News Coverage, the Expansion of Discourse, and Conflict

Philip Seib

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The universe of news cultures—comprising providers and consumers—has never been static. It perpetually evolves, sometimes in small increments, sometimes with dazzling leaps. We are now in one of the latter phases, with new technologies driving change at high speed. This alteration of the news universe is a mix of reshaping and expansion, and it has a profound effect on social and political life throughout much of the world. It has particular impact on how policy makers and the public evaluate and respond to conflict.

I. THE TRADITIONAL UNIVERSE OF NEWS CULTURES

The traditional news universe of a decade ago contained a finite array of conventional news media and other information providers:

- A limited number of dominant news organizations that delivered what they wanted when they wanted.
- Governments, with some direct access to the public, but relying primarily on influencing news content by controlling information flow, manipulating news outlets, and, in many countries, regulating the entire process.
- Special interest groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with limited access to the public and thus dependent on others to deliver their messages.

Information flow about conflict was constricted by the limited breadth of this news system. Governments were generally successful at providing cues about what the news media should cover, how they should approach a story, and what they should ignore.

These tactics were furthered by comprehensive controls, such as those used by the George H. W. Bush administration during the 1991 Gulf War, which included restrictions on reporters and efforts to flood all-news channels with briefings and footage provided by the Department of Defense. The *New York Times* reported that the goal of administration officials was "to manage the information flow in a way that supported the operation's political goals and avoided the perceived mistakes of Vietnam."[1]

This evolved into less overt, but still effective, means of influencing news content such as the Pentagon's embedded journalists system, which was inaugurated during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Embedding was motivated in part by the Pentagon's recognition that during the fighting in Afghanistan that began in 2001, the Taliban effectively used propaganda, in some instances inventing civilian

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1. Jason DeParle, *Long Series of Military Decisions Led to Gulf War News Censorship*, N.Y. TIMES, May 5, 1991, at A1.

casualties when there were none and generally portraying themselves as victims of U.S. aggression. American officials knew that Saddam Hussein's government was likely to use similar tactics and decided that having U.S. and international journalists on the scene would be the best way to counter such propaganda.[2]

Reporting about conflict was often late, sporadic, and simplistic, as evidenced during the early 1990s in much of the coverage of the Balkans and Rwanda. News consumers around the world had to settle for reporting that was often culturally skewed, usually tinted by a Western filter. When NGOs such as Doctors without Borders tried to alert the public to conflicts that most news organizations were failing to cover adequately, they found themselves frustratingly dependent on those same media to convey their message.[3]

A significant factor in shaping U.S. news coverage of conflict has been the increasing financial turmoil within the news business. Facing waves of new online and on-air information providers, many news organizations, desperate to retain their audiences, have decided to keep the rest of the world at a distance and shrink their international coverage in favor of "local, local, local." This trend has become increasingly pronounced, and the quality of much conflict coverage has suffered as a result. With a few notable exceptions, such as some news organizations' reporting from Darfur, most conflicts receive scant coverage unless the U.S. military is involved.

II. THE NEWS MEDIA: ON WHOSE TEAM?

The news media should theoretically serve as a neutral interlocutor, standing midway between government and public. In practice, however, many mainstream news organizations have positioned themselves cozily closer to the government than to the public. From their position in this closed circle of power, the traditional news media, in concert with the institutions and people they cover, have long determined what "news" is, while governments and various elites have, as Lance Bennett noted, "taken the task of news management as an increasingly important element of the policy process."[4]

Until recently, challenges to their hegemony were rare and ineffective. In the era when print and broadcast shared dominance, news consumers dutifully retrieved the newspaper from the driveway and tuned in to the evening newscast. When the *New York Times* proclaimed it was providing "all the news that's fit to print," or when Walter Cronkite announced, "And that's the way it is," few objections were raised. Choice was limited; it was a seller's market. If people had doubts about the accuracy of the information they received or wondered what stories were not being covered, they had little recourse.

On another level, as the twentieth century's large and small conflicts were fought and reported, academics developed and refined theories about agenda set-

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2. John Laurence, *Embedding: A Military View*, COLUM. JOURNALISM REV., Mar.-Apr. 2003, *available at* http://www.cjr.org/year/03/2/webspecial.

3. PHILIP SEIB, THE GLOBAL JOURNALIST: NEWS AND CONSCIENCE IN A WORLD OF CONFLICT 50-62, 68-77 (2002).

4. Lance Bennett, *The News About Foreign Policy*, *in* TAKEN BY STORM: THE MEDIA, PUBLIC OPINION, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE GULF WAR 12 (W. Lance Bennet & David Paletz eds., 1994).

ting, framing,[5] and indexing.[6] Much thoughtful work was done in these fields, but today, the technology-driven dynamics related to these matters have changed, and theorists have not kept pace. When discourse expands and new participants play significant roles in the news process, theories must be updated as the relationship between news providers and news consumers changes. Just like the news business, the academic world finds itself trying to catch up to new realities.

As the last century neared its close, a growing audience was watching conflict, but the reporting of conflict reflected only a limited number of perspectives. Discourse about conflict was still largely shaped within the implicit partnership of government and news media, and the public had few opportunities to expand the range of information sources on which it relied. That was about to change.

III. THE EXPANSION OF DISCOURSE

Within the past decade, dissemination of information has grown exponentially through two principal vehicles: satellite television and the Internet.

In terms of brand recognition, the best known international satellite television channel is Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based station that began operations in 1996. After several years of dominating its region, Al Jazeera now has plenty of competition—more than 200 Arab satellite channels are on the air. Elsewhere in the world, satellite news station Russia Today is broadcasting in English and Arabic, with Spanish soon to come; Euro News, based in France, and Germany's Deutsche Welle are delivering news by satellite in numerous languages; India is home to the world's largest array of news channels, with thirty on the air; Telesur in Latin America is a model for still more regional satellite channels. Add to these the traditional sources such as the BBC and CNN, and the chorus of news voices grows more diverse, more pervasive, and more influential.

The world of satellite television is growing, but Al Jazeera remains an intriguing paradigm. Within a few years of its startup, Al Jazeera established itself as the principal television channel featuring the Arab viewpoint of major events, particularly conflict. In 1998, when the United States and Britain bombed Iraq because Saddam Hussein was blocking the work of weapons inspectors, Al Jazeera was there. In 2000, during the Palestinian intifada, Al Jazeera's graphic coverage attracted a large audience throughout the Arab world. In 2001, when the United States attacked Afghanistan, the Taliban allowed Al Jazeera to remain after Western journalists were ordered to leave. By 2003 and the beginning of the Iraq war, Al Jazeera's success had encouraged rivals, such as Al Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV, to emphasize live, comprehensive coverage. For the first time, many Arabs did not have to rely on the BBC, CNN, or other outside news sources when a big story broke. They could instead find news presented from the Arab perspective.

One of Al Jazeera's strengths has been its introduction of energetic and sometimes contentious debate into an Arab news business that was previously known for its drab docility. The high production values of the channel's newscasts and the lively exchanges in its talk shows have expanded the news audience and

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5. "Framing" refers to how news organizations define an issue or event in their coverage; for example, the Abu Ghraib story could be framed as being about "torture" or "abuse" of prisoners.

6. *See infra* note 12 and accompanying text.

changed the nature of political discourse within the Arab public sphere. As Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed in 2003, Al Jazeera's talk shows, observed Marc Lynch, "were broadcast live and uncensored, offering an unmatchable window into Arab public political argumentation."[7] Overall, noted Bernard Lewis, television "brings to the peoples of the Middle East a previously unknown spectacle— that of lively and vigorous public disagreement and debate."[8]

The style and substance of Al Jazeera's programming has led its audience to become more engaged with the issues addressed in coverage. This is largely due to the channel's being trusted more than many of its competitors. Critics of Al Jazeera, particularly in the West, often challenge the channel's objectivity, but such criticism misses the essence of the channel's influence. Rather than judging the news product they receive according to standards prescribed by outsiders, most of Al Jazeera's viewers consider credibility to be a news provider's most important attribute, and these viewers want news that is gathered independently for Arabs by Arabs and that sees events through their eyes. In the new era of proliferating satellite television channels, state-controlled and Western broadcasters have found that they are at a significant competitive disadvantage in the Arab world because they are not as credible as Al Jazeera. Furthermore, the presentation of news on Al Jazeera reflects a passion that is well-suited for an audience that feels passionately about many of the issues and events that the channel covers.

During the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah, the Arabic channels, particularly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, provided more extensive coverage than was offered by other international channels. Their reports, which often featured graphic images of dead and wounded Lebanese civilians, affected the region's politics by stoking Arab anger toward Israel and the United States, and toward Arab governments that were slow to support Hizbollah. Al Jazeera's talk shows provided forums for public criticism of Arab leaders, and the overall coverage helped push countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan closer to Hizbollah's cause.[9]

Even more than satellite television, the Internet brings a whole new dimension to questions of credibility. Plenty of online news providers offer detailed, sophisticated content, with greater depth than is found in traditional print or broadcast sources. Beyond that, much of the news delivered on the Web— particularly the quasi-journalism of web logs (blogs)—constitutes a populist approach to information dissemination that affects larger media issues, including those related to coverage of conflict.

The enormity of the "blogosphere" and its rate of growth make it difficult to evaluate. In October 2005, Technorati, a Google-like search engine for blogs, was scanning 19 million blogs. By October 2006, the number had passed 56 million. Some blogs are written by government officials, journalists, soldiers, and academics and convey valuable information. Some are musings of people with time on their hands whose blogs expound on rumors, gossip, and conspiracy theories.

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7. MARC LYNCH, VOICES OF THE NEW ARAB PUBLIC 194 (2006).

8. Bernard Lewis, *Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, May-June 2005, at 46.

9. Ali Khalil, *Major Arab News Channels Tested in Lebanon War*, AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, August 9, 2006.

Many, however, provide an intriguing subtext to conventional news coverage. Blogs mentioning the Iraq war—which in summer 2006, numbered more than 1.25 million in a Technorati search—provided a look at how people were using news about the conflict and shaping their own opinions. Just as reading a newspaper's Letters to the Editor section can provide insights about public attitudes, so, too, does an exploration of blogs on a given topic have value. The results may not be as reliable as those from a properly constructed opinion poll, but they nevertheless are interesting as snapshots of what some people consider important.

Conflict-related blogs come from a variety of sources. Milblogging.com has more than 1,400 military blogs in its database (as of August 2006), many of which are written by soldiers in the field who are unhappy about most of the mainstream news coverage of combat operations, particularly in Iraq. During the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah, bloggers in Israel and Lebanon kept talking. On the Face, a blog written by an Israeli, asked, "Will this turn out to be the first time that residents of 'enemy' countries engaged in an ongoing conversation while missiles were falling?"[10]

Those responsible for making conflict-related policy should consider the effects of these new facets of security discourse. Blog-based conversation can become a significant undercurrent and may influence coverage by mainstream news media when the chorus of bloggers' voices becomes so loud that it attracts attention. If big news organizations are slow to pursue a story, such as the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, bloggers may highlight bits and pieces of the story until CBS, *The Washington Post,* or another major news organization takes notice, investigates, and reports to a larger audience. Bloggers tend to have less tolerance for conventional wisdom and less trust of government, and so are little affected by the relationships between policy makers and journalists that can influence the breadth and tone of coverage. But many bloggers are also less concerned than are professional journalists about commitments to accuracy and objectivity.

Despite such flaws, bloggers represent one of the most significant new facets of conflict-related discourse. They, along with other Internet-based communicators, are part of an unprecedentedly broad array of voices and viewpoints that have emerged within the past few years. Also important is the accessibility of the ideas these online denizens offer. Web sites and blogs are increasingly relied on by the general online public and by journalists and others who have learned that these voices—at least some of them—are worth listening to.

An even more powerful form of "citizen journalism" is the blog-like video to be found on YouTube. Harrowing images of ambushes and firefights in Iraq, provided by military personnel in the midst of combat, are among the ways that conflict is presented to the public in ways that once were within the exclusive purview of television networks. When YouTube and similar ventures gain larger audiences, as will certainly happen over time, governments and traditional news media will find their influence on conflict-related discourse further diminished (unless they determine how to compete more effectively with these new media). For now, the general public can find the new voices through independent Web

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10. Mike Spector, *Cry Bias and Let Slip the Blogs of War,* WALL ST. J., July 26, 2006; Sarah Ellison, *In the Midst of War, Bloggers Are Talking Across the Front Line,* WALL ST. J., July 28, 2006.

searches, from clearinghouse sites, and through news coverage that cites sources from the blogosphere.

Blogs make policy makers' jobs more complicated, because most blogs are usually not susceptible to cues and pressure from government sources. It is interesting to speculate about the effects bloggers' words and videos might have had on the anti-war movement during the Vietnam era and how they might increase the potency of a latter-day anti-war movement should American military involvement in Iraq and elsewhere drag on.

From an academic standpoint, the blogosphere is intriguing in terms of agenda setting. As blogs become more widely read, their influence may increase, affecting how the public aligns its issues priorities. How bloggers frame the stories they discuss also could have ripple effects. In addition to this being a fertile field for academics, mainstream journalists and policy makers alike should be paying attention to this intellectual competition.

IV. LOOKING AHEAD

Conflict-related discourse will be increasingly affected by "tangential media"—the proliferation of satellite television channels and the Internet-based flow of information emanating from Web sites and blogs—that have become de facto competitors of mainstream media.[11]

A primary distinction between tangential and mainstream media is that the former are less susceptible to top-down influence resulting from economic or political pressures. Being outside the established loop, as it were, these media are likewise outside the influence patterns of indexing—at least more distanced than traditional media organizations. Indexing, as defined by Lance Bennett, Jonathan Mermin, and others, refers to "journalism that lets the spectrum of debate in Washington determine the spectrum of debate in the news."[12] For much of the blogging community, Washington is not the center of the universe.

Another difference in tangential media's approach to news is the emphasis not on journalistic scoops (discovering new stories), but rather on turning a spotlight on stories that have received little attention in the mainstream news. Bloggers' approach to news tends to be that of a monitor, challenging accuracy and emphasis. In 2004, when CBS News, on its program *60 Minutes*, reported the controversy surrounding George W. Bush's military service, bloggers' questions about that story were principal factors in the unraveling of the CBS investigation and contributed to the demise of anchorman Dan Rather. Bloggers in the lower ranks of the U.S. military provide information that often differs considerably from Pentagon pronouncements. As the blogosphere expands, and as blogs receive more attention from the larger public and news organizations, this role—finding, magnifying, and challenging—will become more prominent.

The expanded universe of information providers has the potential to make the news process more democratic and populist, but unless influence is accompanied

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11. The term "tangential media" is subject to challenge by those who consider these new forms to be not tangential at all, but rather replacements for old-line sources.

12. JONATHAN MERMIN, DEBATING WAR AND PEACE: MEDIA COVERAGE OF U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE PORT-VIETNAM ERA 5 (1999).

by a sense of responsibility, all of this will occur in a "wild west" environment. Some bloggers and Web site proprietors already recognize the importance of accountability to their audiences, and some members of the online and satellite television communities understand that self-policing is essential. Otherwise, information anarchy might take hold as rumor and fantasy overwhelm accuracy. Fierce debate could be found on blogs addressing, for instance, the alleged murder of civilians by U.S. Marines in Haditha, Iraq. Blogs helped advance this story, although journalistic norms, such as corroboration of sources' information, were not always honored. Passion can obscure fact, and even if truth is not the first casualty in a given conflict, it is always vulnerable.

Policy makers cannot afford to be bystanders as this evolution of the information universe occurs. Strategies for dealing with satellite television must be designed and constantly refined. Bad ideas, such as the U.S. government's attempt to use its own satellite television channel, Al Hurra, to compete with Al Jazeera, should be abandoned in favor of carefully planned cooperation with Arab media and more forthright communication about the true effects of conflict. Governments' Web sites and blog presence must be sophisticated and pervasive. An example is DefendAmerica.mil, which features the U.S. government's views of the war on terrorism (but it is not a leading information source for the public).

Overall, a new balance of intellectual power is taking shape as evidenced by what may be called a "discourse cascade," in which information flows from conventional media to tangential media, to individual information consumers, and after the individuals digest it, their reactions cycle back to the providers.[13] This flow may spill over in various directions, but the cascade hypothesis might prove to be a useful tool in analyzing the structure and effects of new media discourse and its relationship to conflict.

When considering the relationship between communication and conflict, the expansion of discourse through new media is a critical element deserving careful attention from policy makers, journalists, academics, and the public. Longtime theories and principles should not be tossed aside, but they deserve to be scrutinized and updated to reflect the changes in the ways communication flows and informs.

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13. *See* ROBERT M. ENTMAN, PROJECTIONS OF POWER: FRAMING NEWS, PUBLIC OPINION, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY (2004).