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Philip Seib

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# Effects of Real-Time News Coverage on Foreign Policy

by *Philip Seib*

Philip Seib is Lucius W. Nieman Professor of Journalism at Marquette University.

## INTRODUCTION

With its intrinsic urgency and often emotional content, real-time news coverage can compress the amount of time governments have for responding to a sudden crisis or to new developments in a foreign policy matter. The effects of this compression are debatable. One school of thought holds that news coverage generally can drive policy-making. On the other hand, the argument can be made that the impact of news coverage is overrated, and that competent policy makers resist news-generated pressures.

The effects of live news coverage are related to its content. Live reporting - on television, radio, and, increasingly, the Internet - may lack context, detail and even accuracy. Nevertheless, such coverage, particularly when it includes graphic detail and emotive reporting, can capture the public's attention and affect public opinion.

This article examines several instances in which coverage has affected policy and discusses issues that policy makers should consider as real-time coverage becomes more common. It also addresses the obligations of news organizations that provide this coverage. Important systemic issues are at stake in the evolving interplay between press and policy. George F. Kennan, after watching live coverage of American troops going ashore in Somalia in 1993, wrote, "If American policy from here on out, particularly policy involving the uses of our armed forces abroad, is to be controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry, then there is no place not only for myself, but for what have traditionally been regarded as the responsible deliberative organs of our government."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the dynamic tension between the news business and the business of government, a principal thesis of this article is that the impact of real-time coverage is inversely proportional to the solidity of government policy. News coverage (real-time or otherwise) has greater effect on poorly formed, overly pliable policy and policy makers. It has less influence on well-designed, thoroughly thought-through policy and those who are responsible for it. That should not be surprising, but while some policy makers operate accordingly, others do not.

## Prime Time War

As seen through the television camera's night-vision lens, downtown Baghdad was drenched in a surreal yellow-green glow. For much of the time all was still, with an automobile's headlights occasionally sliding across the screen. Periodically, the night became alive with flashes: small ones dotting the sky; then a larger one - like a torch - moving steadily across the horizon; then a huge burst of light. The shells and bombs

crackled and boomed. On-scene reporters gasped and tried to steady their voices. It was quite a show.

This was mid-December 1998, as the United States and Great Britain launched four days of air strikes against Iraq. Live coverage of combat, such a novelty during the 1991 Gulf War, now was smoothly integrated into the flow of television news.

In this instance, the attack on Iraq provided extra drama as counterpoint to impeachment proceedings under way in the US House of Representatives. On Saturday, 19 December as debate proceeded prior to the impeachment vote, the television audience could watch both the House chamber and Baghdad on split screen. It was an impressive, if not particularly meaningful, electronic collage.

For its part, the Clinton administration seemed to have adjusted well to the requisites of prime time war. White House press secretary Joe Lockhart timed his official announcement about the air strikes to coincide with network television reports from Baghdad about the attack. The Pentagon casually let journalists know when a wave of missiles was launched, despite the fact that the audience for CNN and other networks quite likely included members of Saddam Hussein's government.

Hanging over the bombing was a political question: Did President Clinton order the attack as a way to rally public support and impede the impeachment process? Did the White House hope that a dose of "living-room war" - engrossing but safely remote violence - would give a final boost to anti-impeachment poll numbers? The administration forcefully denied all such allegations but could not dispel them. This is one of the most recent cases illustrating a link between news coverage and public policy. Although it is impossible to determine Clinton's true intent concerning the timing of the attacks and impeachment, any president knows that televised images of war - particularly when they are part of real-time coverage - will capture the public's attention and may well stimulate a rally 'round the flag response.

As the 1991 Gulf War illustrated, live coverage has complex ramifications for policy makers and journalists. It removes the cushion of time and with it considerable flexibility. When the public is seeing events as they happen, policy makers may be pressed to respond rapidly. When news organizations provide real-time coverage, their journalists must similarly keep pace with the action. Time for reflection - a precious commodity in both government and the news business - may be squeezed to the point of nonexistence.

The beginning of the Gulf War had been preceded by television-influenced diplomacy, with speed a principal characteristic of the coverage and with CNN, eager to be taken seriously, a major player. Even when direct communication between Iraqi and American officials broke down, CNN was available as a de facto diplomatic channel. Spokespersons for each side could talk to CNN and be relatively certain that their counterparts would get the message. On the day before the bombing began, CNN chairman Ted Turner stressed the network's importance in a telephone call to his Baghdad producer, Robert Wiener. "We're a global network," said Turner. "If there's a

chance for peace . . . it might come through us. Hell, both sides aren't talking to each other, but they're talking to CNN. We have a major responsibility."<sup>2</sup>

Not only politicians were watching CNN. When CNN anchor Bernard Shaw reported from Baghdad, shortly before the 1991 air war began, that an Iraqi official had expressed a willingness to discuss all issues, the American stock market soared. This response was in part a product of the ripple effect a story can have. A writer for the Dow Jones wire ascribed more importance to the CNN report than was appropriate and the story was moved as a bulletin. The combination of the CNN story and the Dow Jones report gave the market a shove. Shaw immediately went back on the air to clarify his original story, and angrily told his producer, "I can't be responsible for what people want to believe."<sup>3</sup>

In this instance, Bush administration policy makers reacted far more cautiously to the report than some members of the public did. Nevertheless, what proved to be a relatively inconsequential story roiled the waters. For the Dow Jones wire and for stock market traders, speed was all important in responding to the CNN story. Reflection - asking, "What does this really mean?" - could be set aside for later.

The Iraqis also were paying attention to CNN. When the network broadcast a story from Atlanta referring to Iraq's National Assembly as "Saddam Hussein's rubber-stamp parliament," an Iraqi information officer called the CNN Baghdad producer to protest. The producer immediately relayed the complaint to Atlanta (where the editor agreed that the "rubber-stamp" designation was a cliché, even if accurate).<sup>4</sup>

Officials in Washington used television to send messages to Baghdad. After the war, Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly, who conducted Pentagon news briefings, said: "Every single time I mentioned the use of chemical weapons in a press briefing, I would look into the camera and say, 'You must understand, any commander who uses chemical weapons is going to be held accountable for his actions.' I knew they watched CNN in Iraq, and I wanted those guys to hear that."<sup>5</sup> In such cases, technology was helping to shape the content and impact of the message. A few years before, using the news media as a diplomatic messenger might have meant leaking information to the New York Times and then gauging reaction as policy makers mulled over the story that ran the next day. Now, hours have become minutes, and policy makers may find themselves electronically face to face. This process has been likened to "a 'diplomatic ping-pong match,' with adversaries and allies rapidly serving and returning messages" through CNN or other news organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Once the air war began in January 1991, CNN brought its viewers extensive live coverage from what CNN reporter John Holliman said was "like the center of hell."<sup>7</sup> The upstart network dominated early coverage of the war partly because its planners had provided its Baghdad staff with the technical tools needed to circumvent Iraqi-controlled equipment. CNN also may have received preferential treatment because the Iraqi government wanted to have a way to get its own messages to the rest of the world quickly. This use of media as messenger is an important element in the larger relationship between press and government. For the first two weeks of the war, CNN broadcast its

audio live. The Iraqis had allowed CNN to use a "four-wire" satellite telephone that did not depend on local switching connections. This enabled CNN's Baghdad crew to stay on the air for 16 hours when the bombing began. Their competitors were cut off after just a few minutes.

At the end of January, with the permission of Saddam Hussein's government, CNN began using its own flyaway (portable by truck) satellite uplink, allowing it to broadcast live pictures. Local American affiliates of the big three networks frequently switched over to CNN when their own networks lagged. As the supplier of news to more than 100 countries, CNN was the world's primary source of televised war coverage.

In striking contrast to the Vietnam War, the Gulf War saw significant censorship measures imposed by the American government. This was due largely to the belief within the Bush administration that news coverage of the fighting in Vietnam had undermined Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, a debatable point and more about political than security matters. But the censorship also was seen as necessary at the White House and Pentagon because of the new realities of live coverage. It would be intolerable, for example, for a correspondent to do a live report with a column of American tanks in the background and say, "The push toward Kuwait has just begun." Given the broad audience, including Iraqi officials, for live television news, this kind of report could pose a genuine threat to the security of American forces. News organizations could argue that they were perfectly capable of self-censorship in such instances, but the Bush administration was determined to set the rules.

Some of the coverage was ragged enough to illustrate the administration's point. Despite the censorship, reporters still found plenty to discuss, but sometimes the quest for drama overwhelmed thoughtful news judgment, and the emphasis on speed superseded fact checking. Lawrence Grossman, a former president of NBC News, said that television viewers experienced "the illusion of news" because "the on-the-scene cameras and live satellite pictures at times served to mask reality rather than shed light on what was happening." He added, "Rumors, gossip, speculation, hearsay and unchecked claims were televised live, without verification, without sources, without editing, while we watched newsmen scrambling for gas masks and reacting to missile alerts."<sup>8</sup> Journalist Johanna Neuman wrote that "viewers could not so much see war as they could observe news-gathering in the war zone."<sup>9</sup>

The potential effect of journalism makes its flaws more important. Even Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney said that in the days preceding the war he was getting much of his information about goings on in the Gulf region from CNN. Reportorial lapses in such circumstances thus are not merely fuel for future academic debates about journalistic responsibility; they can have immediate impact if policy makers rely on them. For their part, the policy makers should not overly depend on news accounts without their being corroborated. For example, soon after the air war began, CNN reported that the Iraqi Air Force and the Republican Guard (reputedly the best Iraqi troops) had been "decimated" and their missile launchers knocked out. It simply was not so. General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of allied forces, later said that he had "turned the TV off in the

headquarters very early on because the reporting was so inaccurate I did not want my people to get confused."<sup>10</sup>

Live coverage of Iraq's Scud missile attacks on Israel and Saudi Arabia sometimes provided examples of speed-induced problems. Lawrence Grossman said of this: "In their impatience to get on the air live rather than wait to find out what was going on, television reporters wondered aloud on-screen about what they were seeing and what was happening. No longer did they perform as reporters trying to filter out true information from false. Instead, they were merely sideline observers, as ill-informed as the rest of us. Was it the sound of 'thunder' or a 'lethal rocket attack' outside? Was it the odor of 'nerve gas' or 'conventional explosives' that was seeping into the TV studio in Tel Aviv? (It turned out to be bus exhaust.)"<sup>11</sup>

The inconsistent mix of timely, accurate journalism and hurried, misleading reports is something that policy makers must factor into their calculations about the situation being covered and about public opinion. As a news story, an event such as the Gulf War will attract a massive audience - much the same audience that a president needs to be supportive of his policy. This means that government officials will try to direct and sometimes correct coverage as the need arises, promoting their version of events with the same emphasis on speed that drives electronic journalism. For one thing, government can take advantage of the expanding appetite for information that expanding coverage produces. Journalist Warren Strobel has noted that "journalists rely overwhelmingly on official sources for reporting the news, and this reliance is even greater with regard to national security matters."<sup>12</sup> A good example of this during the Gulf War was networks', especially CNN's, reliance on Pentagon briefings. Assertions by military officials may or may not have been totally reliable, but at least they filled air time. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon found that "in our analysis of network news reports on the Gulf, more than 50 percent of all reports examined emanated directly from official spokespersons."<sup>13</sup> With more real-time pressure on news organizations, such reliance is likely to continue.

One danger of live coverage is the tendency to put more value on quantity and immediacy than on quality. Patrick O'Heffernan observed that the Pentagon designed a successful strategy to feed news organizations' appetites for more and more material. The menu included video of smart-bomb strikes and Patriot missiles, and details - no matter how trivial - about the troops, their equipment, their home towns, and on and on. He noted that "media-sophisticated elites can redirect media attention away from unpleasantness," and offer lots of audience-friendly public relations fare.<sup>14</sup> This dependence on government-supplied fodder makes for a more compliant press corps. In *Second Front*, John MacArthur presented a thorough indictment of American news organizations' failure to fight the censorship imposed by the Bush administration. According to MacArthur, when the war began "the media were tied up in the knots of their own collusion with the government."<sup>15</sup> As Robert Entman and Benjamin Page noted, "reporting that circulates information and opinion at odds with the administration is vital to the possibility of democracy in foreign policy. Such coverage offers the potential for the public to assess administration policy critically and to participate in genuine policy deliberation."<sup>16</sup>

Government can sometimes wield considerable influence in shaping coverage of its actions. What it cannot afford to do, however, is underestimate the potential impact of live reporting of a war or similar foreign policy event. For both journalism and government, speed is important. Policy makers will find themselves at a political disadvantage if their efforts lag too far behind the pace set by news coverage. W. Lance Bennett has written that "the speed and portability of communications equipment, combined with a public fascination for live events coverage, forces officials to make calculations based on the daily publicity surrounding their actions. Such calculations might result in policies that are hasty, ill-conceived, damaging to future options, or tempered by domestic opinion rather than long-term state interests."<sup>17</sup>

It was precisely this kind of damage that the Bush administration sought to prevent by anticipating news media demands and potential effects on public opinion. The controls imposed on journalists during the Gulf War were the products of this anticipation, and were effective in achieving the administration's goals. Even the relative spontaneity of live coverage is susceptible to government-imposed limitations. In the Gulf War real-time reporting presented moments of drama but featured little that could not be anticipated by government officials. Therefore it had little impact on the course that Bush administration policy makers had carefully set.

### **Tiananmen Square**

In Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989, the students demonstrating in support of democratic reform were well aware of their international television audience, and had designed part of their strategy to influence American public opinion in particular. They waved signs written in English, quoting the likes of Patrick Henry. Their much-photographed "goddess of liberty" was modeled on the Statue of Liberty.

These Chinese protests represented the first time that a major breaking story was covered without interruption for a worldwide television audience. With the presence of CNN, the wire services now had live competition, so they no longer could unilaterally determine the pace at which information would be gathered, edited and reported.<sup>18</sup> CNN also intruded into the wire services' traditional role as the primary source for other news organizations.

The cumulative power of this coverage was particularly noteworthy. Walter Goodman wrote about this in the New York Times: "Beginning Saturday night and resuming Sunday morning, the networks had been running still photographs and televised scenes from China as they came in. This conveyed action, confusion, crisis. What exactly was going on was not always clear, but that in a way added to their immediacy. Taken together they told a strong story - soldiers, so many soldiers, moving in on the protestors; students pounding with sticks on an armored troop carrier; burned-out buses and stranded bicycles; the improvised barricades crushed by the military machines; recorded voices of witnesses describing beatings of students by the soldiers."<sup>19</sup>



The real-time policy-making loop was much in evidence in this case. When the Chinese government ordered a halt to live television transmissions, President Bush issued his formal protest - via CNN - about the events he had been witnessing . . . on CNN.<sup>20</sup> Both CNN and CBS broadcast their own shutdown being ordered by "official representatives of the Chinese Government, embarrassed and clearly aware that they were losing face on live television."<sup>21</sup> The Chinese government was, however, able to use some of the American networks' coverage for its own purposes. When NBC's Tom Brokaw interviewed government spokesman Yuan Mu, both NBC and China's state-run television carried it live. Yuan denied that government troops had massacred students. As he said this, NBC rolled videotape of the Tiananmen violence. On the Chinese broadcast, only the picture of Yuan appeared.<sup>22</sup> Chinese officials presumably thought their credibility with their own people would be enhanced if Yuan was seen being grilled by an American. They, of course, had no intention of showing the incriminating pictures from the square.

Responses to the Tiananmen brutality reflected policy makers' recognition that news coverage was affecting public opinion worldwide. American response to the crisis would be scrutinized in the context of the images from the square that television had delivered. Nevertheless, President Bush displayed considerable restraint in his response. He thought that "posturing" about human rights would do no good and would prove too costly in the long-term relations between the United States and China.<sup>23</sup> In terms of long-range geopolitical realities, Bush's position may have been sensible. But in the swirl of the politics of the moment, his response looked puny and opened him to criticism from those who had less direct responsibility for policy-making. Bush was aware of this. In a letter to Deng Xiaoping, Bush wrote: "As you know, the clamor for stronger action remains intense. I have resisted that clamor, making clear that I did not want to see destroyed this relationship that you and I have worked hard to build."<sup>24</sup> In his diary, Bush acknowledged the source of at least part of the clamor. He wrote: "I want to preserve the relationship, but I must also make clear that the U.S. cannot condone this kind of human rights brutality. You have the networks, led principally by Dan Rather, pitching everything with the highest emotional content and driving to . . . almost break relations with China, and that I don't want."<sup>25</sup>

Bush clearly felt media-generated pressures as the violence flared. He understood the public's reaction to the pictures and words arriving from Tiananmen, but he separated immediate political repercussions from longer-term policy commitments. His refusal to alter basic policy toward China is evidence that news coverage (real-time or otherwise) may be influential but not necessarily determinative.

## **Kosovo**

Just as the Gulf War was the first live television war, the 1999 conflict in Kosovo was the first Internet war. Although mainstream news organizations have their own Web sites for delivering information, the Web dramatically changes the news media's role as gatekeeper. Web users can create their own array of sources, moving with a click of the



mouse from the White House to the Serbian Ministry of Information, taking and believing whatever they want from each.

This is unmediated media: no filter, no editorial judgments, no commentary or context beyond what is offered on the screen by the unchallenged source. For some news consumers, this may be the intellectual freedom they have long desired: "No network anchor is telling us what to think; no editor is chopping out paragraphs that we might find interesting. We can gather news just as journalists do and decide for ourselves what to make of it." That approach certainly has appeal, but with limited ability to verify information picked up at various Web sites, the independent news gatherers are at the mercy of their sources. They might find plenty of "news," but discovering the truth amid that news can be difficult.

News organizations facilitate this independence by providing links from their own Web sites. CNN, for instance, offered a long list of war-related links, such as ones to the Kosovo Liberation Peace Movement, the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook (for CIA-compiled information about Serbia and Montenegro), a free-lance journalist's site with a road map of Kosovo, refugee agencies and a number of audio and video offerings. On its site, Radio Yugoslavia denounced NATO as "the fascists of the new world order," while NATO on its site offered video sequences of its recent airstrikes. CNN's list of Web links was preceded by a parenthetical note stating, "These sites are not endorsed by CNN Interactive." But for Web users moving from the principal site along the path of links, there might be no real sense of leaving the news organization's premises. The news organization faces the dilemma of providing access to other sites without implying approval or vouching for the accuracy of the linked sites.

In the world of cybernews, lines between fact and propaganda may blur. Journalists have new competition from the many voices the Internet amplifies. Similarly, government officials who explain policy must vie for attention with those using the Web as electronic soapbox. The Internet will educate with unpredictable effect. As online news coverage expands, the "CNN effect" becomes old hat; the Web has moved beyond all-news television because of the almost infinite variety of primary sites and related links it can feature. With their own sites, governments gain direct instant access to worldwide publics, giving policy makers more control in terms of shaping public opinion.

The 1999 fighting in the Balkans marked the arrival of online news as a force in covering, and thus in making, foreign policy. Coverage of the war in Kosovo also underscored the continuing significance of television's pictures as a factor in shaping public opinion. As was the case with the Iraqi Kurds nearly a decade before, the emotion-laden coverage of Kosovar refugees affected public perceptions of the conflict. As television reports increased in number and in their graphic content, opinion polls indicated a rise in support for the Clinton administration's and NATO's air war and their stated determination to enable the refugees to return home. William Shawcross wrote: "The appalling television images of vast armies of refugees being forced at gunpoint across European borders - crucial now as always to Western demands that 'something must be done' - meant that Western opinion coalesced around NATO. But it could be

fickle."<sup>26</sup> That fickleness requires watchfulness on the part of policy makers. If the pictures change or vanish, opinion might go with them. Also, there was in Kosovo as in other humanitarian crises a compassionate but simplistic veneer that became attached to policy. As Bernard Cohen has noted, "The human costs of war are eminently pictorial; the political imperatives and advantages are not."<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The effects of news coverage on foreign policy will vary according to the firmness or softness of the policy-making process. A solid, principled policy foundation is less likely to be shaken by news reports and resultant public demands that "Something must be done!"

Peter Jennings of ABC News has observed that "political leadership trumps good television every time. As influential as television can be, it is most influential in the absence of decisive political leadership."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, policy makers should brace themselves for a surge of emotion-driven public opinion in the wake of graphic news coverage of events such as war or other humanitarian disaster. This is especially true when the coverage is live, because these reports carry an additional drama of their own. Policy makers also should recognize that journalists are not infallible, and that their reports - no matter how well supported with convincing video - sometimes may be incomplete, lack nuance or simply be wrong.

For their part, news organizations should be sensitive to governments' reliance on their coverage when it serves as messenger, early warning system and general gatherer of information about goings on elsewhere. This reliance should lead to renewed commitment to thoroughness and accuracy on the part of those who deliver the news. As a corollary to this, journalists who present live reports should beware of being manipulated by those who want to affect policy via the news media. With so much emphasis on speed, the temptation may arise to shortchange corroboration of sources and other fact-checking procedures. That will inevitably lead to errors. News organizations also should develop plans for self-censorship when live coverage could compromise military security, improperly intrude on privacy (as in the case of live reports and pictures of casualties) or otherwise disrupt an essential governmental function. If journalists do not police themselves, governments will do it for them. This does not, however, mean that news organizations should willingly accede to governmental interference in legitimate news gathering and reporting. Regardless of policy-making issues, the public, not the government, remains the news media's primary client.

When considering the effects of news coverage on policy, it is important to remember that policy also affects coverage. Writing about the American decision to intervene in Somalia in 1992, Jonathan Mermin noted that this policy "is not at heart evidence of the power of television to move governments; it is evidence of the power of governments to move television."<sup>29</sup> Leaders in Congress and other supporters of the Somalia intervention had taken the lead, and news coverage followed. Much the same pattern could be seen in

Kosovo in 1999. Coverage reinforced, but did not bring about, the Clinton administration's interventionist policy.

Riding the ups and downs of media-inspired public opinion can be harrowing for even resolute policy makers. News coverage of foreign affairs often fails to establish context; episodic reporting may exclude a sense of the larger picture and long-term policy goals.<sup>30</sup> This version of reality - often as dramatic as it is imprecise - may be accepted by a public whose attention span is brief, but if those who govern are unprepared for this, it can wreak havoc with the consistency that should be part of sound policy-making.

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