestic medias. Other recent accounts that attempt to bridge the elite/pluralist divide include Wolfsfeld's (1997) *political contest model* and the *policy–media interaction model* (Robinson, 2002).

Media, public opinion, and theoretical frames

Having set out the diverse array of argument concerning the relationship between public opinion, media, and foreign policy, we can now turn to the task of integrating these competing arguments with major IR schools of thought. As we shall see, each of the major IR schools of thought can be linked to the different arguments and models discussed earlier.

Realism

Broadly speaking, media and public opinion are presented by realist theory as irrelevant to understanding international politics. Why is this the case? For realists, international politics can be *described* and *explained* as the outcome of inter-state power struggles. For realist theory, the most important actor to consider is the state; and the domestic structure of a state has minimal bearing upon how that state behaves. Whether a state is democratic, totalitarian, or authoritarian, the anarchic nature of the international system forces it to pursue its self-interest in order to survive. Consequently, foreign policy is formulated, not under the influence of domestic media

and publics, but by foreign policy elites who, under the influence of an anarchic international system, define and pursue the national interest. As such, realism argues that foreign policy is generated by forces *external* to the state, rather than forces *internal* to the state such as media and public opinion.

However, there is more to the realist analysis. Implicit in realist theory are various normative components. The first such component is that foreign policy *should* be immune from public and media influence, otherwise a state might be prevented from pursuing its national interest. For example, public opinion might remain opposed to a war necessary for their national interest. Here, the assumption underpinning realism is that foreign policy elites are more likely to do what is in the nation's interest and that, just as Gabriel Almond (1950) argued, publics are largely ignorant and ill-informed about international affairs. The second normative component is that the mobilization of public and media in support of the national interest is morally correct. Here, the realist assumption is that moral communities are defined by state boundaries and that both media and

public opinion should reflect this reality. So, when a state goes to war for example, it is *right* that media help to mobilize the public in support of war.

Regarding debates about public opinion and media discussed earlier, the *elite model* is compatible with realist theory, by claiming that public opinion and media *are* led by government and that domestic factors are irrelevant to foreign policy. Conversely, the realist claim concerning the irrelevance of domestic factors is weakened if one accepts the pluralist model's argument that public opinion and media *do* influence foreign policy formulation. Further, the argument that the media are limited to *procedural-level criticism* is consistent with realist theory. For example, media might come to criticize the means by which a war is being fought—as was the case regarding the use of cluster bombs during the 1991 Gulf War—but leave uninterrogated the justification for the war. Indeed, much research into media coverage of war highlights a broad tendency to uncritically mobilize support for both military and government war objectives. This is not the place, of course, to suggest which line of argument is 'correct'; the central point here is that realism rests upon the assumption that the elite model is correct and that pluralist models are in error. As such, the validity of realist assumptions can be usefully analysed and debated through reference to both elite and pluralist models.

Liberalism

Unlike realism, liberalism places far greater analytical importance upon the role of public opinion and media. As a theory of international relations, liberalism focuses on the rules and norms that have evolved between states (see Chapter Three). Central to liberalism is the belief in, and commitment to, developing rule-governed behaviour between states that, in turn, can lead to greater levels of cooperation and reduced levels of conflict. A key component of liberal theory is the democratic peace thesis and it is here that particular claims regarding public opinion become crucial to liberalism. The democratic peace thesis maintains that liberal democracies are war-averse because, at least in part, the consent of the public

is required. Because, as liberalism assumes, people generally prefer peace to war, public opinion acts as a powerful constraint upon elected leaders and, therefore, the external behaviour of a state. In order for this to occur, it must be the case both that public opinion constrains foreign policy formulation and that media are independent of government when covering international affairs. In short, the democratic peace theory assumes that pluralist models of media and public opinion are correct and that elite models are in error. The level of academic disagreement on these issues, as discussed earlier, suggests that such assumptions are open to contestation.

At the international level, liberal claims regarding free speech and the global free flow of information (in part facilitated by media communication technology), have been associated with the progressive spread of liberal values. For example, Joseph Nye (1996) argues that:

“[o]rganizations such as the U.S. Information Agency are vital to the task of aiding democratic transitions. . . . USIA'S international broadcasting arm, the Voice of America, has in the last few years become the primary news source for 60 per cent of the educated Chinese. America's increasing technical 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.”

Here communication technology becomes a key mechanism by which soft power, the 'ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals' (Nye, 2004), can be projected. With respect to complex interdependence and regimes, the pluralization of transnational information flows facilitated by the Internet and global media have 'opened the field to loosely structured network organisations . . . who are particularly effective in penetrating states without regard to borders and using domestic constituencies to force political leaders to focus on their preferred agendas' (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 83). For example, NGOs successfully coordinated political pressure through media vis-à-vis environmental talks leading to the Kyoto agreement and the anti-landmine campaign that led to the Ottawa agreement (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 92). As

such, the kind of networking and media promotion available by virtue of the contemporary information environment facilitate the emergence of new regimes.

Other, liberal, arguments persist regarding the Internet and its tendency to undermine the control of authoritarian states over what their populations see and hear. The assumption here is the free flow of information through global media and the Internet are part of globalization processes and have a progressively liberalizing effect around the world. Significant debate during the 1990s revolved around the emergence of a new norm of humanitarian intervention, whereby the international community intervened in the internal affairs of a state to uphold human rights (see Chapter Eleven). For some, a key factor in developing this norm is the media. For example, in *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, Martin Shaw (1996) argues that, during the 1991 Kurdish crisis in Northern Iraq, Western media highlighted the suffering of Kurds fleeing attacks from Saddam Hussein's forces. As a consequence of relentless and emotive coverage, Western leaders were forced into conducting what was widely seen to be the first case of humanitarian intervention. As such, the media is understood to be a central component in ensuring that states respond to human rights concerns.

Again, as with the democratic peace, these arguments rest upon a series of assumptions regarding the role and function of media and public opinion. To the extent that media and publics are capable of both influencing and driving foreign policy, liberal theories are strengthened. Whatever the empirical validity of such claims, which are open to debate as discussed earlier in this chapter, the key point is that important liberal claims rest upon the validity of the pluralist model.

Critical approaches

Critical approaches to the study of IR (Marxism and critical theory), call into question existing political and economic orders through a process of explaining and understanding their origins.¹ In fact, it is noteworthy that the empirical description of the public opinion/media/foreign policy nexus made by

realists is similar to critical approaches. Both assert the subservience of public opinion and media to the state and work with an elite understanding of the foreign policy/media/public opinion relationship. For realists, this is in part due to the need for foreign policy elites to be free to pursue the national interest unfettered by an 'irrational' media and public, and, in part, because the state is assumed to represent the interests of those people contained within its borders. For critical approaches, however, the state is a function of political and economic structures that enable domination by a socio-economic elite. Central to the maintenance of this inequality is the role of the mass media which serves to reflect and propagate the interests of elites, whose particular world view is then transmitted to the population whose opinions are manipulated or 'manufactured'.

A provocative account in this vein is *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media* by Herman and Chomsky (1988). These authors emphasize the commercial imperatives acting upon news organizations which lead them to avoid controversial areas where the interests of business overlap with those of the state. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), there are significant overlapping interests between the US state and major US business conglomerates of which the mass media is but one part. Consequently, news stories that run contrary to these interests are unlikely to surface. It is important to note that such radical critiques are not only arguing that media within liberal democratic states function to promote liberal and capitalist values to both domestic audiences and wider global publics. If this were the case, the only disagreement between liberal and critical positions would be a normative one; that is to say, liberals support the promotion of liberalism and free market economics, whilst critical approaches would challenge the promotion of these and, instead, seek to change the existing order. Rather, the core of the radical critique is that Western mainstream media perpetuate an image of Western democracies (and in particular the United States) as inherently benign, peaceful, and committed to high moral standards when, in fact, the foreign policies of

those states are riddled with self-interested economic and political objectives that often lead those states to support violent and illiberal policies. As such media are not free and autonomous but, rather, mobilize—through deception—citizens in support of the actions of their governments. For instance, in support of their case, Herman and Chomsky document how US media functioned to promote anti-communism by highlighting human rights abuses committed by communist states and downplaying similar abuses committed by allies of the United States during the ‘struggle against communism’.

In addition, critical approaches highlight ways in which global information flows are dominated by powerful states and vested economic interests. For example, whilst CNN might indeed be described as global media, some argue that its news agenda and framing of events reflects the interests of First World

elites. Again, whilst liberals point to the ability of media to provoke humanitarian concern for suffering people in poorer parts of the globe, as was the case during the 1984 Ethiopian famine (Philo, 1993), critical approaches argue that such responses are superficial and allow affluent audiences in the West to avoid confronting global inequalities that enable famine and crisis to occur in the first place (De Waal, 1997).

Central to these critical analyses, of course, is the position that media are subservient to the state and that public opinion is moulded by—but does not itself mould—foreign policy elites, who form part of a broader societal elite. As such, critical accounts emphasize the extent to which both media and public opinion (via the role of dominant ideology) are secondary to (or created by) broader political-economic power structures and, as such, rest upon the elite model.

Conclusion: new technology and the ‘war on terror’

Whilst academics continue to debate the relative merits of the various theories, models and arguments outlined in this chapter, a broader set of concerns have come to dominate debate in recent years. Essentially, these new issues examine the extent to which media and public opinion have grown in influence due to the proliferation of new forms of

communication technology, such as the Internet and the emergence of global media such as CNN and Al-Jazeera; conversely, they also examine the extent to which the rise of new political issues, such as the ‘war on terror’, have decreased the influence of media and public opinion. I shall deal with each in turn.

BOX 8.4 The Al-Jazeera effect?

Since its launch in the mid 1990s, the Qatar-based 24 Hours satellite news channel, Al Jazeera, has emerged as a significant, and at times controversial, news channel. Principally committed to providing *independent* and *objective* news reporting throughout the Middle East, the first effect of Al Jazeera was to enable the creation of an Arabic public sphere where genuine criticism and debate could be aired. This contrasted with existing Arab news media that were widely seen as beholden to Middle Eastern governments. As such, Al Jazeera is seen by many as a democratizing force in the Middle East. Since 9/11, however, Al Jazeera has increasingly been criticized by the US and British governments on

the grounds that its reporting is *biased* and unhelpful in the ‘war on terror’. For example, for broadcasting tapes of Osama Bin Laden delivering statements, Al Jazeera was accused of providing a public platform for the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Also, during the 2003 Iraq War, Al Jazeera incurred criticism from both the US and British governments for transmitting images of dead coalition soldiers. In its defence, Al Jazeera has maintained that it has attempted to objectively report controversial events without privileging any one perspective. But what is the overall effect, if any, of an independent 24-hour, Arab-based news channel on global affairs? On the one hand, its influence on western publics is probably

BOX 8.4 Continued

minimal; most people in the West continue to watch 'Western' news channels. On the other hand, the popularity and credibility of Al Jazeera throughout the Arab world means that attempts by the West, and in particular

the US, to influence perceptions during its 'war on terror' through *soft power projection* is far more limited than if, for example, CNN was the information source of choice in the Arab world.

New technology

The emergence of truly global forms of communication such as satellite broadcasting, which facilitate real-time reporting of global events, along with the Internet, which provides a forum for anyone to promote their own political agenda free from the constraints of state-based media systems, have radically pluralized the relationship between publics, media, and the state. In a globalized world of instant communication, governments—as the traditional architects of foreign policy—are less able to manage and manipulate information and ideas, and hitherto weak and marginalized groups have been able to exploit communication technology. For example, analysing the David and Goliath struggle between the indigenous Chiapas guerrilla army and the Mexican state during the early 1990s, Douglas Kellner claims that '[f]rom the beginning, the peasants and guerrilla armies struggling in Chiapas, Mexico used computer data bases, guerrilla radio, and other forms of media to circulate news of their struggles and ideas' (Kellner, 1998: 182). Another example of the inability of states to suppress 'bad news' are the images of torture and abuse by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib in Iraq where, ultimately, the US government could do little to prevent the global circulation of such images through the Internet.

Broadly speaking, such claims challenge both the realist and critical approaches discussed earlier and support liberal arguments regarding the influential and transformative potential of both media and public opinion. Despite the quantity of such claims in recent years, some have come to question quite how empowering new communication technology has actually been. With respect to the aforementioned examples, instances like the Chiapas can be

argued to be relatively rare and exceptions to the rule. Certainly, there is little evidence to support the thesis that, overall, marginalized groups have become more powerful as a consequence of developments in communication technology. With respect to the issue of Abu Ghraib, recent research has suggested that, whilst a problem issue for US authorities, most mainstream US media represented the issue in a manner relatively congenial to the US government by representing the events as *abuses* by a *few soldiers* rather than as the consequence of an 'administration policy of torture' (Bennett et al, 2006: 467). More generally, realists can still point to the fact that, for all the talk of the emergence of a global media sphere and global public, most audiences maintain a 'stubborn preference' for national, regional, and even local news (Carruthers, 2000: 202). Also, critical approaches point to the concentration of ownership and competition across the global media industry to highlight the political-economic imperatives that, in their view, encourage media outlets such as CNN and Sky News to eschew in-depth reportage for a focus on infotainment. Overall, realists and critical approaches still present a serious challenge to both the theoretical and empirical cogency of liberal claims.

The 'war on terror'

As noted earlier, much debate during the 1990s revolved around the impact of the end of the Cold War stand-off between the US and the USSR. Freed from an ideological bond that united policy makers and journalists, media, it was argued, became more influential and adversarial. The current question influencing research and theorizing concerns how new issues, such as the 'War on Terror',

have limited the extent to which both media and publics are autonomous from state-directed foreign policy. Specifically, since the events of September 11, 2001, the geopolitical landscape has been dominated by the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. For some academics (Domke, 2004; Jackson, 2005), the 'war on terror' functions as a new ideological imperative, effectively replacing that of Cold War-era anti-communism (see Box 8.1), and that is now limiting media independence and the perception by Western publics of global affairs. From this perspective, the 'war on terror' frame provides journalists with a template with which to understand global events and a powerful rhetorical tool with which to justify a more aggressive and interventionist foreign policy agenda. This has already been seen during the build-up to and war against Iraq when the US government justified the invasion of Iraq as part of the 'war on terror'. For liberals, the appearance of new issues, such as the 'war on terror', challenge their claims for the existence of a more adversarial and independent post-Cold War media. For realist and critical approaches the 'war on terror', and its impact

upon both media autonomy and public perceptions of global affairs, confirms the subservience of both media and publics to broader political and economic forces.

Quite where the truth lies between these various positions must be for the reader to decide and for academics to continue to debate. But as we have shown throughout this chapter, media and public opinion remain important for IR theory, whether as a powerful constraint upon state action (the liberal position), a source of mobilization for the state (the realist position), or the mechanism by which structures of inequality and domination are maintained (the critical position). Perhaps the most significant question facing researchers is the extent to which political and economic forces constrain and manipulate media and publics and the extent to which technological developments have strengthened the independence of media and publics from those forces. At the heart of this debate remains the central question of whether peoples of the world have become any more, or any less, informed about global affairs.

Key points

- Research on public opinion, media, and foreign policy falls into two principal categories examining (a) the public opinion–foreign policy relationship and (b) the media–foreign policy relationship.
- Pluralist accounts maintain that both public opinion and media have a significant impact on foreign policy.
- Elite accounts maintain that both public opinion and media are subservient to the state and, therefore, do not influence foreign policy.
- For realists, public opinion and media should be mobilized in support of the state.
- For Liberals, public opinion and media provide an important input to foreign policy decision-making and can transform international politics.
- Critical approaches maintain media are mobilized in support of the state and elite interests, but that this situation is to be criticized as fundamentally undemocratic.
- Recent debate has revolved round the impact of new communication technology and the 'war on terror' upon the power and influence of media and public opinion.

Questions

1. What influence, if any, can public opinion have on foreign policy formulation?
2. In what ways, and to what extent, can media influence public opinion?

3. Assess the relative cogency of elite and pluralist models of media–state relations.
4. To what extent do you agree with the realist perspective on media and public opinion?
5. To what extent do you agree with the liberal perspective on media and public opinion?
6. Critical accounts argue that media and public opinion are manipulated by elite interests. To what extent do you agree?
7. What impact has new technology had on the public opinion/media/foreign policy nexus?
8. To what extent *should* public opinion and media shape foreign policy?



Further reading

- Entman, R. (2004), *Projections of Power: framing news, public opinion and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).
Comprehensive introduction to the concept of frames, detailing their impact upon both public and foreign policy.
- Foyle, D. (1999), *Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press).
A good example of a contemporary account arguing that that public opinion can influence policy.
- Herman, E., and Chomsky, N. (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media* (New York: Pantheon).
Provocative and widely read example of the elite perspective, arguing that US media function to mobilize support for elite interests.
- Robinson, P. (2002), *The CNN Effect: the myth of news, foreign policy and intervention* (London and New York: Routledge).
Provides a contemporary theoretical and empirical analysis of the CNN effect debate highlighting the contrasting roles media can play in policy formulation.
- Shaw, M. (1996), *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises* (London: St Martin's Press).
A good example of the pluralist position, detailing the case of the 1991 Kurdish crisis and arguing media had a powerful impact upon public opinion and foreign policy.



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