
Foreign Policymaking in the Age of Television

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The discussion of the global news networks' effects on defense and foreign affairs policymaking has produced two oppositional arguments: news management and the CNN effect. "News management" refers to the government's control of information and manipulation of the media, meaning that the media primarily functions as a tool for policymakers. Conversely, commentators employ the "CNN effect" to describe television coverage, primarily of horrific humanitarian disasters, which forces policymakers to take actions they otherwise would not have, such as military intervention. This phenomenon enables the media to determine the national interest and removes the power of policymaking from appointed officials. Unfortunately, this binary focus has obscured the widely varied subtleties around and between these poles of analysis, deflecting attention from the actual effects of global news networks. Upon closer examination of decision-making, one finds that global media has effects that exist between these polar extremes, which are less obvious, but highly significant.

Policymakers acknowledge that 24-hour global news coverage influences policymaking. Former Secretary of State James Baker identified three effects: the need to respond quickly to events without sufficient time to consider options; the need to cope with television's attempts to determine the national

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interest; and, the use of global television for fast and direct communication with foreign leaders. According to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, global television coverage contributes to policymaking “because you know what’s going on and there is a real-time sense about things.” She noted, however, that “it makes you have to respond to events much faster than it might be prudent, because facts may come in incorrect, but you don’t have time to put them in context, so you respond just to a little nugget of fact, and when you learn the context later, things change.”¹

This article explores the negative effects that global television networks have on the policy process. These include: the creation of tight policymaking deadlines; media demands for immediate response to crises and events; the exclusion of experts and diplomats; diplomatic manipulations; the creation of high expectations; and partisan media. The article suggests several tools that policymakers can use to meet the challenges of global news coverage.

Effect 1: Forcing Snap Decisions. Scholars, officials, and journalists have expressed concern about the impact of global television coverage on the pace of policymaking. The rapid speed of broadcasting and transmission of information often manipulates and accelerates the policy process. Over the course of the 20th century, technology reduced the time needed to transmit information from weeks to minutes. Official U.S. responses to the construction and destruction of the Berlin Wall clearly demonstrate this time constraint. In 1961, President Kennedy had the luxury of waiting eight days before making the first official U.S. statement

on the construction of the Wall. In 1989, President Bush felt compelled to comment less than eight hours after the destruction of the Wall.

Historian Michael Beschloss argued that the speed of this coverage may force hurried responses based on intuition, rather than on careful deliberation, and that this may lead to dangerous policy mistakes.² He wondered whether or not Kennedy would have had the time to carefully consider options to resolve the Cuban missile crisis if he had been under the pressure of global television. Kennedy had thirteen days to deliberate and to negotiate an acceptable agreement with the Soviets. President Clinton’s press secretary, Dee Dee Myers argued, “If that happened now, Bill Clinton would have about 30 minutes, and [CNN reporter] Wolf Blitzer and everybody else would be standing out on the North Lawn of the White House demanding action, or saying ‘the president is indecisive.’ So I worry that the time allowed leaders in crisis to make good decisions is compressed. That’s a troubling development.”³ Veteran journalist Daniel Schorr agreed: “Think about the communication age we live in and the way nail-biting officials must make fateful decisions without time to think. And, if you are like me, you will worry a little bit when powerful people make snap decisions, trying to keep up with the information curve.”⁴

Political leaders thus face a serious dilemma: should they respond quickly at the risk of making a mistake, or should they take more time to deliver a better response at the expense of being seen as a confused or weak leader? Lloyd Cutler, counsel to President Carter, explained that if a president does not respond quickly to a crisis, the networks may report that his “advisers are divided, that

the president cannot make up his mind, or that while the president hesitates, his political opponents know exactly what to

of diplomacy: they represented their countries; they communicated their government's positions; they negotiated and

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do.”⁵ Leaders often tend to resolve this dilemma by providing some response rather than requesting additional time to think. Yet, an immediate response creates problems of its own, in that a statement on television becomes a policy commitment, which leaders may find difficult to reverse or even amend.

Network pressure for an immediate response is not, however, always automatic because it depends on the circumstances of the challenge or the threat. Despite the dramatic coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, the media pressure did not induce an immediate retaliation. In fact, President George W. Bush took the time necessary to develop an appropriate response. It is also difficult to clearly correlate good decisions with the length of time available for policy-making. Great leaders may make the right decision quickly and others may make wrong decisions even when they have weeks to deliberate. However, in most cases, the more time leaders have to collect information and to deliberate, the more likely they are to avoid making major mistakes.

Effect 2: The Exclusion of Diplomats and Experts. Traditionally, ambassadors and state representatives dominated several important areas

concluded agreements; they gathered information about the countries to which they were posted; and they recommended actions to policymakers at home. However, the communication and information revolutions have substantially eroded the diplomats' central position in all five areas.⁶ In many recent crises, global television coverage has replaced ambassadors and experts as the source of critical information and evaluation on what is happening in the world. As one U.S. official acknowledged, “diplomatic communications just can't keep up with CNN.”⁷ Richard Haass has also complained “he could see an event or speech live on CNN at 2:00 p.m., but he had to wait three hours or more before the CIA could deliver its own updated news and commentary to the NSC [National Security Council] office.”⁸ In response to these gaps, President Bush's press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, said that in many international crises, “we virtually cut out the State Department and the desk officers ... Their reports are still important, but they often don't get here in time for the basic decisions to be made.” Bush admitted during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis: “I learn more from CNN than I do from the CIA.”⁹

Sometimes, conventional diplomatic messages do not affect policymakers as strongly as televised images. Fitzwater recalled that during the violence in

Tiananmen Square they were getting reports and cables from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, “but they did not have the sting, the demand for a government response that the television pictures had.”¹⁰ Live coverage of world events, the dramatic appeal of pictures, and the pressure on leaders to quickly adopt policy to keep pace with the frenetic schedule of television programming, challenge the foreign affairs bureaucracy. They face this dilemma: how to effectively compete with real-time information provided on screen without compromising professional standards of analysis and recommendations. If foreign policy experts make a fast analysis based on incomplete information under severe time pressure, they might make bad policy recommendations. Conversely, if they take the necessary time to carefully verify and integrate information and ideas, and produce in-depth reliable reports and recommendations, these may be irrelevant if policymakers have to make immediate decisions.

Effect 3: Facilitating Diplomatic Manipulations. Global television has created new opportunities for worldwide propaganda, misinformation, and diplomatic manipulations. Leaders may make what is described as a significant statement which is broadcast live on global television, expecting that their statement will gather enough strength to undermine and confuse the plans of their opponents. However, this option is a double-edged sword that opponents can also use to advance their goals. During the Gulf War, just before the beginning of the ground assault, Saddam Hussein made a statement designed to create the impression that he was ready to accept the allied conditions

to end the war. Television anchors and reporters around the world quickly suggested that the war might be over.

Bush thought Hussein’s peace plan was false but was worried that the Iraqi leader might snatch “a victory from the jaws of certain defeat.”¹¹ Baker and Bush felt they had less than 30 minutes to dismiss the Iraqi deal or risk the disintegration of the coalition fighting Hussein. According to journalist Timothy McNulty, Bush told the officials he assembled to deal with this challenge, “We’ve got to get on the air fast to answer all these people who either don’t know what to do or want us to do something we don’t want to do.”¹² Bush wanted to convey his administration’s position to all twenty-six members of the international coalition confronting Iraq. Fitzwater said that the best way to transmit this information was through CNN because “all countries in the world had it and were watching it on a real-time basis.”¹³ In this particular case, both Hussein’s challenge and Bush’s response played on global television, but Bush was the one who correctly identified the challenge and effectively neutralized it.

Iraq later used a similar tactic more successfully in order to undermine U.S. policy. On Saturday, November 14, 1998, Clinton authorized a military attack on Iraq in response to Iraq’s defiance of UN resolutions on the inspection and dismantling of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. U.S. bombers were already in the air when CNN broadcast a live statement from an Iraqi official who said his government had “positively” responded to an urgent letter from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, urging Hussein to readmit the weapons inspectors. The Iraqi official added that the Iraqi government had faxed a commitment to that effect to the UN.¹⁴ A

NSC official watching this report immediately called National Security Advisor Samuel Berger, who then informed Clinton of the broadcast. While monitoring CNN for details, Clinton consulted with his senior advisors and issued an order to abort the mission. Despite the renewed Iraqi commitment, Hussein continued to ignore the United Nations' inspection resolutions and the United States's demands for Iraqi compliance. These examples demonstrate how leaders can manipulate global television to undermine their opponents' policies.

Effect 4: Creating High Expectations. The high speed of global television coverage may create expectations for instant results in both warfare and diplomacy. Former State Department Spokesperson James Rubin said, "The impatience of the media is one of the phenomena of the 24-hour news cycle. Three times a day, a new story line has to develop. And that creates an institutional impatience, where policies that require time...are not given their full fair view."¹⁵ War, diplomacy, and other international processes are especially complex and take time to complete. Public expectations for instant results become dangerous because a failure to meet these expectations may result in huge public disappointment. For example, Wolf Blitzer's reports after the start of the Gulf War concerned Colin Powell because "it seems as if all that remained was to organize the victory parade."¹⁶ Powell asked the Pentagon to tell Blitzer that, "This is the beginning of a war, not the end of ball game." Consequently, Blitzer modified the content and tone of his reports on the war. This exchange exemplifies these challenges and a successful response to them by a

senior official. During the initial phase of NATO's operations in Kosovo, Secretary of Defense William Cohen faced a similar challenge, "The pressure was on from the press to give us a day-by-day account of how successful you were today. And I think that builds a tempo into a campaign to say wait a minute, this is going to take some time."¹⁷ Cohen's attempts to deal with this challenge were less successful than Powell's.

The pressure that global television exerts on policymakers to take action is particularly powerful in severe humanitarian crises. Dick Morris argues that occasionally failing to act in the face of horrific television pictures "quickly gives a president a reputation for weakness, ineffectuality, and dithering."¹⁸ Clinton faced this when television coverage of the war in Bosnia raised doubts about his policies, but he took the risk of not responding. He felt that the American public would not support intervention in this crisis. Conversely, Bush's perceived weakness in 1989 was a major factor in his decision to invade Panama.¹⁹

The global war against terrorism poses a new major challenge to policymakers. Following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush declared that it would take a long period of time to combat this new breed of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. He repeatedly cautioned the public not to expect rapid results and instead be prepared for a battle that would take years, possibly decades. The war includes the use of economic and diplomatic measures that are less visually stimulating than traditional warfare, slow to produce results, and difficult to evaluate. How this situation will play out with the public remains to be seen. Global and local networks

have already questioned the results of the war against terrorism and frequently pressed leaders to demonstrate success. No wonder that National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice advised the media to recognize that, "world affairs is not a scoreboard where you keep daily score of winning and losing."²⁰

Conclusions and Recommendations. The expansion of news coverage has made policymaking in defense and foreign affairs ever more challenging. Global television rapidly transmits information, accelerating diplomatic communication and cultivating expectations for fast results. The pace and accessibility of global television applies pressure on policymakers to respond even more swiftly to world events while crafting a message that is acceptable to a broad audience. Global television is a powerful tool that should be used prudently because it can dramatically affect the outcomes of events.

Global television coverage has become an alternative means for leaders to obtain information and insight. The effect of more rapid diplomatic exchanges on the decision making process is particularly acute in crisis situations. Valuable information and suggestions from diplomatic and intelligence sources may arrive too late to influence decisions. When information does arrive on time, it competes with televised images and reporting of crises and foreign policy issues. Policymakers must also consider the tone of coverage, and be aware of attempts by foreign leaders to undermine their policies through global television, primarily via the "breaking news" format that creates further pressures for response.

Policymakers do not face the same challenges in every international crisis. Media pressure varies depending on the

threat's magnitude, on domestic considerations, and on the impact of the crisis upon the national interest. Media pressure is potentially more damaging when more than one policy is attractive. In such a situation, aides may have differing views which are subject to change, and the president may be uncertain and need time for deliberations in order to present an effective policy. National interest should always be a key factor. In the case of Bosnia, policymakers were concerned with the global media pressure for a military intervention in a humanitarian crisis that did not serve the national interest. On the other hand, the media pressure after the September 11 terrorist attacks and during the war in Afghanistan was minimal because the United States had been ferociously attacked, and national interest concerns were paramount. Since the media, like the government and the academic community, had failed to highlight the threat posed by Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism beforehand, many members of the media felt a pressure to be patriotic by way of atonement.

Global television coverage affects the nuts and bolts of policymaking. It forces leaders to find ways to avoid an immediate policy response and the appearance of leadership weakness or confusion; refrain from commitment to a policy subject to subsequent review; include different appeals to domestic and foreign audiences in a single message; keep pace with media coverage without creating high expectations for overly rapid results; and maintain policy at odds with television tone, without alienating reporters and audiences. Meanwhile, if foreign affairs officers are to remain relevant, they must provide solid information and recommenda-

tion for policy in time for consideration, and compete with video images that create a public sentiment that may clash with the chosen policy. There are no easy solutions, but the first task is to acknowledge the challenges that global media coverage presents for policymakers.

Policymakers cannot eliminate the challenges of the global news media, but they can limit their effect. Viewing the media as an enemy to criticize and discredit is not effective and may do more harm than good. The frequent clashes between Madeline Albright and reporters did not help U.S. foreign policy. The creation of offices for disinformation or global communication is also unlikely to help the government to deal with networks. However, policymakers can cope with the challenges of global coverage. Some of these methods include:

First, contingency planning in diplomacy and warfare must include a detailed communication chapter outlining possible negative media effects and suitable responses. Experienced communication professionals and foreign affairs experts should jointly prepare and update this chapter for crises and events.

Second, communication experts should be extensively involved in the planning phase and high level policymaking. The participation of communications experts in policymaking should become a standard operating procedure.

Third, training methods for leaders and diplomats should be updated. Greater emphasis must be placed on properly handling the press, for

example through simulation exercises. For example, before making important policy statements and pursuing significant actions, communications experts should present leaders with likely key media questions and help them prepare persuasive answers.²¹

Fourth, communications professionals can generate images of leaders that illustrate the time-consuming nature of the decision-making process. For instance, they should distribute photographs of senior officials entering and leaving presidential offices in order to convey the idea that leaders are cautiously and seriously considering options. A visual image of the leader may be more important than his actual words. Thus, statements made while vacationing or holding a golf club may create a negative image and should be avoided.

Fifth, global broadcasts create information vacuums that policymakers must quickly fill. Otherwise, journalists and opponents may prematurely speculate upon and judge policies. A typical media vacuum appears when an announcement is made regarding a major policy speech the following day. An effort should be made to reveal the policy rationale or key points during the time between the initial announcement and the actual statement.

Lastly, in the past, presidents invited influential editors and senior reporters to discuss complex foreign policy issues. In many cases, these talks were sufficient to thwart

criticism. This practice is much less effective today, but it can still limit potentially adverse effects of news coverage.

In addition to conventional strategic and diplomatic considerations, sophisticated policymaking requires a sensitive understanding of global media challenges, efficient communication

strategies, and the training needed for leaders. One of the most important principles of successful leadership and governance is the ability to adjust to changing circumstances. Leaders and institutions are more aware of the challenges of global television coverage now than they were a decade ago, but they still are a long way from addressing them effectively.

NOTES

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