



Research Article

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Do the Media Affect the Decisions of Policy Makers in Foreign Policy?

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Abstract

On July 16th 2021, the U.S. newly elected President Joe Biden hosted Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi at the White House. The main topic was the future of the U.S. troops in Iraq. The controversial American invasion, after more than eighteen years, is again in focus. The American media in particular is allocating long hours of its live coverage in discussing this sensitive topic. This paper investigates the complex relationship between media and policymakers in the USA. The paper uses the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a case study to address the question of the media's influence on policy decision-making. By choosing two main media outlets in the "stalwart" on democracy: The New York Times and Fox News. The paper goes through a detailed account of how the Bush administration was able to impose their interpretation of the situation and how the media fostered misperceptions among the American public in one of the most world's controversial crises. The conclusion from this analysis was that the media don't affect policymaking. On the contrary, the American administration shaped the news coverage almost entirely. The Bush administration in 2003 was able to employ media to form its war agenda and spreading it to the public. Media, even in a democratic system, was unable to give counter argument or even a critical attitude towards Bush administration foreign policy.

Keywords: Media coverage, Iraqi war 2003, Push Administration, American public opinion

1. Introduction

It became part of history that George W. Bush administration used to persuade public opinions after 9/11 that the United States was in a war state against terrorism. The American propaganda focused on the Iraqi possession of weapons of mass distraction (WMD) and a hidden linkage between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda. American media played an essential role on this topic. It went side by side with politicians to reach the make the desired public opinion.

Interestingly, the newly elected President Joe Biden was also an active part of that propaganda.

At that time as a senator, he authorizes force against Iraq and even joined then-President George W. Bush in the White House East Room when he signed the resolution. After the invasion, when no trace of WMD were found. Biden addresses the media:

"Let me tell you what I see with Iraq, we had to go into Iraq, not because Saddam (Hussein) was part of Al Qaeda, there was no evidence of that, not because he possessed nuclear weapons or because he posed an imminent threat to the United States, there was no evidence of that. The legitimate reason for going into Iraq, was he violated every single commitment he made and warranted being taken down. And the international community and us had a right to respond" (Lite.CNN,2020).

Biden statement mentioned above came one year after the war. Till that time, no fundamental change in his stand. He was still supporting President George W Bush decision to start the Iraqi war by voting for the invasion. Yet, after another year, in 2005 he criticized how the Bush administration handled the war. Biden acknowledged his vote was a "mistake". However, till now he dare not to mention, the real incentive towards heading to war in Iraq without even the approval of the United Nation.

Alan Greenspan, who served five times as chair of the Federal Reserve of the United States simply admitted in his famous book 'The Age of Turbulence' what Joe Biden did not say, that the war on Iraq - as everyone knows- was about Iraqi oil. (Greenspan, 2007:463). Greenspan, who was in charge of determining the financial policy for more than 20 years in the most economic, political and militarily powerful country in the world, digress to say that Iraq is vital to the strategic interest of the USA in any long-term energy arrangement. For this main reason, no American President may 'admit' his old 'mistake' in relation to the war on Iraq. This harsh but true statement is also still valid in 2021 and President Joe Biden is no exception. Since the real incentive was oil not Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) or saving Iraq from dictatorship; No complete withdraw of military forces is expected.

The demanding question is to understand why the American media did not admit such a 'mistake' before the invasion or launching of military operations. Media, in a stalwart of democracy, should work independently and highlights the full truth independently. How American media interacted with such international events. In other words, the American mass media, before the invasion, were devoted to discussing this controversial event. But it was not effective in preventing the war. Was mass media able to affect the decisions of policymakers in foreign policy? According to (Dorman, 2006), the role of media in the USA can be seen as the daily textbook for its audience. It tells what is happening in other parts of the world. It also warns Americans from expected 'terrorists' and gave them a daily dose of concerns that comes especially from Iraq. In other words, media is involved in the details of people's lives. It affects them and, at the same time, could be affected by them. If American media, which is considered a stalwart of democracy, has such an intensive effect on public opinion then what could be the influence of American mass media on foreign policymakers and policymaking? To be more specific, there is a need to examine whether the American mass media have affected (either positive or negative) the decision of invading Iraq in 2003?

While doing this, this paper will focus on media activity in the period between 9/11 and the start of the Iraq war in March 2003. The focus will be on the most influential TV networks and the most prominent daily newspapers in the USA namely Fox News and The New York Times. We propose to analyze their coverage of Iraq and terrorism topics during the above selected period.

2. American Public Opinion Between the two Gulf Wars

The quality of political leadership can determine how powerful the expected media influences would be. In the case of the USA foreign policy, strategies and goals were unrealistic (Seib, 1997: xix). The American foreign policy after 9/11 was ill-defined and the public felt some sort of policy uncertainty as a response. Indeed, policy uncertainty (Robinson 2001 cited in Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010:56) is the main reason enabling media to influence policy. The publics were strongly committed to a media report in relation to the war on terror and counterattacks. The media has a strong power to

determine the public attitude and to put pressure on the Bush administration if in need. However, this was not the case on the ground. We can digress and say that the opposite was the case. The media in relation to the Iraq war in 2003 did have a significant effect on supporting Bush intentions and allowed him to proceed. Bush administration knew this fact well. Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly, the Pentagon's chief press briefer during the second Gulf War, knew this fact as well. He stated, "anybody who doesn't recognize that the support of the American people is a critical element of combat power is pretty dumb" (Paletz, W.Lance Bennett & David L., 1994:17).

As a matter of fact, the support of the American nation was not far to reach. American public attitude towards terrorism became very sensitive after 9/11; counter-terrorism was a favorite subject on their living room news. President Bush administration successfully developed the 9/11 tragic event towards its strategic interests.

To understand the American trends concerning the Iraqi war in 2003, it is worth going back to the second Gulf War on Iraq in 1991 in which President Bush Senior was not in need of huge effort to persuade the American public of the noble cause they were fighting for:

The administration did not orchestrate the Citizens for a Free Kuwait propaganda campaign but did seize upon it when making the case for going to war against Iraq. The Kuwaitis –as-martyrs imagery was particularly useful in deflecting charges that Bush's was a 'blood for oil' tradeoff (Manheim, 1994:54)

What concerned the public opinion at that stage was the Vietnam Syndrome. The Vietnam War became known as the living-room war. It had a great effect on the elite and that was one of the reasons that led America to lose it. The daily pictures that came to their screens each day gave a negative attitude towards the war. This attitude, however, became no more than history after the USA clear victory in 1991.

This is a proud day for America, declared President George Bush immediately following the allied coalition's successful military conclusion to the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all

People in the 1991 war did not see pictures of casualties and destruction on screen. Instead, thanks to CNN for this, they witnessed their 'smart weapons' reaching and destroying Saddam's evil empire. Former NBC News president Lawrence Grossman focused on the success of news management in the second Gulf War:

The military's most striking success in controlling the flow of battlefield information, however, came not from its censorship of war news... but from its well-planned and inspired decision to flood the world's television screens with fascinating videotapes of smart bomb strikes that never missed and with detailed official briefings (Grossman, 2009)

At the end of that war, the public opinion was ready to accept another clean war to 'liberate' the Gulf region from 'its new Hitler' as the American media used to call him. In other words, the road was paved even long before 9/11 to launch a war for 'good' purposes.

The informed permission of the government is impossible without the mechanism of a free press. In the realm of foreign affairs, where under usual circumstances Americans tend to be least well informed and least interested, the press has a particularly important role to play, given the dynamics of the media's agenda-setting capacity and its power to representation (Dorman, 2006)

In relation to American public opinion, (Dorman, 2006) pointed to the difference between "belief" and "knowledge" in relation to the recipient. Americans were ill-informed by their mass media. Originally Americans were not interested, but their media started a continuous daily effort to 'educate' them. That was done in a fine and subtle way.

A study done by the Program of International Policy Attitude (PIPA) conducted before, during, and after the third Gulf War strikingly illustrated that more than 68% of Americans accepted at least one of the three USA decision makers' claims and pretext to start the war. Their misperceptions were: First, after 9/11

there is a connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Second, Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. Third, the war has international legitimacy and support of world opinion (Kull, 2003).

3. The New York Times Coverage from 9/11 till 2003 Iraqi War

The New York Times is a recognized leader in the national news media, viewed as a credible source of international news. The reach of the paper is significant, as is the potential impact of the public agenda... (it) play key role in helping American citizens determine the relevance of international issues and events (Kosic, 2005:112)

According to (Kosic, 2005) A credible news establishment in the USA like The New York Times is used to play an essential role in informing and educating the American audience with international events and other major world issues. This newspaper can reach every house in the USA and its objectivity is considered unmatched.

It is worth noting that in June 2004, the *Times* examined its coverage in relation to its articles before, during and just after the war. After reviewing hundreds of articles about the Iraqi war, alleged ties to terrorism and WMDs, it criticized its coverage by admitting that they should have been more open in relation to Iraqi huge stockpiles. The newspaper regrets that it should allow opposite voices to express themselves freely especially those who claimed that no WMD's exists (Editors, 2004). After two months, in August 2004 the Washington Post mentioned the same apology (Kurtz, 2004).

This transparent acknowledgement from The New York Times was a correct but too late step to regain its objectivity on one hand and the trust of its readers on the other. But still, it is a demanding question to ask why a firmly established newspaper such as The New York Times to be on the wrong side in relation to Iraq? According to Dorman, the media did not challenge the president's assumptions about the need for war because of 9/11, the questions of national security and journalists' fear of appearing unpatriotic (Dorman, 2006).

For this reason and just after the war, articles began to appear to tell the opposite. New York Times opened its article on June 17th by admitting that there was no evidence or linkage between Al-Qaeda, September, 11th and the Iraqi leadership. The Bush administration should apologize because he misleads the American nation. (Editorial, 2004)

But again, that was too late. The striking fact is the huge number of articles before the war. Robinson & Livingston closely examined the articles which appeared in The New York Times that linked Iraq and the topic of terrorism in the period between 9/11 and the Iraq war in 2003. They discovered that the association between Iraq and Al-Qaeda was mentioned in 100 articles. 97 of these articles subtly implied an assertion that Iraq "harbor" terrorists, while 3 of them referred directly to the involvement of Iraq in 9/11 (Livingston, 2006). Just in October 2001, Livingston was able to observe 194 articles that made a general connection between Iraq and terrorism.

A survey done by Gallup in November 2001 found that 74% of the Americans were willing to send troops and use force to remove Saddam Hussein. Taking into consideration in February 2001 the percentage was only 22% (Polling Report, 2001).

In November 2001 Livingston observed 107 stories discussing Iraq and terrorism. In December there were another 100 articles in The New York Times on the same subject (Livingston, 2006). By March, public opinion polling found that 88% of Americans believed that it was important to remove Saddam Hussain from power (Polling Report, 2001).

On January 29, 2002, Bush had his famous state of the Union speech in which he directly linked weapons of mass destruction to terrorism in Iraq. That speech was widely known as the "Axis of evil" speech. After it, American media resumed its usual linkage between Iraq and Terrorism. According to Livingstone (2006), pointing at the relations between Iraq and al Qaeda became more direct in the preceding months. The numbers of articles were as follows: February 96, March 110, April 110, May 56, June 55, July 52 (Livingston, 2006). Moreover, in a period between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2001, Livingstone was able to count 2662 stories related to Iraq and Al Qaeda in The New York Times.

In August 2002, a Gallup poll found that 86% of Americans agreed that Hussein was involved in

supporting terrorists (PIPA). Livingston put it differently by pointing out that the American public considered Iraqi President Saddam Hussain guilty through continuous oral allegations of countering terrorism by both the New York Times and the Bush Administration. (Livingston, 2006).

On the other hand, Ronald Bishop focused in his study on anti-war articles depending on a series of Lexis-Nexis searches and his collection efforts. He found that between December 2002 and May 2003, only 178 articles were produced on antiwar in ALL major daily newspapers (Bishop, 1996).

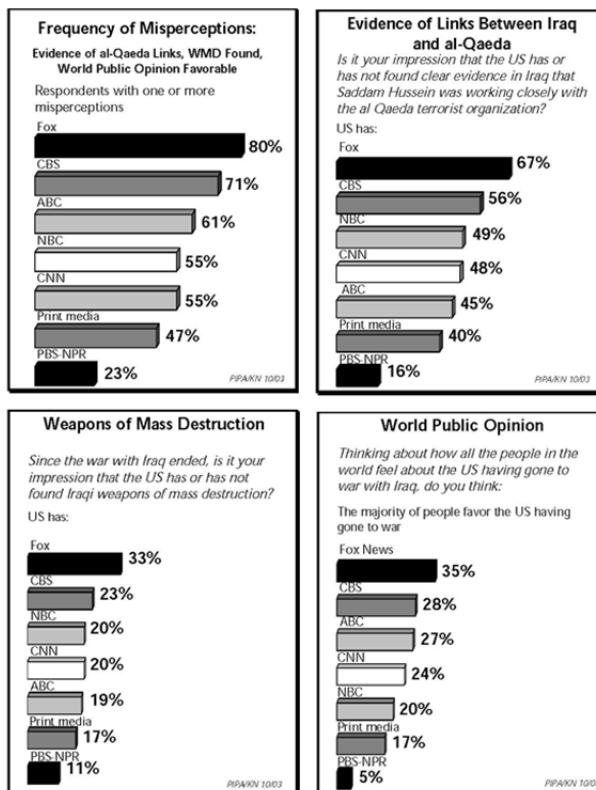
The above statistics clearly show that American journalism was not an obstacle at all against U.S. administration intentions towards Iraq. On the contrary, it had a positive impact and we can say that it was -intentionally or unintentionally- a major assistant to the administration. U.S. journalists prepared the public opinion for the next step and were encouraging the policymakers to proceed not to deter.

4. Fox News and Misperceptions Before The Gulf War 2003

Different PIPA polls were conducted in different periods on a random sample consists of 3,334 respondents. The first and most important question was "What is the source of your news: TV or newspaper?" The massive majority relayed on TV with a percentage of 80%. Fox News was no.1 and got 18% which was far higher than CNN, NBC, ABC and CBS. After that, the poll asked three direct questions related to the major misperceptions before the start of the Iraqi war. First, Evidence of Links Between Iraq and Al Qaeda. Second, Weapons of Mass Destruction. Third, World Public Opinion. The answers according to (Kull, 2003) indicated that the audience of Fox News was far beyond other networks in selling the above mentioned three misperceptions.

In other words, the most viewed and trusted U.S. TV channel, namely Fox News was number one in relation to 'ill-informing' the nation.

The diagrams below illustrate the numbers in detail:



The surveys demonstrate the tendency towards giving the nation false information and false beliefs to gain the needed support for the war on Iraq.

In most U.S. TV channels in general and in Fox News in particular interviews went into the same context and only rarely could one find a guest or talk show in an American news program that criticized the current American national attitude. Rutherford noticed that on six main TV programs and cross-talks, the anti-war programs were less than 10%. The painful truth was that most of the guests on screen were not Americans but foreign nationalities. On the other hand, Pro-war were two thirds or more. (Rutherford, 2004).

The striking fact is that the media was in a way or another a docile figure that was unable to give a counterargument or even a critical attitude towards Bush administration foreign policy. On the contrary, American media was the main support to Bush to proceed. Indeed, the impact of 9/11 on Americans was so powerful and the American mass media was stumbled in concepts of war on terror and WMD. It can be considered as a picture in the American mind after 9/11 since “elements prominent in the media pictures become prominent in the audience’s picture” (Estrada, 1997:237). As a result, it was not difficult for the W. Bush administration to “establish phase” of war. While the first Bush administration wasted time on convincing the public of the need for war with Iraq although the noble cause did exist (e.g. Saddam is another Hitler, Liberation Kuwait, Oil and American prosperity) (Paletz, W.Lance Bennett & David L., 1994).

George W. Bush administration used fine and subtle propaganda to persuade the public that after 9/11 the United States was in a war state against terrorism.

5. Why Media Did Not Tell the Other Side of the Story?

If the American military involvement in Iraq was a wrong step as it was fully discovered later, why the American media, then, did not try to deter Bush’s administration’s desire of invasion?

The media, itself, is one of the reasons! When this nation witnessed the most savage terrorist attack since Pearl Harbor 1941, American media as a shortcut to public opinion changed accordingly. Media coverage after 9/11 did not leave room for a counterargument. It was a general attitude of shock and horror. People were still worried that there could be another massive attack anytime and anywhere inside or outside the States. Indeed, that was the main reason why American journalists dare not to give a counterargument (Massing, 2004)

Krugman (2004) went deep in analyzing this phenomenon. He noted that because of the tragedy of 9/11 and its huge effect on the Nation; most of the American media preferred to reduce criticism to military staff to the minimum. That was an undeclared collective decision to maintain national unity. The national unity and the permanent fear from new terror attacks after 9/11 were the main apparent factors that characterized American media and this explains its ‘blind’ support to the Bush administration. It became a rule that no negative attitude against the President of the United States or his administration or his military staff should be said in American media. Such an attitude may ruin the reputation of the journalist and isolates him forever.

6. Conclusion

American media was a bridge between public opinion and the overall administration strategic will. The media supported Bush administration in a clear desire to proceed. George W. Bush and his administration were able to make strategic use of the American media. In a fine and smooth way, his administration was able to employ media in defining a problem with Iraq and in forming its war agenda and spreading it to the public after that.

In a nutshell and as Entman (2004:142) put it “Public opinion can not be divorced from the political discourse and media frames that surround it”. Media was a great support to the decisions of USA policymakers. It shaped public opinion in a way that made the whole country cherish a war that would bring liberty to the Iraqis and security to the Americans.

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