

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

Written by Daniel Hardwick

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/07/is-it-correct-to-announce-the-decline-and-fall-of-the-cnn-effect/>

DANIEL HARDWICK, SEP 7 2011

Scholars such as Piers Robinson assert that government military intervention in humanitarian crises can occur because of the influence of television news media (Robinson 2002: 1). The premise is that governments feel compelled to act where they otherwise might not have done because TV images of human suffering beamed back to the living rooms of citizens in the western world create a groundswell of public opinion in favour of intervention, which the government can simply not ignore due to the negative implications it would have on its image and standing domestically. The mediatisation of conflicts, from the 1991 Gulf War onwards, has allowed news media to challenge the legitimacy and direction of policy (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007: 54). The term coined to describe this phenomenon is the 'CNN effect'. Although there are many definitions of the CNN effect, Robinson's is perhaps the most abundantly employed and will be used from here on in this essay. He defines the CNN effect as 'the ability of real-time communications technology, via the news media, to provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national events' (Robinson 2002: 2). Although the term is labelled after the American broadcasting network Cable News Network (CNN), it refers to the impact of the news media in general, and is not synonymous with CNN itself. Steven Livingston asserts that two factors have aided the increase in analysis given to the CNN effect: a lack of foundation and rationale in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War; and the advancement in technology that allows television networks to broadcast from anywhere on earth almost instantly. This has resulted in the US' foreign policy becoming what he describes as 'media-specified crisis management' (Livingston 1997: 1).

James Hoge has suggested that the CNN effect existed to a greater degree in the immediate period after the Cold War than it does today, adding that the CNN effect has more prevalence on humanitarian rather than security issues (Livingston 1997: 1-2). It is necessary to analyse instances of government military intervention in humanitarian crises and war since the date of its conception to ascertain whether the CNN effect is declining, whether it has increased, or whether it was not very prominent in the first place and has either stayed the same or remained an intangible variable that is difficult to isolate to measure its actual effect. Some, such as Royce Ammon argue that TV has the ability to drive foreign policy (Ammon 2001: 89), while others such as Nik Gowing are more sceptical of TV's perceived impact on foreign policy decisions and argue that government decisions are not swayed to a great degree by TV images (Gowing 1994: 12). Indeed, due to the fact that the CNN effect is usually asserted rather than demonstrated (Robinson 2002: 12), it can be argued that the CNN effect might not exist at all.

This essay will begin by briefly considering some of the different facets and conceptualisations that scholars have used to analyse and 'measure' the CNN effect; it will then argue that the CNN effect has not declined, but that its influence has always been marginal at most and that it is not more or less prevalent than at any time since the concept was formulated. Rather, it might be more accurate to announce the decline of the CNN effect as a concept, belying Hoge's contention. It is fanciful to suggest a cause-effect dichotomy between TV coverage and government policy and certainly arguments that suggest as much are overstating the case dramatically. Ultimately it is governments' strategic and geopolitical concerns that drive foreign policy, not the TV news media. As Seib states: 'There is a certain logic to the [CNN] theory, and it cheers journalists who like to think they are powerful, but there is a fundamental problem: It just ain't so, at least not as a straightforward cause and effect process' (Gilboa 2005: 36). Furthermore, it can be argued that governments skilfully use the media to their own advantage during humanitarian

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

Written by Daniel Hardwick

crises or war and that 'governments are even more likely to be driving media coverage than the other way round' (Gilboa 2005: 38). This will be analysed using the 1991 Kurdish crisis and the 1992-1993 Somalia crisis.

Different conceptualisations of the 'CNN effect'

To analyse whether the CNN effect is indeed declining, it is first necessary to consider some of the different conceptualisations and theories that have been formulated to measure any impact that it might have had. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky devised the manufacturing consent theory, which asserts that the media do not have any influence over government policy decisions, but rather that 'in countries where the levers of power are in the hands of state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite' (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 1). They base their theory in political economy, and outline five 'filters' that orientate the media in favour of government policy. These include: profit orientation; reliance on advertising; sourcing mass media news; flak from powerful institutions; and anti-communism (1988: 3-29). Although some of this theory is clearly outdated (e.g. anti-communism), it is not completely redundant, illustrated by the criticism levelled at the Conservative-led coalition government in the UK following Rupert Murdoch's takeover of BSkyB.^[1] This argument is supported to a degree by Bennett's indexing hypothesis, which asserts that the news media 'indexes' its coverage to mirror the different opinions that exist within government (Gilboa 2005: 32). What is important to note here is that the manufacturing consent model offers no space for any 'CNN effect', as the media is portrayed as a tool of the government. Robinson criticises the manufacturing consent model for its dearth of analysis of the effect of media on political outcomes and has devised a 'policy-interaction model, which 'offers a two-way understanding of media-state relations which advances media theory beyond a simple effect/non-effect dichotomy' (Robinson 2002: 37). He specifies different types of effects, either strong or weak, where the former might push policymakers down a certain route, while the latter 'might incline' policymakers to act through emotional attachment and contends that media can affect government policy when there is an absence of policy and leadership over an issue (2002: 39). This is reinforced by Ammon, whose telediplomacy paradigm argues that five conditions can force policy makers to succumb to media pressure: an emergency, a fast-breaking event, a leadership vacuum, media autonomy, and high visibility (Gilboa 2005: 36).

Steven Livingston also offers a more nuanced model of the CNN effect, arguing that it can manifest itself as a policy agenda setting agent, an impediment to governments achieving their aims, or an accelerant to policy decision making (Livingston 1997: 2). In addition, he argues that the media's effect will depend on the type of policy, for example conventional war (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007: 58). This assessment is supported by Wolfsfeld, who argues that 'the role of the news media varies over time and circumstance' (Cottle 2006: 22). Robinson and Livingston's conceptions assert that the CNN effect does not work as a simple cause and effect model, which raises questions as to how the role of television can provoke major responses from political elites if its exact influence is difficult to gauge. It is also important to note the impact 'framing' can have. Robinson defines distancing and proximity frames, which are used to create irrelevance or sympathy respectively for viewers (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007: 59). From this, it is clear that the CNN effect can present itself in a number of different ways, some of which may be difficult to measure. It can be argued that it is not correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect, but rather that its perceived effects are no clearer than they were when the concept was devised in 1991. Scholars' different conceptions of it indicate that it may exist only marginally due to the fact that scholars have tried to shoehorn the CNN effect into situations where it might have had an effect on government policy. However, when considering whether it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect, it is necessary to consider some humanitarian crises in which these perceived effects can demonstrate the media's ability or inability to influence government policy. I will analyse the 1991 Kurdish crisis and the 1992-1993 Somalia crisis to argue that the CNN effect has not declined, but that any influence it has been ascribed has been overstated.

The 'CNN effect' fallacy

Operation Provide Comfort, a humanitarian intervention in 1991 by the US and its allies to assist Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq and prevent Iraqi aggression against them after a failed rebellion by the Kurds, has been well documented by scholars and analysed as an event that showed news media coverage influencing government policy. It is a pertinent event to analyse as it occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, when the term 'CNN

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

Written by Daniel Hardwick

effect' was first coined. Ammon is unequivocal in his argument that global television was the key factor in persuading an initially reluctant President George H. Bush to intervene to assist the Kurds and prevent further genocide against them. (Ammon 2001: 104). This view is supported by Shaw, who asserts that Kurdish crisis was 'the only clear cut case, of all the conflicts in the early 1990s, in which media coverage compelled an intervention by the Western powers' (Miller 2002: 73). If this was the case, then it would suggest that it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect as media influence over government policy has not reached the same heights since. However, this analysis of the events displays a paucity of awareness of geopolitical interests in the region. Particularly, the role of Turkey was an important factor in the US' decision to intervene. Turkey had closed its borders to the Kurds in an effort to avoid a repeat of a similar situation in 1988 when thousands of Kurds fled to Turkey and could not be removed (Miller 2002: 99). Turkey's needs in 1991 were much more important than the refugees themselves, and that the passing of UN Resolution 688 to allow military assistance to the Kurds was the catalyst for intervention, indicating that it was the machinations of the UN that delayed the US' response, (Miller 2002: 99-100) not a leadership vacuum.

Therefore, it does not appear as if the media acted as an accelerant to policy or set the policy agenda, and it is certainly not a case of 'governments bowing to the power of real-time television on a foreign policy issue' (Gowing 1994: 6). Turkey, as a member of NATO, is an important ally of the US as illustrated by the US' deployment of nuclear weapons in Turkey during the Cold War, which had only been over for a year before the Kurdish crisis occurred. The UK's assistance during the operation also reflects its good relations with Turkey, as evidenced over the contentious Cyprus issue and its continual support of Turkey's entry to the European Union.[2] In addition, Ammon adds that a similar uprising in southern Iraq received no coverage and hence no US intervention, as there was a lack of global television, visibility and therefore media influence (Ammon 2001: 112). However, this further exemplifies the scarcity of any CNN effect as the US did not have the same geopolitical concerns of assuaging any allies in the south of the country. In addition, the Kurdish crisis did not display either a weak or strong CNN effect (Robinson 2002: 70). Robinson argues that empathy framing enabled the US to justify the reasons behind entering Iraq, suggesting a weak CNN effect. But the US' aims in the situation never changed (Miller 2002: 114), which indicates that the US would have intervened regardless of how the media framed the crisis. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the US needed to justify reasons for intervention. As Gowing states, 'the frequent government citations [sic] of 'public opinion' can be considered froth for most foreign policy issues' (Gowing 1994: 20), as highlighted by the British government's general ambivalence to the 2003 Iraq War protests in London. This has implications for whether it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect. If no CNN effect existed in the instance that Hoge and Shaw consider to be its zenith, then it can be argued that the CNN has either increased over time, or that it is a fallacy, with the media essentially having no effect on government policy.

When analysing whether it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect, it is necessary to consider a further example to observe whether similar patterns to that of the Kurdish crisis emerge, i.e. of no CNN effect. In late 1992, the US-led, UN sanctioned Unified Task Force was sent to Somalia to create a protected environment for conducting humanitarian operations, following the displacement and massacre of many civilians as a result of the 1991-1992 civil war in the country. Gowing argues that the oft used quote from John Shattuck that 'television got the US into Somalia and got the US out' stands up to examination' (Gowing 1994: 49), while Cohen, Mandelbaum and Roberts all assert that television pictures of the crisis initiated US military action (Mermin 1997: 385). However, the accelerant-impediment-policy agenda setting, strong-weak effects, or the leadership vacuum assertions did not affect government policy. Livingston and Eachus contend that US policymakers such as Andrew Nastios reframed the Somalia crisis to place it on the agenda, belying any media agenda setting through the 'CNN effect' (Livingston and Eachus 1995: 424). This also gives credence to the manufacturing consent model and the indexing hypothesis, which highlights how the media follow increased diplomatic activity, rather than vice versa. As a result, the CNN effect is not in existence here, as in the Kurdish crisis, showing how the CNN effect has not declined, but rather that it never gained any prominence to begin with. Furthermore, the apparent evidence of the CNN effect appeared to come as a result of the closeness of the TV reports to the policy change, which was not the case (Livingston and Eachus 1995: 427). This temporal aspect of the media coverage highlights an argument from Peter Jakobsen that 'the CNN debate and its focus on intervention and withdrawal misses the point, obscuring the indirect, invisible, and far greater impact that media coverage has on conflict management' (Jakobsen 2000: 132). He adds that media coverage of a particular event diverts attention and funds from cost-effective long-term solutions to undesirable short-term

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

Written by Daniel Hardwick

resolutions (1997: 140). The temporal aspect of the argument is supported, as President Bush decided to act in Somalia upon the receipt of a message from the US Ambassador to Kenya, Hempstone, warning of the potential for atrocities in Somalia. The receipt of this message far preceded the media's coverage of the event (Livingston and Eachus 1995: 425), highlighting how Jakobsen's argument that 'the direct impact of the media on Western conflict management is negligible because coverage is limited to a small number of conflicts in the violence phase', with no focus on the build up to the event or crisis (Jakobsen 2000: 140). Although crises shown on TV may receive more aid donation, the fact that media follow the government to the scene of the crises shows how the government, not the media, has set the agenda and that that the crises higher on the agenda would have likely received more aid donation with or without the media coverage.

The assertion that 'TV images of starving children played a role in the US decision to intervene militarily in Somalia' (Ammon 2001: 136) is inaccurate. There is no evidence for this cause-effect relationship; Miller's positioning hypothesis sums this up by contending that 'we be so concerned with indexical expressions and whether episodes are or are not clearly referenced? The short answer is so we can determine "uptake" and hence know for certain that a conversation is taking place – and we aren't simply imputing unity where none really exists' (Miller 2002: 62). This qualifies as a case of 'mistaking coverage for pressure' (Miller 2002: 183). When returning to the question of whether it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect, the examples of Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Restore Hope show how it is not correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect, or to imply as Hoge did that its perceived effects were much greater initially than subsequently. The situation instead appears to be one where media coverage, although being real-time and live, does not change government policy, with this being the case both when the term was coined and later. It does not have any more effect on humanitarian crises than on issues of security. Instead geopolitical goals drive government policy, and the media follows the government to the scene of the crisis. Returning to Robinson's statement that the CNN effect is usually asserted not demonstrated, it is not unreasonable to argue that with these various assertions, scholars have vastly overstated the impact of the 'CNN effect' and that it has not declined, but has had limited if any effect on government policy. What may be in decline is the concept of the CNN effect itself. As Hoskins and O'Loughlin argue, 'we must understand that the CNN phenomenon not as a question of who has control and influence in a historical situation, as though media-politics relations were about the interaction of defined actors with defend interests in a given context' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007: 55). If the CNN effect is examined in relation to its perceived influence, then it is not correct to announce its decline and fall, but rather it never had an effect from the beginning. If the concept itself is considered, then previous studies 'measuring' its 'effect' may be declining in relevance. To locate the exact genesis of the 'CNN effect' or to devise a falsifiable theory is an arduous task that will prove to be unsuccessful. Treating the CNN effect in this manner has 'obscured the phenomenon of interest' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2005: 73).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to discern whether it is correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect by first outlining some concepts that scholars have employed to measure the perceived effect that media coverage has on government policy, and then demonstrated through the 1991 Kurdish crisis and the 1992-1993 Somalia crisis that the CNN effect is not declining, but has been overstated since its initial conception, rendering James Hoge's assertion that the CNN effect had more influence in its infancy than in subsequent years a misleading notion.

References

Ammon, Royce J. *Global Television and the Shaping of World Politics: CNN, Telediplomacy and Foreign Policy*, California: McFarland & Company Inc. (2001).

BBC News, 'Murdoch BSkyB takeover decision defended by government', 3 March 2011 (Accessed 16 March 2011) [1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12640322>.

Cottle, Simon, *Mediatized Conflict*, Buckingham: Open University Press (2006).

Gilboa, Eytan, *The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations*, Political

Is it correct to announce the decline and fall of the CNN effect?

Written by Daniel Hardwick

Communication 22 (2005) 27-44.

Gowing, Nik, *Real Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?* Working Paper Series #1994-1 (Spring 1994).

Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, London: Vintage (1994).

Hoskins, Andrew and Ben O'Loughlin, *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2007).

Jakobsen, Peter, *Focus on the CNN Effect Misses the Point: The Real Media Impact on Conflict Management is Invisible and Indirect*, *Journal of Peace Research* 37:2 (2000) 131-143.

Livingston, Steven and Todd Eachus, *Humanitarian Crises and US Foreign Policy: Somalia and the CNN effect Reconsidered*, *Political Communication* 12 (1995) 413-429.

Livingston, Steven, *Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention*, Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, Research Paper R-18 (June 1997).

Mermin, Jonathan, *Television News and American Intervention in Somalia: The Myth of Media Driven Foreign Policy*, *Political Science Quarterly* 112:3 (Autumn 1997) 385-403.

Miller, Derek B. *Media Pressure on Foreign Policy: The Evolving Theoretical Framework*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2007).

Robinson, Piers, *The CNN Effect: The myth of news, foreign policy and intervention*, Abingdon: Routledge (2002).

Number 10.gov.uk, The Official Site of the Prime Minister's Office, PM Backs Turkey EU bid', 27 July 2010 (Accessed 16 March 2011) <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/07/pm-backs-turkeys-eu-bid-53838>.

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12640322>, 'Murdoch B SkyB takeover decision defended by government', 3 March 2011.

[2] <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/07/pm-backs-turkeys-eu-bid-53838>. 'PM Backs Turkey EU bid', 27 July 2010.

—

Written by: Daniel Hardwick
Written at: Royal Holloway University of London
Written for: Ben O'Loughlin
Date written: March 2011