

Robert Entman

Presentation given at the “American Media and Wartime Challenges” Conference

(March 21-March 22, 2003, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.)

I'd like to talk about the media, public opinion, and foreign policy from the perspective of democratic theory. I think that was touched on yesterday; it's been touched on today already by the first speaker, Paul Pillar. And it's a different perspective, I think, than some of what we've been hearing. From the perspective of democratic theory it is important for citizens to have information independent of the government's effort to manage the news. And that has led most political communications specialists to demand that the press maintain a watchdog orientation even in times of foreign policy crisis. It may surprise people to hear that most scholars who specialize in this area believe the media are usually passive rather than adversarial. They believe news coverage of military action by the American forces tends to give citizens too little opportunity to do anything but cheer for our side, which means in practice cheering for the White House policy. Democratic theorists point out that the White House policy may not in fact be the one that best serves the nation's interests. And that's why they believe it is in the national interest to have an independent press nurturing truly informed, independent citizen deliberation. Despite the scholarly generalization that the media tend more toward “lapdog” than “watchdog” when the American military is engaged actively, in my forthcoming book which is called *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S Foreign Policy*, from the University of Chicago Press this fall, I argue things have actually changed and that the scholarship needs to be updated a little. The media are *less* dependably deferential as they operate in the new, still evolving international system, a system that's far more complicated and much more unpredictable than was true during the Cold War. So following my assignment from the conference organizers, what I want to do is talk a little about what this media-government relationship portends for the role of public opinion in defense and foreign policy.

The implicit model of a lot of discussions of these relationships is very simple, and it's basically that government interacts with the media, the media tell the public what to believe, and there's some feedback from the public to the media. For example, in yesterday's discussions everything I heard implied that media's coverage was a function of the media alone. They make decisions on what to do in a kind of interaction with government, who's trying to manage them, and the media may resist to some degree. But it's actually a much more complicated situation, as scholars who have looked at this certainly would acknowledge, and what I've tried to do is suggest a model that is *much* messier. This [simpler picture] is nice, but it really doesn't reflect what goes on.

There are several levels here to the interactions. There is differentiation within each of those levels. This is what I call the cascading network activation model, or the

cascade model, which attempts to explain the relationship between the administration's viewpoints, what actually gets through to the media, and the frames that they put in the texts of their reports, and how that ultimately affects the public. There are lots of interactions, feedback loops, etc., in this relationship, and it is that I think which gives you a much better appreciation of the power flows, the difficulties, the promises, the opportunities. The model is designed specifically to help explain how thoroughly information penetrates from the White House's framing of an event or an issue down through the rest of the system to the public so that the administration at least appears to be garnering public support. The book argues that the alignment between the White House's position, media coverage, and public opinion is less reliable, more variable now than it was during the Cold War period. How closely they align is a function of four variables: cultural congruence, power, strategy, and motivation. I'm not going to go into all of that. I do want to say that depending on the interaction of those four variables there is a continuum, which I don't think is as thoroughly appreciated as it might be, between what the White House wants the media to say about a particular foreign policy issue or event, and how the media frame it. For some events, depending as I say upon the interaction of these four forces, particularly cultural congruence, the White House and the media are so perfectly aligned that in essence I think it's fair to say that what the media offer is propaganda. At the other end of the spectrum, however, there are cases where the media are actually quite critical and even hostile toward the administration. A few examples are Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia. And then there are those that can a little bit be arrayed across. And I don't mean to say that this is the result of some specific comparison I've done. It is the result of some work I've done. I don't want to say this is exactly what's happening. I just want to point out that there is a continuum here, and in different cases there have been different relationships between the media version and the White House's preferred version.

Let me say something about cultural congruence. The more closely an event or issue fits with established schemas or habits of thought that are dominant in the culture, the more closely the media will align with the White House line, all else equal. White House control over media content in these cases is high, assuming it takes advantage of the cultural congruence, which for example the Carter administration didn't. That was one of its big problems. With high congruence, though, politicians and journalists are reluctant to challenge the White House line, which grows out of what seems to most people to be common sense. KAL [Korean Air Line flight 007] was an easy case. It was totally congruent with dominant Cold War expectations of the Soviet Union, as an example. But media have more autonomy when events and issues are ambiguous. Unfortunately for the Clinton administration, it began during a period of great cultural ambiguity in world affairs as leaders tried to figure out what does this new post-Cold War international system mean, what is the proper role for America, and so forth. And that cultural ambiguity made managing the media much more difficult for Clinton, and as a result many of his actions, as I suggest, were not portrayed as the White House might have wanted. Now the Bush administration is apparently hoping its war on terrorism can supplant the Cold War as a dominant paradigm that guides journalists' and ultimately the public's interpretations of international affairs. When a single paradigm shapes public

thinking, virtually all foreign crises and military decisions can be assimilated to this one dominant theme.

However, the cascade model suggests that when issues, events, or actors arise that do not clearly pose a threat of terrorism against America, if that's the dominant theme, the media may not cooperate. The ability of terrorism to trump fears about excessively costly projections of power actually began waning within months of the victory over the Taliban. When President Bush declared his intention to intervene unilaterally in Iraq, intense opposition arose within the executive branch among leaders of the Republican foreign policy establishment and from almost every foreign government, and as a result gained a lot of attention from the media. All questioned the connection between the war on terrorism and the goal of toppling Saddam Hussein. This response suggests limits on the White House's ability to connect every foreign issue with this unifying war on terrorism, and it also indicates that the significance of foreign dissent to American policy decisions may be greater in this century than in the previous one. Even though Democrats were largely silent, certainly after October and the Congressional resolution, the media were able to weave foreign critiques with American expertise and their own points of view to provide some balance in covering the debate over should we go to war soon or should we allow the inspections to continue. That is a brief picture of this argument about the first theme, about the media's role being a more complicated role than it was in the Cold War period.

So what? That's my second theme. What does this all mean for the role of public opinion? Alignment of the White House line and media framing of an issue will significantly influence public opinion. My argument is that, for officials and policy makers, the public opinion that exists, the public opinion that matters, is that which officials perceive and anticipate. A key proposition from the cascade model is that where news coverage is diverse, as it was to some degree prior to both Gulf wars, polling evidence will be ambiguous. There will be plenty of data supporting both sides. Even in cases like the two Gulf wars, poll data can be deployed to support many inferences. I don't know how many of you saw the [results from] the University of Maryland center that does surveys on foreign policy attitudes, and I thought this was an innovative and very good poll, in which they gave people a set of arguments pro-going to war soon and anti-going to war soon. And the interesting finding is that very strong majorities of the public agreed with both sides of the argument. So this is an example of the public saying we strongly agree with let's act now, let's get it on, and a strong majority saying let's wait, let's let the inspections wait. This is the same sample, now; these are the same people. If the U.S. fails to get U.N. authorization, what should we do? This is after hearing the pros and cons, actually in late February, and you get 60 percent saying we still need the U.N. to act, we should not invade Iraq on our own. You could say that's public opinion. Sixty-three versus 37 percent said *don't* invade on your own. But the key is this: the polling people were smart enough also to ask, even if you don't agree with the decision, would you support the president? And when you ask it that way you actually get 62 percent supporting the president's policy, because so many people who actually disagree with the policy still support the president.

I submit that in that sort of a tangle of data on public opinion it is very difficult to say what the public really thinks. And if it is difficult to say in a case like this, which is incredibly well known, debated for months and months, covered *ad nauseam*, of course how much more difficult is it to figure out what the public really thinks when it comes to less-publicized, less thoroughly debated issues? And that means, I believe, that the media play a central role, if not *the* central role, in shaping elites' perceptions of public opinion. Because polls can be read in so many ways it may in fact make rational sense for leaders to pay attention to news frames, to news itself, as much as to poll results, because those poll results can be twisted to support just about any view you want to say. And studies of how elites figure out what public opinion is find that indeed their chief source is inferences from the way the news is covered, more so than looking at polls. So what will the goal of the administration be? It will be to try to get one-sided news coverage that favors its framing of the issue. The more skillfully the White House applies power, strategy, and motivations that are operating the more completely it will succeed in managing the news and having public opinion on its side. Success in managing news will likely lead to lots of supportive poll data, but more importantly, the news framing in itself will feed the perceptions that the public supports the administration, and those who oppose the White House are disregarding the public will.

That gets to my third theme, which is public opinion becomes in essence a captive of media coverage when the coverage is overwhelmingly one-sided. I'm not saying that the media have control of the actual thoughts of individual Americans. What I am saying is that when there is overwhelmingly one-sided media framing of an issue, the manifestations of public opinion that leaders pay attention to will appear to be one-sided in that direction. An example of the complexity of the *real* public opinion as opposed to what the perceptions of it may be is Gulf War I. As we all remember, 90 or 91 percent of the public approved George Bush's presidency, and there was this enormous outpouring of support for Bush in the wake of the Gulf War victory. Bush himself and others read that as indicating a public which was enthralled with the president and made the '92 election a foregone conclusion, etc., etc. We all know the history there. In other words, that poll showing the 91 percent approval rating ignored lots of other poll data that we might have seen that was more complicated and suggested a rockier path for President Bush.

As a general matter, news during short wars, and so far that seems to be what we are having in recent years, will lead officials to perceive supportive public opinion unless high casualties and other costs clearly combine to outweigh apparent benefits to the U.S. If that happens, the "quagmire schema," the Vietnam schema, will come to the fore rather quickly, especially if the benefits appear low and the costs appear high, which is what transpired during those earlier Somalia-Haiti-Bosnia events. The threshold for quagmire reactions is very low when benefits appear low and costs appear high. It makes the costs appear much higher when benefits appear very low. It's actually analogous to what Jay Hamilton was talking about yesterday in terms of paying attention. Leaders outside and inside the administration under those circumstances join a critical chorus and news may even become one-sided against the administration, as happened during the Clinton presidency. Where congruence between the military policy decision and political culture

is clear rather than ambiguous, usually because there is, as Paul Pillar mentioned, a personified villain like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden, then the threshold becomes much higher for the quagmire reaction. Support is easier to garner.

From the point of view of democratic theory, then, what does this suggest? Well, some people would say the current situation is pretty much optimal. The public's proper role in foreign policy is really a much more complicated matter than the democratic theorists I suggested at the beginning would have you believe. Many international relations experts would say, as you know, that it's not clear how desirable it is to have an active, informed public opinion constraining the actions of foreign policy leaders. Moreover, it is certainly not clear that the public wants unmanaged coverage when American fighting forces are in harm's way. Surveys have shown large majorities supporting the government's rights to control information over the press's rights in a time of war like we are in now. In other words, in terms of the cascade model, motivations of news media to please the audience may match those of the White House, which wants to control the news, and the military, which has various understandable motivations to try to manage the flow of information. As a result you expect one-sided coverage. And some might say this is okay. On the other hand, there is the argument that democratic input actually may help make foreign policy more rational, may help align foreign policy better with the true long-run interests of the United States. That is a debate we can get into during the discussion.

Thank you.

Robert Entman is Professor of Communication at North Carolina State University. Books of which he is author or co-author include Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics; Media Power Politics; and the forthcoming Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and American Foreign Policy. Dr. Entman is also senior author of Mass Media and Reconciliation, a report written in March 1998 for President Clinton's Initiative on Race. Robert Entman is co-editor with Lance Bennett of a forthcoming volume on Mediated Politics: Communication, Society and Politics, to be edited by Bennett and Entman and published by Cambridge University Press. Dr. Entman has also written many reports on communications policy for the Aspen Institute, the Commission on Radio and Television Policy, the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Telecommunications, and other organizations. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Yale and an M.P.P. in policy analysis from Berkeley.