The news media and foreign policy-making

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All of us are aware of the extraordinary power of the media in our lives. Through television and the cinema, their most popular forms, the media reach into every corner of our lives. Our speech, our fashions, our expectations, our dreams, our very thoughts all bear the imprint of what comes to us on screen and in the press.

During the past century the startling innovations in the media, first in mass circulation newspapers, then radio, film, and television, were applied to the gathering and broadcasting of «news» and, unavoidably, to the molding of opinion. In a democratic age, the power of the news media derives from their potential to influence opinion. Here is the reason that an astonishing range of groups and individuals, governments, political parties, terrorists, corporations, labour unions, seek to dominate the news, to shape it, and to harness its power for their own ends.

Ours is above all an age of democracy. Whether they are truly free and pluralistic or subservient to a totalitarian party, most of the world's societies subscribe to a democratic ethos. Accordingly, the media are populist, and they emphasize the themes that appeal to a mass audience: violence, wealth and scandal. The news media offer no exception.

At the same time, the news media in Western societies are themselves affected by their origins and by the character of their present ownership. They were often launched as entrepreneurial endeavors by typically capitalist investors. The great print and broadcast empires in American publishing and broadcasting show this pattern precisely – Luce of Time, Inc., Paley of CBS; the Hearst newspaper chain; the Chandlers' *Los Angeles Times.* Surprisingly, and perhaps more so than in any other major industries, these original founding families still control and dominate their entrepreneurial empires[1]. Under the heavy hand of the entrepreneurs, the news media were obliged to entertain, to sell advertising, and, where possible, to be first, to lead a mass audience wherever the entrepreneurs decided they should be led.

Editors and journalists in Western Europe who work for government-owned news media, as in Britain, France, and Portugal, should not be misled. They cannot escape

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the power of ownership to shape news coverage simply because their employer is the state rather than a private enterprise. The essence of state control of the news media is the assumption that the agencies of the state will act in the best interests of society as a whole. That assumption is no more self-evident than the assumption that private ownership of the news media best serves the public interest.

To a greater or lesser extent, the free news media of Europe and America operate under the protection of their governments. In peacetime our democracies content themselves with regulation; in wartime varying degrees of censorship.[2]

The potential for news media influence on society and public policy is greatest in the United States because of the protection afforded free speech by the First Amendment to the Constitution. There is no official secrets act. Under prevailing judicial interpretation, the government may not engage in the prior restraint of publication or broadcasting without the most exacting justification. Even while the country was at war in Vietnam, with hundreds of thousands of troops in combat, the US government could not prevent the publication of the «Pentagon Papers», thousands and thousands of pages of highly classified documents that revealed insights of great value to the Vietnamese revolutionaries about United States motives, methods, and, above all, reservations about prosecuting the war to the limits of its capabilities.[3]

Thus, there is no legal basis for prosecuting most of the US government officials who leak classified information to the news media. The present basis for prosecution for most foreign policy offenses that are not clearly treasonous, and treason is a constitutionally defined crime requiring admission of guilt or the testimony of two corroborating witnesses, or in violation of the laws governing atomic energy, derives from an Espionage Act passed in 1917. The specific section of the US law is known as section 703e of Title 18. Legal precedent requires the government to prove both that the material was made public with the intention to harm the United States and that material damage to the country actually occurred. Nor do Iibel laws offer much protection to public officials. In short, most of the legal sanctions that protect governmental secrecy and restrain the news media in other free societies either do not exist at all or operate without much force in the United States.

Finally, one must consider the logic of the profession of journalism. The aim of journalists of integrity is to report what first hand observation reveals to be true. As Walter Lippman observed, this involves both witnessing an event or trend – recording it for notice and inquiring into its larger significance. But the context in which journalists must work – entrepreneurial, competitive, entertaining, populist – rewards a certain

kind of journalism. The term in the United States is investigative journalism, by which is meant being first to reveal one or another kind of damaging secret, incompetence, criminality, or venality on the part of the authorities, whether in government or business and finance. Careers are made by journalism of this kind, whether in war correspondence or national and international news coverage. Scandal and failure sell advertising because the industry is populist in a democratic age.

But there is another reason for the importance of investigative journalism, or «muck-raking». The people of free pluralist societies use the news media as one interest group against others. We hope the press will disclose wrongdoing, and we depend on them to do it in our behalf. The dilemma for journalists and publishers in private enterprise is the constant conflict of interest between meeting this democratic expectation, and thus serving the common good, and satisfying the business goals of the newspaper or broadcasting station. The problem for editors and journalists in state-owned but free news organizations is to overcome the heavy weight of prevailing national political consensus and fashions as they plan and deliver their coverage and interpretation of the news.

The power of the media

In summary, in understanding the power of the news media, one must recognize:

- the importance of opinion in a democratic century;
- the impact of the ownership of the media, whether the papers and stations rest in private or public control;
- the commercial pressures to satisfy a populist audience and to make a profit;
- the standards of journalism that reward muck-raking, investigative journalism; and
- the dependence of free men and women on the news media to counterbalance the great industrial, commercial, financial, political, and military centers of power in their countries.[4]

With this understanding of the power of the news media in mind, one may address the manner in which the media influence foreign policy, and the measures that governments and others in free societies have adopted do deal with this influence.

One of the most striking characteristics of contemporary media coverage of international affairs is the willingness of editors and journalists to cover both sides of a

controversy or conflict. While this willingness varies greatly within and among Western, democratic societies, the degree to which the conflicting versions of events are reported is, one suspects, unprecedented. As Ed Cody of the *Washington Post* observed,

> ... during the shelling by the *USS New Jersey* of some positions in Lebanon, we at the *Washington Post* (and we certainly weren't alone in this) had a reporte r in Beirut reporting on the outgoing shells, and we had a reporter in Damascus and the Bekaa Valley driving in and reporting on what happened when they landed. So that if the spokesmen of the Army or the Navy said, well, all the targets were hit and none of them was in a civilian area, and we shot up the high command of the Syrian Army, there was a reporter there to say, well, wait a minute, this is what I saw.
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> ... The reason there was so much unfavorable reporting on the Israeli action in Lebanon in the Summer of 1982 was not that the Israeli army was lenient and cooperative in permitting reporting. It was not. On the contrary, it was obstructive. The reason was that for the first time in a major Middle East conflict there was uncensored and on-the-spot reporting from the other side ... When Secretary Shultz says, well, the press is no longer on our side, in a sense he's absolutely right. I don't think we are on the side of the US Army anymore, not automatically, and that is emphasized by our trying to report on both sides. This, I think, has caused and will cause a lot of friction.[5]

Contemporary news coverage in Western democracies, and particularly the United States, also puts the emphasis on the competence of the authorities rather than the correctness of the policy initiatives in question. Thus, a major criticism of both Presidents Carter and Reagan in their dealings with Khomeini's Iran has been their incompetence, their tendency to miss opportunities or to bungle operations that might have led to positive outcomes. «Ineffective» is the preferred adjective rather than «wrong.» The reasons for this trend are less obvious than the trend itself. It may be that in societies graced with a reasonable degree of ideological consensus there is a temptation to avoid divisive questions of right and wrong. It may also be that most current foreign policy problems are judged by broadcast and print editors and journalists as too complex to be discussed at length. For most people it is unquestionably far more interesting to delve into the personal shortcomings of important people than to have to painstakingly evaluate the ins and outs of dealing with, for example, a revolutionary theocracy.

There are special characteristics of international news coverage by the American

media that have profound effects both within and outside the United States. As a rule, stories are given large amounts of space and time only if Americans are involved, either indirectly because of a large national political/military or economic involvement; or directly, as when Americans are killed by terrorists. This is very evident, as Daniel Pipes observed, in American media coverage of the Middle East. It is highly egocentric coverage. It is eyed not only to solely American concerns, but it causes an extreme narrowness of vision and, consequently, distorts the views policymakers and members of Congress have of the region, not to mention the general public.

This egocentric coverage also has great impact outside the United States, for there is a sense in which American media coverage sets the agenda for the rest of the world. American coverage of an issue or an event can turn it into a world-class affair. Other countries then tend to dwell on the same egocentric focus that the American media have established, and thus may fall victim to the same narrowness of vision and distortions that haunt American policymakers. China, as Pipes observed, tends to concentrate on the United States and Israel in its coverage of the Middle East. This is creating the news as well as reporting it.[6]

Finally, the great influence of the news media, and particularly their coverage of both sides and their use by citizens of pluralistic democracies as a counter to other interest groups, has generated governmental and nongovernmental attempts to restrain and diminish the media's power. From their studies of the role of the media in the Vietnam War, Western democratic governments appear to have concluded that it is essential to restrict access. The British government denied the press first-hand observation of the military campaign to recover the Falkland Islands (Malvinas), and the United States prevented the press from accompanying the landings on Grenada. In a sense, this is a return to the complete governmental control of the press that characterized earlier military-media relations in wartime, as in world wars I and II. A similar pattern has been imposed on coverage of the Iran-Iraq war and has increasingly been applied, as well, to the coverage of racial conflict in South Africa, although none of the last three countries can be said to be representative democracies.

In the United States, with its wide-open interest group politics, a variety of «watch-dog» surveillance groups, many with covert agendas of their own, have been established to monitor media coverage of political and international affairs. Their impact on the media is unclear, but may be significantly greater than is generally recognized. These groups follow certain issues closely and do not hesitate to voice their concerns in imaginative ways, both as critics from the outside and as insiders offering advice to editors and journalists genuinely interested in the quality and impact of their efforts. Given the

constitutional protection of the American media and the widespread governmental control of the electronic media in Western Europe, there is a general need for publishers, editors, and journalists to engage in self-evaluation, Nearly everyone involved recognizes the need, but there is Iittle money, no career incentives, and even less time to engage in self-study, correction, and follow-up.

Conflicting powers

The influence of the news media is a necessary accompaniment to an age of democracy. In Western democratic societies, the people rely on the news media for information as they seek to govern themselves and to balance the great conflicting powers of faith and self-interest and ambition within themselves and their societies. Governments seek to control opinion through use and manipulation of the news because of the people's reliance on the media.

But there is a more profound sense in which the power of the media flows from democracy. Liberty of the press – and this is part of freedom of conscience and thought – are, as John Stuart Mill argued, essential barriers against corrupt and tyrannical government.

It is worth recalling the exact reasons Mill gave in support of freedom of the press:

> ... the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race .... If the opinion is right [we] are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, [we] lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error .... All silencing of opinion is an assumption of infallibility ... Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving [an] opinion is the very condition which justies us in assuming its truth ... and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right.[7]

It is even more common that opinions are neither completely true nor false, Mill said, but that conflicting opinions share the truth between them. Truth then lies in the reconciling and combining of opponents, and this can only be done through free discussion and expression.

We are obliged at this time to seek the truth through the clash between government and news media, in the self-interested careerism of journalists and editors, the entrepreneurial obsession of capitalist publishers, and the desperate need of our citizens for the influence that comes from publicity to check the great well-springs of

power in our societies. Despite the great uproar of accusation and condemnation, we should be less worried by the intensity of the clash between government and media than if there were no battles, no sirens and explosions, but only the silence of agreement. Then, as Mill reminded us, we would be the victims of one or another doctrine of infallibility, and all freedom would have been lost.

Notes

[1] For an interesting view of the ongms and development of CBS, the *Washington Post,* and the *Los Angeles Times,* see David Halberstam, *The Powers That* Be (New York: Dell, 1979).

[2] See Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty from the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspon· dent* as *Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975).

[3] For different views of the news media in Vietnam compare Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Teleuision Reported and lnterpreted the Crisis of Tet* 1968 *in Vietnam and Washington* (New York: Anchor Boks, 1978); and Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[4] See David Whitman, «The Press and the Neutron Bomb», in Martin Linsky, Jonathan Moore, Wendy O'Donnell, and David Whitman, *How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 145-217.

[5] Ed Cody, «Covering Grenada», *Essays* on *Strategy and Diplomacy,* 2 (July 1984), 24-25.

[6] Daniel Pipes, «The Media and The Middle East» , *Commentary,* 77 (June 1984), 29-34.

[7] John Stuart Mill, On *Liberty* (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909), 219-220.