

**MEDIA INFLUENCE, REALITY OR PERCEPTION: AN ANALYSIS OF PIER
ROBISON PUBLICATION “THE CNN EFFECT: CAN THE NEWS MEDIA DRIVE
FOREIGN POLICY?”**

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This review looked at Piers Robinson scholarly piece titled “The CNN effect: can the news media drive foreign policy?” In this study published in the British International Studies Association in 1999, Robinson sought to examine ‘The CNN effect,’ an allusion to the purported power of the news media and the influence it has on western governments in compelling them to intervene in humanitarian crises in other parts of the world.

Robinson did his examination of this term by looking at it side by side with another media and communication theory known as the “Manufacturing Consent” theory. Contrary to the CNN Effect theory assertion that the media makes the news and wields huge power and influence on government foreign policy, the proponents of the Manufacturing Consent hold a counter view which says that the news media are typically under the influence of government and its agencies and often times are shepherded into propagating government’s own agenda. To put this simply, Robinson set out in this study to assess the validity of the claim of media power and influence inherent in “The CNN Effect” in light of the “Manufacture of Consent” theory.

Robinson (1999) observed that, following the Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution and subsequent proliferation of media technologies beginning from the 1980s, news coverage has seen a great boost. Some of the early experiments of technology-aided news coverage Robinson noted came during events of the string of revolutions that swept across Eastern Europe which culminated in the collapse of Communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the mid-80s.

The experience of western audiences and the interest the coverage of these events generated spurred the media on in search for best ways to bring the news home in the most compelling ways possible. The period also coincided with the sudden emergence of a new

friendship between US media the political system, a development Robison linked to the abandonment of the anti-communist consensus.

The new and strange marriage between the media and the government system allowed for an easy narrowing of the scope of foreign policy deliberation. Suddenly, media reports were becoming the primary sources of government official policy positions and ideas. This development Robison said made observers to begin to ask questions about the extent to which the news media influences western intervention in humanitarian crises hence the coining of the “CNN Effect”.

What is the significance of Robinson’s analysis?

Robinson pointed out that claims of the power of the mass media to shape public opinion and influence the direction of government policies has not received any major scrutiny in the past. Nonetheless it continues to enjoy public opinion with “Manufacturing Consent” theory been the only concept offering a diverging opinion. This analysis therefore would bring to light a determination on the substance of the claims and to provide answers to the question “Does the media influence government foreign policies or it is the government that influences what the media reports?” A question that has been left by the two theories. Robison believed his study would be instrumental in advancing our understanding of the significance of news media in foreign policy in light of the more radical view of the “Manufacture Consent” theory which down plays the media potential.

Conceptual frame work

Robinson’s study is based off the theory of media framing. Framing theory is grounded in the perception that the media has the ability to not only bring attention and focus to an issue (set

agenda) but also it can help to position an issue in various ways intentionally to create meaning in relation to audience and lead the audience into drawing certain conclusions. This theory was first put forward by Erving Goffman in his foundational piece “Frame Analysis” published in 1986. The theory is one of the most popular and common analysis tool used by political, media and communication researchers.

Methodology, findings and conclusion

In this article Robinson did a systematic review of previous studies examining the effects of media on Western Governments response to humanitarian crises which were conducted by: Nik Gowing: Warren P. Strobel: Larry Minear: Scott Colin and Weiss G. Thomas.

He also examined Martin Shaw’s 1995 study which looked at Civil Society and Media in Global Crises and Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus study on “The effect of media in humanitarian intervention”. Both of the last two scholarly pieces are quantitative-based systematic analysis focused on case studies of humanitarian interventions and the role the media had in influencing government intervention decisions while the first three are interview-based assessments.

While his assessment of all three interview-based studies found that there were no strong cases of media influence in policy except for some casual relationships, the analysis of the case studies of humanitarian interventions did find that the media indeed largely influenced some of humanitarian intervention decisions examined especially in cases where the government lacked a clear policy based on which it could provide information and guide direction for media reportage.

In the interview-based studies Robinson found that the researchers had fundamental problems such as difficulties with precise measurement of the impact the media has on

government intervention. According to Robinson, these three researches nonetheless found some interesting but loose links between news media coverage and policy decisions which he dismissed as “less than convincing”(P.8). With regards to the case study analysis there were some solid evidence of policy decisions or interventions attributed to the role of the media especially in cases of lack of clear government agenda or presence of a conflicting agenda from government.

What this meant was that it is not whether or not the media is influential in the policy process but rather it is the case of “what is the role of government in a particular humanitarian situation?” As was found, whenever government has a solid agenda and demonstrates its legitimate power as the source of information and authority such policy largely becomes the touchline for the media. Therefore, the power of the news media seemed to manifest strongly in a policy vacuum or lack of policy certainty.

Drawing from the data, Robinson concluded that the long held perception of the power and influence of the media in policy making fails the test when it is conceptualized against the radical “Manufacturing Consent” theory (which operates on the question of who controls the media) and only shows its vitality in isolation or in the absence of government’s hand. What this reveals is that there an idea of a media policy interaction.

What lessons can we learn from here?

No doubt Robinson’s study has brought significant insight to one of the most popular debate in communication-the reality or otherwise perception of media influence in public policy. It is important to note as pointed out by Robinson himself that the next most relevant step after this study has established that Media influence in government foreign policy is less pronounced

than previously perceived should be for anyone to go out and try to understand how the media policy interaction discovered here looks like.

This step is more crucial than simply reducing the focus of the conclusion of Robinson analysis to the question “Between ‘The CNN Effect’ and the ‘Manufacture Consent theory’ which one can drive government policy in humanitarian interventions?” Whilst this question helps settle the long standing debate Robinson thinks it can potentially lead one to lose sight of the role of other factors including government’s direct involvement as well as other sources of resources in media reporting. These other factors could conversely be shaping government policy or intervention decisions. The media policy interaction conceptual frame also offers a theoretical basis for conducting a more rigorous analysis on both the “CNN Effect” and the “Manufacturing Consent” theories.

The results also contribute to further understanding of framing theory and the agenda setting theory. The analysis provides clarity that the media indeed has a huge role in holding government accountable, and depending on how well it plays that role in the framing of news, the media is capable of compelling duty bearers to respond appropriately.

If the media fails to use the appropriate pro-intervention frames in its reportage it is almost certain that will result in none response from government. The reverse will be true.

Another important lesson from this study is the understanding that wherever there is a clear government policy it shapes what and how the media reports on a disaster. This is useful in helping the media to report from a realist point of view instead of allowing the government position which sometimes can shadow the real issues on the ground to be the only source of information for journalists in news reporting.

Robinson (1999) also helps to establish that in times of emergency humanitarian situations such as natural disasters or strange disease outbreaks where there is usually no opportunity for government policy, media reporting has enormous potential for helping attract the needed government response.

Finally, it would be insightful to apply “The CNN Effect” in analyzing the impact of western media on government response in developing countries where governments have little resource, less control and maybe under the power and influence wielded by western news media because of their location.

Reference

Robinson, P. (1999). The CNN effect: Can the news media drive foreign policy? *Review of International Studies*, 25(2), 301–309.