War has dominated the political communication research about media and foreign policy. The complex and evolving media–military relationship – and its implications for influencing public opinion about war – serves as a backdrop for this research. Through Vietnam, journalists were allowed on the front lines with U.S. forces but, especially in the 20th century, their copy was censored by the military, ostensibly for operational security reasons but in fact for more propagandistic aims (Fussell 1989). Most notably, images of dead U.S. GIs were almost entirely forbidden in American media in the first two world wars out of fear that such images would turn public opinion against America’s involvement in those conflicts. This era of “post-censorship” was replaced beginning with the invasion of Grenada in 1983 with one of “pre-censorship.” Following the lead of British media management in the Falklands/Malvinas War a year earlier, and spurred by an institutional belief amongst many in the military and the Republican-controlled White House that the press had played a role in losing Vietnam (Wilson 2001), reporters were kept away from the battle and left on boats to cover the invasion via press conferences. Although this media management strategy raised hackles amongst the press and many critics, it also allowed the military to control the message environment and resulted in uncritical coverage of conflicts ranging from Grenada to Panama to the Persian Gulf War (Sharkey 2001).

This policy changed, however, with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, when the Pentagon switched to a modified version of the post-censorship model called embedding. The decision to attach journalists to specific units stemmed in large part from a belief that in the 21st century global media environment, information wars were important components of an intervention’s success (Katovsky & Carlson 2003). Scholarly studies of embedded coverage shows mixed results regarding whether the coverage was indeed more slanted than would be expected. Some found evidence of pro-American bias in embedded reportage (Pfau et al. 2004; Robinson et al. 2010). Using different measures of tone, Aday et al. (2005b) didn’t find significant differences in the level of patriotic coverage, but did find that unembedded (or “unilateral”) reporters showed more casualty images in broadcast news.

Ultimately the question raised by these and many other studies of media and war is: what role do media play in generating or depressing public support for war? After all, a key reason for various wartime media management policies is the perceived effects of coverage
on public support for war. Much of the literature in this area has been focused on three key areas: casualty coverage, questions of media (in)dependence, and public opinion rallies. The work of John Mueller (1973) is foundational in this regard. Mueller used data from the Vietnam and Korean wars to argue that publics will rally behind presidents who go to war, but that these rallies will eventually fade, and support for intervention will evaporate, as home country casualties mount over time, something known as the casualty aversion hypothesis. Mueller's thesis gained traction toward the end and following the Vietnam War, especially in the United States, where many military and political elites came to believe America lost that conflict in large part because of what they perceived as casualty-ridden, overly critical broadcast coverage that turned the public against the war.

Mueller's casualty aversion hypothesis has been fleshed out and contextualized by recent work challenging or modifying its propositions (Gartner 2004; Gartner et al. 2004). Some of that research, for instance, has shown that not all casualties are created equal in terms of their effects on public support for war: recent deaths are more salient to public opinion than reporting of cumulative casualties (Althaus et al. 2012), and people are more sensitive to casualty rates that are rising than those that are falling (Gartner 2008). Many studies have found, contra Mueller, that casualties per se are not the most important determinant of public opinion about military intervention, but rather are usually contextualized through the prism of various other variables (Burk 1999; Eichenberg 2005; Klarevas 2002). These include the nature of the conflict and severity of the threat (Jentleson & Britton 1998), partisan predispositions and elite consensus or dissensus (Berinsky 2009; Berinsky & Druckman 2007; Larson 1996), a kind of rational cost–benefit analysis (Lacquement 2004), and whether the intervention is seen by the public as being likely to succeed and as righteous (Gelpi et al. 2005/2006; Sidman & Norpoth 2012).

The vast majority of these studies either ignore or dismiss the role of news media in shaping the public's attitudes about war and intervention. They often treat their independent variables—such as casualties, elite opinion, nature of the conflict or threat, and a conflict's chances of success and “rightness”—as objectively defined. In fact, however, in almost every case we might think of these variables as being subject to, or influenced by, media and elite framing. Framing refers to the selection and highlighting of certain information in a news story or elite narrative at the expense of other information in a way that influences audience perception (Entman 1993). Despite being largely absent from the major work on casualty sensitivity and support for intervention discussed thus far, framing plays a key role in the dynamics each describe.

For instance, how people contextualize casualties and assess threats and crises is largely an outgrowth of elite and media framing. The Iraq War provides an excellent example. The war was originally framed by its proponents in the White House and elsewhere as necessary to combat an existential threat, winnable, and the “right thing to do.” Later, events showed this threat to be exaggerated, victory became a contested construct, and Americans quickly became divided about its justification. Ultimately strong majorities supported the withdrawal of U.S. troops, a policy promise that helped propel Barack Obama to the White House in 2008.

Indeed research suggests that media coverage itself might influence opinion about war and intervention in a variety of ways, for instance as an intervening variable between elite cues and public opinion (Boettcher & Cobb 2006). Jordan and Page (1992), found that favorable messages in television news from elite sources had a significant effect on changing public attitudes. Baker and Oneal (2001) and Aday (2010) find that media coverage and the framing of war news is associated with the occurrence and the magnitude of rally effects.
Others argue that episodic and tactically-oriented war stories that ignore more thematic and geo-strategic implications of war and foreign policy create “accountability gaps” that prevent presidents and other elites from being held fully responsible when those policies fail or backfire (Aday et al. 2010; Entman et al. 2009).

Coverage of conflict has also been found to be dominated by a “war” frame that tends to be one-sided (i.e., in favor of the home country or its allies), employs militaristic language, focuses on “action” such as battles and bombings, and wraps that all up in a superficial, context-free narrative (Lee & Maslog 2005). This has led to calls for news organizations to adopt a more advocacy-oriented “peace journalism” (Galtung 1986) that uses an alternative frame that avoids demonization, is non-partisan, has a multi-party orientation, and emphasizes peaceful and diplomatic solutions and contextualized reporting. Studies show, however, the persistence of the traditional war framed journalism, in part because of the reliance on news routines that privilege official sources and their frames (Fahmy & Neumann 2011).

Casualty coverage and the CNN Effect

In the 1990s, the casualty aversion hypothesis formed the theoretical basis of the “CNN Effect,” a strand of communication research that investigated whether in an era of 24 hour broadcast news, some vivid images might spur support for intervention (e.g., images of a famine), while others, notably casualties, might make the public risk averse. Yet the preponderance of CNN Effect studies has found little evidence of direct effects on the public in line with the CNN Effect hypothesis (Gilboa 2005; Robinson 1999; though Hawkins [2011] argues importantly that lack of media coverage of global conflicts can keep them off the policy agenda, and that this may lead to increased civilian fatalities). Significantly, however, policymakers’ perception of the media’s power to turn the public against an intervention by showing American casualties has been shown to lead them to adopt policies that avoid or limit American risks. This, it has been argued, has taken the form of preferring air campaigns over committing ground troops (e.g., the Balkans, Libya, Syria), and avoiding or abandoning potentially costly humanitarian interventions such as Rwanda in 1994 (Gilboa 2005; Robinson 2002).

Indeed, the question of whether critical media coverage, or casualty coverage specifically, can turn people against an intervention is far more complex than the casualty aversion hypothesis and its spawn, the CNN Effect, would suggest. Interestingly, despite their prominence in normative discussions of media coverage of war, the specific effects of exposure to casualty images, especially vivid ones, remain largely unaddressed empirically. Recently, scholars have begun to investigate experimentally the influence of mediated casualty coverage, especially images, on audience attitudes. Several of these studies have found that casualty images can have a more pronounced effect on attitudes, at least under certain circumstances, than narrative discussions of them (Gartner 2011; Pfau et al. 2006, 2008). But these effects seem to be filtered through prior attitudes and predispositions and emotions. Aday (2010), for instance, found evidence that news audiences reframe graphic images of dead American soldiers through the prism of their partisan predispositions, with Republican-leaning study participants seeing photos of dead American soldiers in Iraq in the middle of that war as a noble sacrifice, whereas Democratic-leaning subjects saw them as tragic wastes. Gartner (2008, 2011) found that “conventionalized” casualty images such as flag-draped coffins (as opposed to “unconventional” images such as battle pictures) have a greater tendency to shift a person from supporting to opposing a war, but he also found effects to be filtered through partisan predispositions. And Althaus and Coe (2011)
show that the evidence from the past 60 years of major military conflicts shows that public support for war in the United States tends to increase as coverage of the war increases—and decreases as coverage decreases—regardless of casualty coverage or other variables. They draw on social identity theory to argue this is because news about an external threat primes citizens’ latent patriotism.

Also contrary to conventional wisdom, there does not appear to be any evidence that media coverage explains the very slow (and much exaggerated) turn of American public opinion against the Vietnam War. Hallin (1986) showed that media coverage of Vietnam was largely uncritical of the war and tended to reflect the perspectives of the military and White House until prominent members of Congress began questioning the war’s progress in 1967 and the Tet Offensive in early 1968. Furthermore, despite the image of a living-room war, Hallin showed that casualty images were few and far between until after Tet.

In fact, Vietnam is far from an outlier. Rather, the trend Hallin found of coverage adopting a largely uncritical stance toward the war has been shown to exist in press coverage of the early stages of most conflicts, at least in the American case (see: Campbell [2000] and Nasaw [2000] regarding the Spanish–American War; Bennett [1990] on Nicaragua; Dickson [1995] about the invasion of Panama; Kellner [1992] and Mermin [1999] regarding the Persian Gulf War; and Aday et al. [2005b] and Katovsky & Carlson [2003] regarding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars). In addition, coverage of casualties generally and of American casualties (especially those killed in action) specifically, is almost entirely absent from coverage of war (Aday 2005; Althaus et al. 2014).

**Elite-driven news**

Why do we see these trends? One persistent answer offered by scholars has been because journalism in general, and especially in foreign policy coverage, tends to be source-driven and reflects the biases and policy goals of elites. Much of this territory is covered in another chapter in this volume, but suffice to say scholars consistently find that political elites—especially presidents in the U.S. system—dominate the agenda setting and framing environment during foreign policy crises and wars, especially when they are in consensus about the threat’s causes and remedies (see, for example, Bennett 1990; Entman 2004; Robinson et al. 2010).

Baum and Groeling’s (2010) “strategic bias” theory of media–elite–public interaction argues that the natural news bias in favor of conflict leads the journalists to cover foreign policy crises in a way that may distort the facts by overemphasizing controversy and dissent at the expense of nuance and consensus, something they refer to as “opinion indexing.” They argue this leads audiences to fall back on partisan cues in making judgments about policy, rather than a more considered examination of the diverse array of facts and opinions available.

Baum and Groeling’s work is based in a voluminous amount of research showing the power of elites to shape not only media coverage of foreign policy but also the public’s foreign policy beliefs (Brody 1991; Zaller 1992). This is due in no small part to the well-established fact that most citizens, especially in the United States, know very little about foreign affairs (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1997). Interestingly, however, Baum and Groeling also argue that the determinants of public support for war, and of elites’ ability to influence public opinion, is not static. Rather, presidents’ rhetorical power—as well as that of their opponents—vary based on the stage of the crisis, events on the ground, and other factors. Baum and Groeling refer to this as the “elasticity of reality,” a dynamic that parallels an argument made by Aday.
(2008) that presidents have “framing windows” during the course of a military intervention that are “bigger” (i.e., their frames influence a wider range of the public) and can overwhelm partisan predispositions during the establishing phase and early stages of a crisis (e.g., the large number of Democrats who supported President Bush after 9/11), but shrink as events and elite dissensus – transmitted through the media – combine with partisanship to play a bigger role in shaping public opinion.

For example, Aday et al. (2005a) found that pre-war rhetoric from White House and other political elites suggesting coalition forces would be welcomed as liberators led U.S. media to adopt a victory frame immediately following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Firdos Square on April 9, 2003, as if it represented the triumphant end of the Iraq War. In addition, the authors found that in the week following the statue’s fall, combat coverage declined dramatically on all U.S. broadcast networks. Aday et al. (2005a) also found that journalists tended to explicitly tie the toppling of the Saddam statue to iconic images of the fall of the Berlin Wall and various Lenin statues around the world after the Soviet Union collapsed.

This points to the importance of culturally significant historical events in shaping both elite and media framing of war and foreign policy crises, consistent with Entman’s (2004) cascade model and its emphasis on the power of culturally resonant frames. Scholars have found that policymakers, for instance, use – and often misuse – historical analogies – especially World War II – both to frame contemporary international crises (usually in a way that justifies a course of action they already support) and to persuade the public to support the desired policy response (Jervis 1976; Record 2002). World War II analogies also receive a prominent airing in the press (Dorman & Livingston 1994). World War II frames appear to be especially effective at eliciting support for intervention, whereas wars with more complex or less favorable outcomes, such as Vietnam, have not been found to have the opposite effect of diminishing support for war (Aday & Kim 2008; Gilovich 1981). It will be interesting to see how the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, with their lack of clearly defined victory or defeat, evolve into cultural-historic signifiers for future policymakers, journalists, and publics.

Elite influence over media coverage of war and public attitudes about intervention can have other ramifications, as well. Factual inaccuracies endorsed by elites and broadcast through the media are not only likely to be accepted by the public, but to persist even after their debunking (Kull et al. 2003). In addition, because the range of elite foreign policy opinion is limited and often consensus-driven during international crises (Bennett 1990; Mueller 1973), media coverage can accentuate and contribute to public opinion rallies in support of White House policies by transmitting these consensus cues (Althaus & Coe 2011; Zaller 1992). One implication of this can be that during major foreign policy crises, public trust in political and media institutions is heightened (Brewer et al. 2003, 2004; Gross et al. 2004), which may make the messages and frames they convey all the more persuasive.

New media, war and conflict

More recently, the role of digital and social media in shaping coverage and public opinion about war and conflict has received increasing scholarly attention. Much of this research has focused on how these new media technologies might alter the power dynamics between the public, the media, and political elites discussed above. For instance, initial euphoria over social media’s impact on major movements for democratic change such as Iran’s Green Revolution in 2009 or the Arab Spring protests of early 2011 could be found in several prominent scholarly articles and books from the time (e.g., Howard 2010; Hussain &
Howard 2013). Yet the ephemeral successes of these movements, coupled with their more troubling legacies, have led to more sober analyses of late (Lynch 2007; Shirky 2011). Indeed, the very phrase “Arab Spring revolutions” now seems exaggerated, given that only Tunisia has managed to maintain a semblance of democratic momentum.

That said, new media and other technological innovations are leading scholars to rethink old paradigms in political communication regarding media, foreign affairs, and the public’s role in foreign policy. In particular, the press–state dynamic described earlier – in which the foreign policy press is largely dependent on and reflective of political elites in a nation state system – is being challenged. Global media and satellite-based technologies have empowered networked communities to gain access to publics and media (and therefore an even wider public) and challenge official framing and message dominance (Aday & Livingston 2008; Castells 2009; Keck & Sikkink 1998). Portable satellite video technology and smartphones are allowing reporters – professional and amateur – the ability, in theory at least, to circumvent official media management strategies and potentially include a wider array of sources that can now be efficiently engaged via the internet (Livingston & Asmolov 2010). These new technologies may in fact force us to rethink the ways in which media influence foreign and military affairs, something Livingston (2003) has referred to as the “CNN Effect Plus.”

Some have found that the news agenda on social media is different in many ways than that in traditional media, especially in its greater focus on foreign policy (Neuman et al. 2014). At the same time, we need to be careful not to exaggerate these evolutions: coverage of foreign policy crises still typically reflects elite framing and agendas (Bennett & Livingston 2003), and traditional news norms and routines still play a significant role in how all journalists report and write the news (Livingston & Van Belle 2005).

The question thus becomes, what can we say of social media’s evolving role in coverage of conflicts and public opinion about them? For instance, some have found evidence that the high degree of regional media and social media integration helped to create the conditions for the international diffusion of revolutionary protest, culminating in a regime change cascade (Hale 2013; Hussain & Howard 2013; Patel et al. 2014). This is known as a “scale shift,” in which disparate local protest movements are linked together into one meta-protest frame (McAdam et al. 2001). This allows individual protests to be applied to otherwise unique contexts, potentially broadening their sources of support and increasing the perceived efficacy of individual movements and their participants.

Other scholars have investigated whether new media are changing the gatekeeping dynamics found for decades in research on traditional media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). This might result from the fact that the task of filtering new media falls in large part to the public, who select information to pass on to their friends and followers, rather than professional journalists, something Bruns (2003, 2005) calls gatewatching (see also Hermida 2010; Meraz 2009; Williams & Delli Carpini 2004). At the same time, gatewatching doesn’t imply that all users are equal. Some users are more important than others in deciding which content is disseminated and which is not (Lawrence et al. 2010).

Finally, other scholars have suggested that new media may facilitate political participation and activism in ways that can lead to the kinds of revolutions and political upheaval witnessed during and since the Arab Spring (Howard 2010). Several studies, for instance, have concluded that digital media were useful to some degree to protestors on the ground in the early part of the Arab Spring protests (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011; Rinke & Röder 2011; van Niekerk et al. 2011; but see Hassanpour 2011; Newsom et al. 2011). Others have argued that new media were important platforms for sharing knowledge about the ongoing events (Howard et al. 2011; Russell 2011; Wall & El Zahed 2011).
If true, this could mean that digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) might play important roles in shaping and marshaling public opinion in repressive societies, circumventing not only regimes but state-run media. Whether this leads to largely peaceful revolutions or to civil war depends more on the contextual variables other than communication platforms, however, as events in the Middle East have demonstrated since 2011.

For instance, in one survey of Tahrir Square protestors, only 13 percent named Twitter as a medium used in protest activities (Wilson & Dunn 2011). In fact, social media were cited less frequently than “old media” such as television (92 percent) and firsthand communication via live conversation (93 percent).

It’s possible, however, that digital media amplify attention to protest movements such as those seen in the early stages of the Arab Spring outside the region, among international publics not directly affected by the consequences (Aday et al. 2013; Bruns et al. 2013; Lotan et al., 2011; Lynch, 2011). This potential “boomerang effect” (Keck & Sikkink 1998) could have important ramifications for protesters, for instance by increasing international pressure on regimes to not engage in violent crackdowns, and to negotiate peaceful settlements. Initial research on the Arab Spring, for instance, showed that traditional media networks, particularly Al Jazeera, were central to conveying protestors’ grievances to a global audience (Khondker, 2011; Rinke & Röder, 2011; Russell, 2011).

That said, one of the important things to realize about the impact of digital media is that our understanding of it must continue to evolve alongside the media themselves. Research from the Syrian civil war, for instance, finds fascinating evidence of multiple “twitterverses” that might modify our understanding of war coverage. Lynch et al. (2014, in press) found that there was very little overlap between Arabic twitterverses and that occupied by Western journalists. Because the framing and agenda of issues discussed in the Arabic tweets versus the English tweets were very different, this implies that Western journalists and their audiences – including policymakers – were missing a significant aspect of the story. This has profound implications for understanding how these potential alternate realities influence public and policymaker opinion differently depending on language and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Media serve as perhaps the most important intermediary between government and citizens, and that relationship is especially important in times of war and international crises. Similar to the findings of decades of media effects research generally, the influence of media coverage of war on shaping public opinion and policy are complex, often limited, rarely as powerful as many assume (or hope), yet far from inconsequential. Perhaps the most important thing we know about media and foreign affairs is that, even more than in domestic coverage, journalists appear to generally be inclined to taking their lead from policy elites in what they cover and how they cover it. This is significant. Among other things, it means that elites, especially leaders (e.g., presidents), have a significant advantage in framing crises, their parameters and the range of options to be entertained to address them. Other views, frames, and even facts, are less likely to be discussed, covered, and thus considered by publics.

Other questions about media coverage are more complex. One of the most important, and still less understood, is the role of casualties and casualty coverage in shaping public support for intervention. At this point, the evidence suggests that casualties are highly contextualized by citizens and media audiences, and filtered through the prism of their prior beliefs and attitudes. Still, it’s important to not ignore the fact that many if not all of the “contextualizing” variables (e.g., the nature of the threat and conflict, the intervention’s
moral rightness and chances of success, etc.) are themselves framed by elites, and filtered through the media’s own news norms and cultural biases. Furthermore, these biases are by definition shared between policymakers and mainstream media professionals, despite their traditionally adversarial relationship.

There has been a tendency in some of the punditry, and even some of the research, on new media to assume these technologies represent paradigmatic shifts in how we understand media, policy, and public opinion. While it’s true that each new medium brings with it new modes of reporting and, perhaps, cognitive processing on the part of audiences, the growing body of research in this area suggests caution in getting ahead of ourselves. Social media, for instance, do not appear to be replacing traditional news in informing people about war and international crises. If anything they appear to be merging in important ways that may even enhance and improve foreign affairs reporting. At the same time, many of old news routines – especially a heavy reliance on official sources and traditional news norms – appear to apply to “new” media.

That said, there are many unresolved questions and potential challenges as we move further into the 21st century. It appears, for instance, that social media may simultaneously expand the reach of non-state actors and citizen “journalists” alike, while creating hemophilic sub-networks where like-minded people have their prior beliefs reinforced. This can be functional or dysfunctional, or both. It also appears from research on the twitterverse surrounding the Syrian civil war that Western journalists may be operating in an English-only social media world far removed from that of other key regional and sectarian constituencies. If future research finds something similar, this could have profound implications for understanding the limits of traditional journalism as well as what impact it might have on public opinion and policy based on this limited, perhaps distorted, worldview.

References


Media, war, and public opinion


