

PRESS STRATEGIES AND NEWS WORK

NABEEL A. JURDI *

- Ph.D. in International Communication, University of Southern California and Claremont Graduate School, 1977.
Professor, Dept. of Mass Communication, Kuwait University.

Abstract

To understand the press-presidential relationship is to understand not only news values and how the press operates, but what forces are perceived by the press as being important in American society. This study will examine how foreign affairs coverage is, in fact, domesticated and a part of the political process. Within the system in interplay with presidents, congressmen and interest groups - and even through journalists' reading of the public opinion polls, which they consider generalized public opinion, the media are an important part of the policy process.

The press corps that existed in the United States in the seventies came out of a very violent time in American history: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and Watergate. There was a functional re-alignment of institutional power in the United States that had not happened since the Civil War. Journalists who were accustomed to covering the government became skeptical of what they were being told. We saw a Vice President, Spiro Agnew, forced from office, and a President, Richard Nixon, who was also forced to resign under the threat of impeachment. Institutional forces were challenged and the press corps changed.

In the eighties, President Ronald Reagan created a climate in the United States and abroad where people felt better about themselves. At the same time, however, the entertainment industry produced movies that glamorized greed and corruption. One such movie, "Wall Street" actually left one with the feeling that greed was good. Because of such an attitude, the press corps that entered the field during the eighties had no ethics, and have continued to have no ethics. It is a very troubling aspect of this time period.

Also during this time changes in television licensing created another basic change in television coverage. Local stations had less of a need for Network feeds and more of a need for their own news. Newspapers closed and low power television stations opened. News Directors justified capital expenditures of equipment by doing more live news reporting from mobile television broadcast and production units. Television news departments gained the attention of accountants and finance departments, and so content and quality got replaced by cost containment and profit. News and information was rapidly becoming news and entertainment. MONEY, even at the expense of truth and fairness, became an obsession. News standards began to fall. Controversy bred coverage, and everywhere one looked one would see and hear nothing but attacks, criticism, embarrassment and drama. One could feel that there were black clouds of despair traveling from the board rooms to the station affiliates.⁽¹⁾ Senator S.I. Hayakawa, former U.S. Senator commented that "in the age of television, the image became more important than substance".⁽²⁾ Leslie Stahl of CBS recounts her conversation with the White House Press Secretary for Ronald Reagan, on the Republican administration cuts of social security where the audio commentary was devastating, but the pictures of elderly people waving flags and smiling were the images that people remembered.⁽³⁾

Today we live in a society that moves very quickly. One can travel from Great Britain to the United States, to Kuwait City in the Arabian Gulf, to the Great Wall of China, all by merely changing the television station. In the flash of

an instant they are whisked around the world. Television has become the primary source of news and information, and so it is apparent that there is a need for a consistent standard of journalistic values.

During the nineties we are seeing another breed of journalist enter the field as the result of technology. Cyberspace and electronics have created a technological revolution. Unlike a simple move from radio to television, or from black and white television to colored television, this movement can be compared to moving from traveling on foot, to breaking the sound barrier in a jet plane. The changes today's technology brings are deep and they are profound, and will cause economic, social and political dislocation as the field in which one is headed becomes a primary factor on the news. The information that people get from the news media helps them formulate opinion, make impressions and take decisions.

Two hundred years ago it would have taken one month for news of a treaty to reach the troops engaged in combat. Now, it doesn't even take two hundred seconds. We live and work in "real time." Now, "real time" is unreal. Today, technology, time and travel drive our decision making process. The good news for Cable News Network (CNN) is that they have become the network of record for most of the world's major events. The bad news is that everybody watches them. Thus, other news organizations have begun to follow suit with respect to twenty-four hour news programming.

Today, a majority of Americans get their news and information from television. In fact, the average American household has a television set turned on seven (7) hours and thirty five (35) minutes per day. People don't just watch and listen to television. They live on and from it. And the twenty-two (22) minute newscast is the equivalent of the front page of most newspapers. A full two-thirds of the American population have cable television. In some respects the television set has become a non-IRS approved dependent. Ignacio Ramonet reports in *le Monde Diplomatique* that television "has seized power" shaping the style, and above all the rhythm and pace of print journalism. TV has succeeded in imposing itself on the other media, "not only because it presents a spectacle, but because it has become faster than the other."⁽⁴⁾

Against this background, five other events or phenomena have been occurring. First, foreign governments began to use the media to send messages directly to governments and in some cases directly to the people. This has become known as tele-diplomacy.

Second, the news hole that news organizations had to fill once a day or once an edition is now ever present. On cable news the news hole is 22 minutes and it is updated periodically.

Third, some news organizations have chosen to fill some of their programming with news talk shows. These talk shows have placed a premium on rhetorical violence rather than content or quality. In many respects some of these shows have gone from news and information to news and entertainment. These talk show hosts live in constant fear of the paraphrased adage: "He who lives by ratings will die by ratings."

Fourth, the phenomenon of distant participation, the contemporary version of live news, has been growing in demand. People across the globe are virtually glued to their television sets to watch the bombing in Baghdad, or the white Bronco automobile carrying O.J. Simpson travelling down the freeway. Naturally this phenomenon of distant participation results in huge rating spikes because the people feel close to the event without quite touching it or endangering themselves. Such events cause increased levels of interest for live or breaking events.

Fifth, the increased demand for news and information greatly exceeds the capacity of news organizations to independently scan, evaluate, chase, obtain and report news from around the world. The Gulf War cost vast amounts of money and many smaller news organizations which could not keep up with the costs were forced to close their foreign bureaus. For this reason, one often see or hear foreign reports quoting Reuters or even CNN, so that they can continue their reporting without needing to have on-site reporters.⁽⁵⁾

The modern journalist carries a laptop computer and travels with a satcom unit and a portable phone and FAX machine. They have the ability to access Lexis/Nexis programming to find out everything written or reported on a subject, form opinions, access wire reports and cover the story through their R-11 jack. Occasionally they actually participate at the coverage site.

Today there are 184 members of the United Nations, which represents a 60% increase in fewer than thirty (30) years. With this increase comes more national identities, and this means more indigenous media. It also means that the competition for time, space and attention, especially for public policy decision makers is now at a premium. A perfect example of how the role of the media has changed is an incident that occurred during the Afghanistan war. A British woman who was visiting Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation was mistaken for a Russian and was surrounded by an angry mob. She tried to explain she was British by repeatedly shouting, "British". The crowd did not understand her, but when she shouted "BBC" they calmed down and left her alone.⁽⁶⁾ Madeline Albright, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations was once asked by Jed Duval of CNN if the government decided what to do in the world by what it saw on television. She replied: "Well there is no question that

television has become the 16th member of the Security Council because television brings the horrors of the breakdown of peace and stability to the table."⁽⁷⁾

PRESS STRATEGIES AND "NEWS WORK"

Presidents and their foreign policy officials employ a combination of strategies to gain coverage for their views. They feel that what they have to say about foreign policy affects the various media publics. There are actually two types of presidential press strategies: high visibility and low visibility. The first involves television and often includes press conferences and major media events. The second involves "backgrounders" with leading journalists, where individual face to face visits or interviews take place.

The success or failure of a president and his entourage and how they interact with the media can be judged by whether they can use the press effectively. Some administrations have been more effective than others. The Reagan administration would actually start each senior White House staff meeting with the question, "What is the story today?" They were actually admitting to themselves the importance of the media component in the policy process. Diplomatic strategy requires an appropriate media strategy when trying to bring public pressure to bear on one party or another. If it is not used, other parties to the issue can use the media to avoid the administration's pressure.

Even an administration that has a good relationship with the press cannot always determine the nature of the coverage of issues of international conflict. President Kennedy had a very good relationship with the press in the pre-Vietnam period when the climate favored a strong presidency. Kennedy lost the initiative during the days before the Cuban missile crisis because another major campaign launched by highly visible anti-Castro Florida-based activists created many media events to turn the eyes of the Republican lawmakers so that they would force the President to alter his stance. Opposition politics, with their anti-Castro climate of public opinion fostered through the media was able to make Kennedy appear to be weak on the issue of "getting rid of Castro."

President Carter was weak in the eyes of the media. His major policies such as SALT, the Panama Canal, and the Middle East, received negative coverage even though the White House and State Department held many press briefings and presidential press conferences. News personality, Sam Donaldson, felt Carter's foreign policy initiatives were only being conducted for personal political reasons in order to blot out the "disappointments of Mr. Carter's first year in office."⁽⁸⁾ Why there was so much negative coverage of

Carter's foreign policies is unknown. Some pick out little things that made him look weak. The Press would see the President carrying his own luggage on board Air Force One, and would perceive this as a weakness. Of course, this is ridiculous, but the Press did perceive him as weak. Perhaps, in the case of Carter, his press would have been better if his administration adopted a case of non-strategy and actually released little or no information to the press which would not have given opportunities to critics.

Presidents who have difficulties with the press should take advantage of the media's limited revenues and "news holes". This combines what can be perceived as a "hotter" story with one that is "hot". In other words, create a diversion. That way, if a news story includes an element of the unexpected, it can become more politically viable. Presidents, with their presumed power, can create a diversion easily. This was very evident during the Kennedy Administration. On one hand, Kennedy was under heat on the Cuban issue, but he was able to create the idea of a new Berlin crisis to help take the heat off. Then he reaped the benefit of an unexpected dramatic event when James Meredith tried to enter "ole Miss". These combined to take the pressure off the Cuban issue and save Kennedy in the media.

THE EL SALVADOR ISSUE

During the post-Watergate period the newspaper press was feeling very powerful with regard to its relationship with the government. Such newspapers as the **Washington Post** and the **Times** gear many of their stories towards the agenda-setting power of government. Both the administration and Congress are in mind when articles are written that pertain to foreign and domestic affairs, especially when they are in regard to policy setting. If both newspapers continually report on certain issues you can be sure that lawmakers will soon be discussing policies based on those articles before long.

Some television journalists were skeptical of both the administration's evidence and of its interpretation of the significance regarding El Salvador. NBC's Lisa Myers said:

"The American media in the early years of Vietnam was manipulated. We may perhaps be overreacting in the case of El Salvador. But when you have an administration saying, "We've got the evidence but we can't show it to you, well, we've heard that before."⁽⁹⁾

She didn't believe that television journalists should believe what the government says unless they are able to prove their statements.

The Reagan administration tried to make the press believe that the war in El Salvador was caused by outside Communist intervention and that this could have grave repercussions within the United States. They produced a highly visible Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, and increased administration involvement. Looking back on the situation in El Salvador today, it is clear that what actually happened there, according to Stephen Rosenfeld of the **Washington Post** was that "Traditional oligarchy and the political extreme right started the violence. Force was used to consolidate injustice. It is as simple as that."

There had been a long American involvement in El Salvador with U.S. military aid to the Junta. This was strongly opposed by the Catholic church. As the war went on policy makers began to oppose it also. Democratic congressional opposition was strongly against Reagan's policy, as were Liberal interest groups. President Carter's policy makers favored emphasis on human rights considerations and certainly didn't want to get mired in "Vietnam-like" involvements.

During the early part of the Reagan Administration journalists began to fear Carter's policies and became concerned with the possibilities of another Vietnam. They questioned the administration's insistence on increasing military aid and sending more U.S. advisors.⁽¹⁰⁾ In fact, in one case, Senate Minority Leader Robert Byrd proposed an amendment to the War Powers Act favoring greater limitations on presidential introduction of U.S. troops. He based his decision on something he saw in media coverage in El Salvador - a U.S. military advisor carrying an M16 rifle.

Throughout the last decade and a half, Congressional critics have counted on media coverage to champion their cause. News stories most certainly are an essential part of the policy process because they keep the issues of both sides before the public and before policy makers. It is obvious that public perceptions of certain situations are enhanced by the television media and this same public can put pressure on Congress. Their dependence on television is very apparent, especially in regard to events that take place on foreign soil.

It is apparent that the Administration's press strategy began to have an effect on the impact of the El Salvador coverage. Other issues began to come forward and take prominence in the news. Problems arose in the Falklands, the President went to Europe for an economic summit, and Israel invaded Lebanon. News crews were pulled out of El Salvador, and thus the media coverage declined greatly. Attention was channeled elsewhere.

Is it only the television media that affects the images of the public and of policy makers, or is the print media just as important. Since the sixties the

Washington Post, the **Wall Street Journal** and the **New York Times** have actually gained in stature. They are certainly read by the Washington policy makers and those who want to influence policy decisions. They, along with the national news magazines, are important vehicles trying to gain policy makers' attention. Television, however, has gained greater power in the last few years and can now even compete with the Administration for the public's attention. It has the potential to greatly impact Congressmen through their constituencies.

Many still cannot decide on the degree to which television coverage influences perceptions, but political scientist William C. Adams has linked public opinion change with changing patterns of television coverage of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Changes in the structure of the media gives television a greater ability to influence perceptions of events as they occur. Who can forget the Iraq invasion of Kuwait and the broadcast journalists who were actually in the path of SCUD missiles, grabbing for gas masks as they continued to report the news. This writer remembers the fear on their faces as they continued their efforts to report what was happening. Events such as those have never been recorded in that manner in history and it will forever be imprinted on the memory of those who viewed it.

Looking back in history we can look at the Laotian crisis in March 1961. New York Times reporter, James Wilde reported a massive buildup along the border and its link to Soviet-backed North Vietnam. This article alone had a great impact because up to that time the American people were not really relating to what was going on in such a remote area of the world. In the days following the story the administration held many high level meetings, there were troop movements and even a televised challenge to the Soviets. The discovery by the television journalist really created a new political reality for the Administration.

Even though there is growing importance of the media there is still no doubt that the power of government can have a decisive impact on coverage in certain parts of the world. This is quite apparent in developing countries where reporters are not assigned on a regular basis. Under those conditions government views have an impact on press coverage.⁽¹¹⁾ Without reporters on site, it is impossible to report in an unbiased manner. Under those conditions the media almost cooperates with the Administration to "see things through the prism of the status quo". The media has also been known to abandon a failed policy before the administration does. A perfect example of this would be the press's coverage of the last days of the Shah of Iran. The media had actually abandoned the Shah before the Carter Administration had. The main reason the media left was that in their view there was nothing left to print. There

seemed to be no opposition to the Administration's handling of the situation, and without controversy the press had no one to challenge the Administration's viewpoint. They could find no champion to fight against this viewpoint, so it was no longer newsworthy.

Diplomatic strategy for the last few Presidential Administrations has been based on bringing public pressure to bear on all parties in order to persuade them to compromise as negotiations got underway. This is particularly true when dealing with foreign governments in attempts to help settle disputes. The Middle East peace initiative of the Carter administration is a good example of what can happen. If the press isn't handled correctly, it can be a disaster. This is what happened to the Carter Administration. It failed to realize that when there is strong domestic opposition to a change in policy, a preemptive press strategy is required. The press was, more or less, ignored. The Administration followed its normal pattern of leaks and press conferences instead of flying reporters to the Middle East to learn of the Arab/Israeli conflict first hand. When Israel's Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, arrived in New York prior to the talks, he created a media event and also in Congress and actively challenged the Administration directly and appealed to the American public through the television and print media. Since a Congressional-presidential confrontation is always news, Dayan surrounded himself with Congressional leaders to lend him credibility and support. Naturally this media event put his agenda before the American public and he was able to gain enough supporters whose views were magnified in the press. They were thus able to turn support in their direction and gain what they wanted in the negotiations. Some think that interest groups have little impact on news coverage. More recent research indicates that some types of interest groups actually stimulate press coverage. President Carter modified his policy concerning the amount of grain being withheld from the Soviets, following a dockworkers boycott organized by left-wing interest groups.⁽¹²⁾

CONCLUSION

Today, press coverage reflects the power relationships that exist and these relationships are influenced by how the press operates. The values of the press are influenced by their surroundings and how they perceive the world around them. Before the Administration can try to guide the press-presidential relationship they must understand how the press operates and the news values it has developed. To understand the press-presidential relationship is important because it is evident that the media is an integral part of the policy making process. The influence that the media has over the public is tremendous, and it is important for Administrations to realize that, so that they can develop their own policies for dealing with the press.

REFERENCES

1. John W. Rendon, Jr., **Seminar at Kuwait University**, March 29, 1995.
2. Remarks by John W. Rendon, Jr., in a fax sent to the American Embassy in Kuwait, April 18, 1995, page 6.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, page 7.
5. Ibid, page 8.
6. Donald Wilhelm, **Global Communications and Political Power**, New York, 1995, page 68.
7. Rendon, John W., Op. Cit., page 9.
8. Bruce Miroff, "The Media and the Woes of Jimmy Carter". Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, September 3-6, 1981.
9. Lisa M. Myers at the Center for the Study of the Presidency conference in Fred Williams, *The Information Highway and its Implications for Democracy*, Columbia University Press, 1994, page 7.
10. These are preliminary findings from a research paper analyzing source usage, themes and newscaster commentary during three periods of media coverage of the El Salvador conflict. The paper, "The Reagan Administration, Television and El Salvador: Was There a Policy Role for Media?" has been presented at the International Association for Mass Communications Research, September 4-6, 1982, in Paris.
11. See particularly David Paletz and Robert Entman's discussion of Zaire in their chapter, "Domesticated Opinion: Foreign News" in **Media Power Politics**, (New York: Free Press, 1981).
12. Montague Kern, "The Invasion of Afghanistan: Domestic vs. Foreign Stories," in William C. Adams, editor, **Television Coverage of the Middle East** (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1981).

* * *