

## **Mass Media and International Relations: The “CNN Effect” and the role of the Mass Media in foreign policy formulation**

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### **Introduction**

In the modern theories in the science of International Relations, the traditional pillar of the school of Realism that considered the state as the only actor in the international scene, actor who took every decision in a monolithic and rational way, taking into consideration only the national interest, has now been rejected. The metaphor of the “black box”, indicative of this monolithic way of operation and the rejection of every non-state, but also intra-state and out-of-state actor, even if it was valid once, has definitely been weakened by the events of the post-cold war era, and especially with the advent of globalization. New parameters have been inserted in the process of foreign policy formulation and politicians (and all those responsible for a country’s foreign policy) have to take them into consideration.

These parameters can be divided into internal and external. The main external ones are the structure and function of the international system, as well as of the regional, in which the country operates. Other external parameters are inter-state relations and international and regional alliances.

Internal parameters include “the personality of leaders and their main staff officers, the economy and the structure of the economy of a state, the political system, political parties, ideological directions of a regime, eurythmia in the functioning of institutions, **the Press and Mass Media in general**, public opinion, social classes and military strength or weakness of a state” (Christodoulidis, 2004:12, emphasis added).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence of the Media factor in the formulation of foreign policy, to present the main theories on whether the Media guide governments or the other way around and to show which roles they can take up in the matters of foreign policy. At the same time, the commonly over-simplified character of media-related theories will be

shown. Finally, a reference will be made in the role of the Media as agenda-setters.

Older research around the Media thought of them as a simple channel for transmitting messages. More modern researches however, have shown that their role is much more complicated and not limited to feeding with inputs the system of decision-making. In reality, they form the general context in which decisions are formulated, as well as the output environment, in which the decisions of leaders end up (Naveh, 2002:2). More specifically, as inputs, they form reality, which becomes the basis for the leaders' decisions, while, as the environment of outputs, they are the receivers of government efforts to influence them with their decisions.

It is a general fact that Media play an extremely important role in the practice of a state's foreign policy, primarily by shaping the public opinion with the way they cover facts. Since the public opinion elects governments (at least in democratic regimes), leaders and government officials responsible for the practice of foreign policy, are directly interested in the way their actions are presented in the public opinion, not exclusively the public opinion of their country. Not only of their country, because negative Media coverage can result in protests from other countries and create a negative climate between their relations. For example "...if in the American press appear reports damaging for Israeli interests, then there is an issue between Israel and the USA" (Christodoulidis, 2004:14), This is a reason those in office are interested in maintaining a good relationship with the representatives and owners of the Mass Media, so as to be able to further their positions to the public opinion. After the end of the Cold War and the journalists' release from the bipolar world of the East-West, there followed a very large number of stories and opinion articles especially critical to the foreign policy of the governments. This change created the need to interpret the consequences this critical coverage had in the foreign policy practice of the states.

But in what extent can the Media shape foreign policy? Can they simple pressure towards in a direction with uncertain results, or do they have the possibility to substitute those officially responsible for the formulation of foreign policy? Do they simply present the opinions of the elites? Or is their role maybe too complicated to be put in strict models?

### The “CNN Effect”

The term “CNN effect” first appeared during the Gulf War in 1991 and has since taken different meanings. It has been used by psychologists, economic analysts and business executives, with different content each time. It has, to a great extent, occupied scientists, while the discussion around the phenomenon involves those responsible for forming foreign policy, academics and journalists, mainly regarding the degree in which the phenomenon appears valid. Its more enthusiastic supporters have reached the point where they refer to “telediplomacy” and “mediapolitik” (Gilboa, 2005:328).

From the discussion around the “CNN effect” occur different roles it can play, always under conditions.

1. The phenomenon creates the need for immediate response, without having always considered all the possible choices
2. The need is created for someone to face the efforts of television (and other Media, too, but it is the image that is more powerful) to define the national interest
3. Through the CNN direct communication between leaders is possible, circumventing the traditional diplomatic channels
4. It can be an obstruction to the desired goals of a certain policy
5. Putting an issue in the political agenda (agenda-setting)

Despite the existence of these aspects of the phenomenon, there are more modest opinions, according to which the “CNN effect” can maybe apply pressure to those forming foreign policy, but it cannot force them into action. Those disagreeing with the “CNN effect” (a part of those forming foreign policy, journalists and academics) mainly focus in the 5<sup>th</sup> aspect, supporting that, what the Media do, is drawing the attention of the international public opinion to a crisis, not being able at the same time to dictate the political decisions that have to be taken to resolve the crisis. Some go to the other extreme, supporting that the Media function as a tool of politicians wishing to transmit a message<sup>2</sup>.

The only points upon all sides agree are aspects 2 (the acceleration of the decision-making process) and 4 (an effect on the practice of foreign policy by broadcasting images undermining the official government positions and goals). The

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the different vies on “CNN effect”, see Gilboa, *ibid.*

Media – Decision-making system on foreign policy nexus is extremely complicated to be included in a model as rigid as the “CNN effect”.

Gilboa tries to categorize the different roles emerging for the “CNN effect, so as to criticize each one separately and examine its degree of validity. He believes that the “CNN effect” can function as :

- Controlling actor
- Constraining actor
- Intervening actor
- Instrumental actor

### **Controlling actor**

Controlling actor, in a nutshell, refers to the dominant role of the Media in the formulation of policy for matters of defence and foreign policy and “Gilboa, “Global Communication and Foreign Policy”, *Journal of Communication*, December 2002, International Communication Association p. 734”. Research on this aspect of the “CNN effect” has resulted in conflicting results. Gilboa mentions examples where Media influence has been verified (Shaw, Cohen), but also cases where coverage and pressure did not lead to decision-making (Gowing), as well as cases where Media coverage came as the result of the work of policy-makers (Livingston and Eachus)<sup>3</sup>.

Very useful for estimating the range of the “CNN effect” is the study by Jacobsen (Jacobsen, 1996:205-215), where he analyses different cases of studies of humanitarian and peace-keeping missions and examines whether certain factors were present in each mission and to what extent. Through these cases, he concludes on the importance of each factor in the mobilization of the international community. The factors the research takes into consideration are legitimation and international support (in other words, the existence of a humanitarian crisis and violation of international law), domestic support, the role of the media (we could call that “CNN effect”), the role of the national interest (whether it exists or not in each case) and the chances of success, as perceived by policy-makers (feasibility, in Jacobsen’s words).

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<sup>3</sup> These studies are referenced by Gilboa, 2002, p. 734

In short, Jacobsen concludes that the existence of the “CNN effect” is necessary, but not enough on its own to mobilize governments. “In all the conflicts studied, the CNN effect put the issue of intervention on the agenda but the decision whether or not to intervene was ultimately determined by the perceived chances of success” (Jacobsen, 1996:212). Depending on the existence or absence of national interest the role and importance of the media changes in these cases. When it is perceived that national interest is at stake, the role of the media is not so important, as the policy makers will mobilize by themselves, while in the cases where it is not believed that national interest is at stake, the function of the media is putting the issue on the agenda. After that, the importance, as a factor, of the perceived chances of success rises, leading to the positive or negative decision for intervention.

So, it is noted that the case for the role of the media as “controlling actor” on developments, as an equal or sometimes superior policy maker, is not easily verified. The media can substitute for the official policy makers, but only under certain conditions. These conditions were studied by Robinson (Robinson, 2001:523-544), who concluded that the media can play an active role in foreign policy formulation only there is dissent among the elites, regarding the issue at stake, while at the same time there is uncertainty for the policy that needs to be followed. Robinson observes that “When there exists elite dissensus with respect to an issue, there is the possibility that news media coverage might actually take sides in that elite debate by adopting the reference frames of one side of an elite debate” (Robinson, 2001:535). In other words, journalists express a side, consciously or not. Three possibilities exist for governments:

1. The possibility that the public opinion is influenced by the negative media coverage
2. Damage in the government’s image and credibility, caused by the negative publicity
3. Policy makers themselves may start having doubts about the suitability of existing government policy

From these, Robinson concludes that, the bigger the uncertainty around the policy that needs to be followed, the more vulnerable the political procedure becomes in negative coverage. Of course,

there are other factors that may exist at the same time and differentiate the consequences for policy dissent: the media can strengthen one side, thus enhancing its position, if the cause for dissent is differences among the executive. Moreover, they can lead to policy formulation, as an answer to the negative coverage, in an effort on the side of the government to show that events are not running ahead of it, if the cause of dissent is the lack of a formed policy. Finally, uncertainty in the policy that needs to be adopted makes policy makers more vulnerable to media influence, while at the same time shows that the government is not capable to answer effectively to journalists by using the relevant mechanisms at its disposal.

The final conclusion is that the media can function as a controlling actor only under very special circumstances. Their influence directly depends on the strength and decisiveness of each government, as well as by the existence of dissent among the elites that shape foreign policy.

### **Constraining actor**

The term “constraining actor” of the Mass Media, means the difficulty they can cause in the usual decision-making procedure, namely, mainly in the job of traditional bureaucratic functions. It is not implied that decision makers are forced to alter their policy, although they can alter their priorities (Gilboa, 2002:736). This role of the Media is directly linked to the rapid acceleration of communications and has as a result the substantial reduction in the importance of traditional ways of communication between states, namely diplomats, embassies and so on. Although the practices of discussions, of official and unofficial meetings are still used, the Media have now been added to the ways of contact between states and leaders. At the same time, a very important part of the diplomats’ job, which is gathering information about the country they are sent in, now takes place through the Media.

Although newspapers were always used as a means of information-gathering, the advent of television and direct and dramatic image has incredibly accelerated the procedure “Valuable information, observations and suggestions from overseas diplomatic and intelligence sources may no longer arrive in time to have the desired influence on decisions, and, when information does arrive in time, it can hardly compete with

dramatic televised images and ongoing reportage of crises and foreign policy issues” (Gilboa, 2002:736). The transmission of non secret messages between leaders (and of course to the public) through the Media has now become a frequent phenomenon. As an example, Gilboa mentions that at the time of the first Gulf War in 1991 the Foreign Secretary of the United States, James Baker, delivered his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein not through the American ambassador to Iraq, but through the CNN.

This acceleration in communication has as a result the “coercion” of policy makers to act spasmodically in urgent situations, without being able to have the necessary information to decide calmly in a crisis, which often demands very careful handling. The diplomats’ reports can no longer compete with the speed of the Media. There are cases where leaders finally make a decision to ease the pressure, instead of asking more time to study on the issue. Gilboa cites the example of a question-speech by CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour to President Bill Clinton concerning the crisis in Bosnia in May 1994

As a leader of the free world, as leader of the only superpower, why has it taken you, the United States, so long to articulate a policy in Bosnia? Why, in the absence of policy, have you allowed the U.S. and the West to be held hostage to those who do have a clear policy, the Bosnian Serbs? And do you not think the constant flip-flop of your administration on the issue of Bosnia sets a very dangerous precedent and would lead people such as Kim Il Sung or other strong people to take you less seriously than you would like to be taken?

The stunned Clinton responded “No, but speeches like that may make them take me less seriously than I’d like to be taken” (Gilboa, 2005:330).<sup>4</sup>

It can appear at first sight that journalists are trying to substitute political power in cases such as this one, but through a more careful examination, one can find that the only thing a question-speech like that does is pressuring policy makers into action. Indeed, Clinton resisted for a long time in Media pressure for intervention in Bosnia, weakening the hypothesis about the

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<sup>4</sup> The original text of Amanpour’s question can be found in Ricchiardi, S., “Over the Line”, *American Journalism Review* 18 (September), 25-30, 1996

Media functioning as a constraining actor. The Media in this case were applying pressure, trying to speed things up. As it is evident by the form of Amanpour's question, what she is firstly accuses President Clinton of, is the lack of a certain policy and not its wrong direction. Only vaguely can one assume that she wishes to lead US policy towards a certain direction. The effort by the journalist to accelerate the foreign policy formulation procedure is evident. It is maybe a classic expression of the Media functioning as a constraining actor.

We can safely conclude that, regardless of success or failure, the Media have managed to accelerate the decision-making procedure and pressure for an increasingly quicker response to issues that become increasingly more complicated and therefore demand careful study and estimation before a certain course of action is taken. This function is a point where all those studying the "CNN effect" agree, regardless of the degree in which they accept the existence of the phenomenon (Gilboa, 2005:336).

### **Intervening actor**

Intervening actor refers to the direct or indirect mediation of the Mass Media in crisis situations. This role is supposed to appear mainly in cases where there is no communication between the two involved sides due to official policy. One form it can take is interviews of leaders not accessible to diplomats, who are constrained by their country's position. There is a part of scholars<sup>5</sup>, who support that journalists interviewing these leaders are essentially conducting diplomacy. But there is also the case that such an interview is nothing more than a simple interview. In order to be assumed that the journalist is indeed conducting diplomacy, he would have to present his or her country's positions or suggest solutions for solving the issue between the two sides.

The role of the Media in these cases cannot of course replace the traditional channels of negotiation. No matter what a journalist does, he cannot sign an official agreement between the two sides or be supposed to represent the official interests of his country. Of course, exactly that helps him to achieve a discussion with the other side. What he can essentially do, is the facilitation of the beginning of the discussion procedure by locating the

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<sup>5</sup> Gilboa mentions Geyer and Newsom in (Gilboa, 2002:738)

points of agreement, on which the beginning of negotiations will be based (the so-called pre-negotiation stage). It essentially what refers to in the literature as track two diplomacy or alternative dispute settlement, which is “the unofficial diplomacy of non-state institutions, which is usually helpful in the pre-negotiation stage” (Heraklides, 2005:273).

From the side of the journalist, this creates a danger for him: how can a news story be considered unbiased, when the journalist is seeking the success of the diplomatic initiatives he has, directly or indirectly helped commence? Is this a danger for traditional journalism, or maybe the beginning of a new role, the one of journalism that will put forward peace and negotiation? This is an aspect and prospect of journalism that maybe needs to be studied more extensively.

### **Instrumental actor**

The role of the Media as instruments refers to their use by leaders as “a significant instrument to advance negotiation and to mobilize support for agreements” (Gilboa, 2002:741). This practice includes, apart from official statements, selective leaks, press conferences, events aimed to attract members of the press etc. In recent years, the tendency to use the media, instead of official diplomatic channels is observed, in an effort to change the image of a state or to show that something has changed in mutual relations. The logic behind this action is very simple: the Media attract an audience incomparably bigger compared to a diplomatic telegraph, which will occupy the elite of a state and receive limited media coverage, instead of, for example, a leader’s interview in a channel of international range.

This use of the Media by politicians leads to worries concerning efforts to manipulate them. Chomsky and Herman’s theory of the use of the Media as tools to “manufacture consent” is indicative. Although there are differences regarding the theory of “manufacturing consent”, in short, it can be said that this theoretical model supports that the Media tend to express the opinions of the elites (political, economic and others) and, as a result, it can be concluded that in no way can they affect foreign policy formulation, since they essentially present the opinions of

policy makers<sup>6</sup>. The dependence of journalists on official sources when covering a story reinforces this position, although it is possible for the journalist to criticize the official positions. The fact that he is based on them does not necessarily mean that he transmits them without any critical thought or that he supports them.

Other problems caused by the function of the Media as instrumental actor is the possible failure of events organized to attract Media coverage and the saturation the extensive use of this practice can cause. Also, in this way, the prospect of the time of an event, its history and future can be lost, something that is already evident in modern journalism. This happens not only in the interior of a country, but also due to the important power of American global news networks, which, not necessarily because they intent to, can bring to the rest of the world the American views on world affairs (Sofokleous, 2004:45).

These theories cannot of course be absolute, they are not always valid. They form, nevertheless, a negative aspect of the instrumental actor of the Media as a means to mobilize the supports of citizens for the adoption of a certain policy.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that there are many different opinions, views, theories and models concerning the role of the media in state foreign policy formulation. The results of Media coverage of an event can vary: putting the subject in the government agenda, approaching the other side and preparing the ground for negotiations, direct influence to leaders and guidance towards certain political choices, acceleration of foreign policy formulation procedures and communication between sides, use of the Media by governments to promote certain choices to public opinion. All those functions are valid, but only under certain circumstances. Who is, in the bottom line, in control? Are the Media guiding politicians, or is it the other way around? The answer is that there is a relation between Media and governments, with each side trying to “pull” the other.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information and references on the “Manufacturing Consent” theory, as well as the differences on the subject between scholars, see Robinson, 2001:525-530

Depending on who has the power, the other one is forced to be guided.

But the primary factor is the political power, the leadership. Only if it has no clearly defined positions, do the Media get the chance to fill the power vacuum by presenting their own opinions. In the case of government certainty, the Media are limited to applying pressure on governments. They can simply put an issue on the agenda, they cannot enforce certain actions. Agenda-setting is an unquestionable function for the Media in the post-Cold War era.

The second unquestionable change the Media have brought upon is the overall acceleration of foreign policy formulation procedures and direct response to crises. Time becomes a luxury that can be proved fatal for decision makers, if they take time to act, but also if they react spasmodically to a complicated issue.

Another conclusion that can be drawn by the discussion on the role of the Media in foreign policy formulation is the complex nature of the matter. It is extremely hard, if not impossible, for someone to reach a theoretical model covering all the cases, with universal validity. A very good effort in this direction is the model created by Robinson, which recognizes the complex nature of the problem and covers more cases, compared to over-simplistic theories, such as the “manufacturing consent” theory or the “CNN effect”. But even this model cannot include all cases that appear and will continue to appear.

Despite the inability to reach a universally accepted theory, all these models help to better understand the role of the Media in a globalised world. Moreover, they open for exploration new, very interesting fields, such as the role of journalism in peace building. This possible new function for a type of journalism that takes an active stance against the problems of today has to be thoroughly studied and developed, in order to assess its potential benefits for world affairs.

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