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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

AMERICAN
PUBLIC OPINION
AND THE MEDIA

Edited by

ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

and

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2011

CHAPTER 41

PUBLIC OPINION, THE MEDIA, AND WAR

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At least at the broadest level of analysis, the media do not seem to have much independent impact on public attitudes toward war. For the most part, the media are exactly that: the thing in the middle. As such they convey information, for better or worse, about what is going on and who is doing what in the war. But it is the information conveyed that chiefly matters, not the method or style of delivery.

Although the role of the media in influencing thought is often considered to be enormous, much research on the issue concludes that in the main, media reports simply reinforce or strengthen beliefs already held by its readers and viewers (Kinder and Sears 1985, 705-14; see also Zaller 1996, 17-18). This is likely to be especially true in the case of war.

War is humanity's least subtle phenomenon. Unlike many foreign policy events, it captures people's attention, and they generally have a pretty good idea about what goes on in it. They also seem to have a fairly good feeling for how to evaluate the stakes at risk in the armed conflict, and they generally seem capable of determining for themselves whether the value of the war is, or is not, worth the costs. They do need information about the war's purported stakes and about what is going on in the war. But it is the message that matters, not the media.

Indeed, people may not even need the formal media to make up their mind if they are able to collect the relevant information by other means. We have no poll data to confirm the conclusion, but it seems likely that the support of the Soviet people for their government's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s declined as Soviet casualties mounted, even though information about what was actually going on there came to them primarily through word of mouth, not through the controlled media.

The media, then, lie (or lurk) between the events they report and the customers they serve. In a free, market driven society, they must, of necessity, be sensitive to both, transmitting, rather than shaping, events and the actions of those who make the news

and satisfying the demands of those who consume it. Thus, in the end, the events, event makers, and media consumers substantially call the shots. As Gladys and Kurt Lang observe in their study of press coverage of Watergate, "The main contribution of the media to moving opinion along was their extensive and full coverage of critical events" (Lang and Lang 1983, 304; see also Nacos 1990, 189; and the discussion about "audience effects" in Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980). The same, it appears, holds true for war. Thus, in an important text on public opinion and American foreign policy (not only on war), Ole Holsti scarcely ever finds cause even to mention the media (2004; see also Strobel 1997).

In this chapter I seek to determine who or what ultimately sets the policy agenda in the case of war and which sorts of facts are the ones that matter most in the process.

FRAMING, PRIMING, AND AGENDA-SETTING

Some researchers have concluded that the media—television in particular—are important not so much because of the way they influence opinion one way or the other, but because of the important independent role they play in gate-keeping, in framing issues, and in setting or priming the agenda for public discussion. "Americans' views of their society and nation are powerfully shaped by the stories that appear on the evening news," they argue, and they find that "people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem . . . cared more about it, believed that government should do more about it, reported stronger feelings about it, and were much more likely to identify it as one of the country's most important problems" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 112; see also Brody 1991, 111; Russett 1990, ch. 4; Page and Shapiro 1992, 339–48; Zaller 1992, ch. 12).

At least in the case of war, however, the notion that the media has a notable—and, in particular, lasting—independent impact in agenda-setting is called into question. To illustrate the process, the experience before, during, and after the Gulf War can be useful (Mueller 1994, 130–3), particularly because that war seems to have been special in the degree to which postmortems have been preoccupied with the role played by the media (see, for example, Smith 1992; MacArthur 1992; Taylor 1992; Lamay, Fitzsimon, and Sahadi 1991; Bennett and Paletz 1994).

Immediately after Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, there appears to have been a certain wariness and confusion on the part of the public as to how to interpret the event. This evaporated a few days later when President George H. W. Bush announced troops would be sent to Saudi Arabia. At that point, the contest in the Gulf soared to the top of the political agenda, but this happened far more by the actions and statements of Bush and Saddam Hussein than by anything the media did. The media dutifully reported what was being said and done of course, and they commented extensively on it in columns and editorials, but it was the message that dominated the media, not the other way around. Moreover, when the attention of the

public and the media was diverted in October 1990 to a bitter budget fight between the president and Congress, the Gulf crisis was brought back onto the agenda not by the media, but by the actions of the president when he escalated the troop commitment threateningly in November, and it was the ongoing debate between the president and his political opponents (and Saddam) that kept it there.

Once war began in January 1991, the media found that their consumers had a nearly insatiable appetite for news—especially for supportive news—and they serviced that demand assiduously, supplying their ravenous customers with huge amounts of information about the war. It proved to be the event that elevated CNN, perhaps the war's only unambiguous winner, to prominence. Serving the public mood, the coverage was characterized by boosterism, even sycophancy. One accounting finds that 95 percent of all television news sources who discussed the performance of the American military praised its effectiveness (Lichter 1992, 227). The editors at the *Los Angeles Times* war desk explicitly took their cue from the polls. Noting that the public seemed to support the war 80–20, they decided that it made sense for their coverage to be similarly weighted. That proportion would have been generous. According to one study, during the war only one out of 878 on-air sources who appeared on newscasts over the major television networks represented a national peace organization (Solomon 1991). And another found that newspapers during the first three weeks of the war devoted 2.7 percent of their space to peace activities while the comparable figure for television network news was 0.7 percent (LaMay, Fitzsimon, and Sahadi 1991, 50; Lichter 1992, 224, 228).

This is hardly anything new. One of the innumerable myths about Vietnam is that the press was critical from the start. In fact, for the first years it largely conveyed the official Washington line and was rarely critical even by implication (see Hallin 1986, especially ch. 4; Page and Shapiro 1992, 226–34; Western 2005, 19).

Had the Gulf War gone badly, it is reasonable to suspect that the press would have become critical—though, as in the case of Vietnam, it would probably have followed, rather than led, political and public discontent. Without failure in the war, the media remained frozen in advocacy.

Then, immediately after the war ended in early March, the media sensed correctly that their customers' interest had shifted—without being led or primed or manipulated by much of anyone. Accordingly, the media followed them onto other issues—particularly the troubling state of the economy. A few months after the war, television network anchor-men found themselves observing in a panel discussion on C-SPAN that, although they personally considered foreign affairs to be of major and increasing importance to the country, they were cutting their coverage of foreign events because their customers wanted them to concentrate on domestic issues.

While the Gulf events demonstrate in some important ways the ability of the president (if not of the media) to lead and to set the public agenda, the post-war experience suggests that even he is far from all-powerful in this respect. It was clearly to Bush's political advantage to keep the war and foreign policy as lively political issues during his reelection campaign of 1991–2, and he certainly tried to do that. But despite the advantage of his enormous post-war popularity (see Page and Shapiro 1992,

348–50), he found himself unable to divert attention to topics more congenial to him. The public had shifted its agenda and wanted now to focus on the sagging economy—something very much to the benefit of his challenger, Bill Clinton. Only occasionally did Clinton bring up foreign affairs issues—and when he did, his remarks often received little play in the media anyway.

A contrast can be made here with an observation by Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon. Noting that, whereas 70 percent of the American public picked illegal drugs as the country's most important problem in 1989 but only 5 percent did so in February 1991 during the Gulf War, they suggest that the “most plausible explanation” for this change was that news coverage had shifted, not that the public was capable of shifting its attention on its own (Iyengar and Simon 1994, 168).

THE FACTS THAT MATTER

The public not only substantially sets its own agenda, particularly in the case of war, but it can be quite selective, and often rather unpredictably so, about which facts about the war, as transmitted by the media, it is willing to embrace. For example, about the only time the public chose to pay much attention to the war in Bosnia, a venture much publicized and much agonized over by elites and by the media in the 1990s, was when an American airman was shot down behind enemy lines and when American troops were dispatched to the area to police the situation (Sobel 1998, 258–9; see also Western 2005, 264–5).

A somewhat similar phenomenon is found in the run-ups to the Gulf War of 1991 and to the Iraq War of 2003. In neither case was the president able, despite great effort, notably to increase public support for going to war (Mueller 1994, 29–34; Larson and Savych 2005, 136; Mueller 2008, 126–9). However, his ability to order troops into action, and thereby to commit the country's honor and destiny, was. With such moves he can make an issue important and convey a compelling sense of obligation as well as of entrapment and inevitability. As with public support for the military ventures in Korea in 1950, in Vietnam in 1965, in the Gulf in 1991, and in Afghanistan in 2001, the war in Iraq was quite notably supported by the public (and elites) as the troops were sent in as a “rally round the flag” effect took place (Mueller 1973, 208–13).

More generally, this phenomenon suggests that the president does not necessarily need the advance support of the public (or of the media or elites) to pull off a military venture. The public generally seems to be willing to go along as troops are put in harm's way, but it reserves the right to object if, in its view, the cost of the war comes to outweigh its perceived value. Sometimes the public has apparently been quite supportive of military action, as in the Second World War (after Pearl Harbor), in Korea (1950), in Vietnam (1965), in Panama (1989), in Somalia (1992–3), and in Afghanistan (2001). At other times, the public has been at best divided, as in Lebanon (1958, 1983), Grenada (1983), the Gulf War (1991), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and the Iraq War (2003). In some cases, the ventures have been accomplished at acceptable cost, as

in the Second World War, Panama, Lebanon (1958), Grenada, the Gulf War, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In others, support dropped as costs grew, as in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq (and, eventually, Afghanistan). And in others, the public's dismay at rising costs was met by abrupt early withdrawal, as in Lebanon in 1983 and in Somalia (Mueller 2008, 129; see also Larson and Savych 2005).

In the three cases since 1945 in which significant American casualties were suffered—Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq—support decreased as casualties—whether, variously, of draftees, volunteers, or reservists—were suffered. This suggests that Americans have a sense of, and react to, the war's increasing cost. However, they are not particularly good at estimating the actual number of casualties at any point in time, nor do the often fanciful numerical estimates correlate with war support (Mueller 1973, 62–3; Berinsky 2009, 73–84). The decline was steeper in the early stages of the war as reluctant approvers were rather quickly alienated, and the erosion slowed as support progressively became reduced to the harder-core (Mueller 2008, 132–7).

However, this does not mean the wars were equally supported as the costs accrued. Specifically, it is clear the public places a far lower value on the stakes in Iraq than it did in the earlier anti-Communist wars: for example, in 2005 the percentage finding Iraq to have been a mistake, when around 1,500 Americans had been killed, was about the same as in Vietnam at the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, when about 20,000 had perished (Mueller 2005, 45). Casualty for casualty, support dropped off far more quickly in the Iraq War than in either of the earlier two wars. It is difficult to see why, or how, media effects could account for this key phenomenon. Nor is it likely explained by changes in cost tolerance: Americans expressed great willingness to expend lives to go after al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attack.

In all this, what chiefly matters for public opinion is American losses, not those of the people defended. For example, official estimates at the end of the 1991 Gulf War that 100,000 Iraqis had been killed scarcely dampened enthusiasm at the victory and “welcome home” parades for returning troops. And support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam derived from the fact that people held those conflicts to be vital to confront the Communist threat, not to defend the South Koreans or the South Vietnamese (Mueller 1973, 44, 48–9, 58, 100–1). This public preference shows up in news coverage which routinely reports and tallies American losses far more fully and systematically than those suffered by foreigners.

The issue about which facts matter can be further assessed by an examination of Figure 41.1, which displays the trend established by a key poll question that can be used to measure support for the Iraq War after its outset in 2003. As it demonstrates, certain events seem to have boosted or depressed support within the general factual fabric of the rally rise and the subsequent erosion of support as casualties mounted. In all cases, however, event-driven change proved to be temporary: soon after each boost or drop, support levels returned roughly to their previous level and then resumed their erosion if further American casualties were registered.

Thus, support for the war dropped at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as Americans were led to wonder about the nation's priorities, but this decline was more

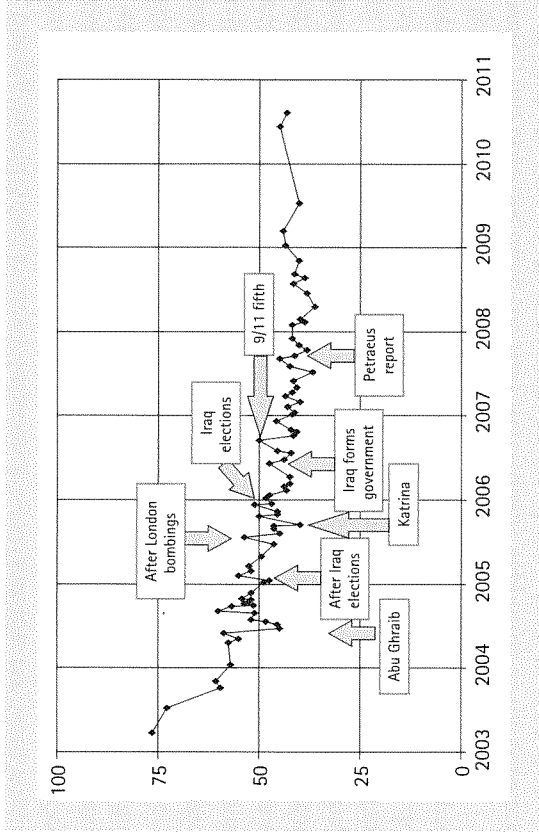


Figure 41.1 Trends in support for the war in Iraq, 2003–2010

"In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?" (percent supporting of those with opinion).

Source: The data come from listings at <<http://www.pollingreport.com>>.

than reversed, it appears, by the successful Iraq elections of November 15. Within days of that event, however, war support dropped again to a level slightly lower than was registered before either event took place. Similarly, a decline in support in 2004 at the time of the Abu Ghraib prison disclosures was eventually mostly reversed. There was also a notable upward shift in support for the war on many polls when Saddam Hussein was captured in mid-December 2003 (Mueller 2008, 131, 136). However, the specific poll question tallied in Figure 41.1 failed to register that effect because the question was not asked until a month after the capture, by which time the upward boost had evaporated.

It should be stressed that the labels supplied for the upward and downward bumps in Figure 41.1 are decidedly ad hoc. After the fact, an effort was made to consider what could plausibly have triggered each rise or fall—although some of these phenomena, of course, might simply be caused by sampling or other errors in polling procedures. However, taking the rises and falls at face value, it certainly seems that the events the public happened to consider significant were less than fully predictable—a special dilemma for media editors trying to deliver the news the public wants to hear.

Of particular note in this regard is that support for the war appears to have been affected on several occasions by events (or even non-events) that had nothing whatever to do with the war, though after the fact one can supply some linkages. Thus, as noted, support temporarily dipped in 2005 in apparent response to government action, or inaction, over Hurricane Katrina, a memorable event that took place thousands of miles away from Iraq. On the other hand, support temporarily rose after terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 and also at the time of the fifth anniversary of 9/11 in 2006, an event and non-event respectively that apparently reminded Americans of

what the war was purportedly all about. However, other anniversaries or other notable terrorist events—as in Madrid or Bali—do not seem to have had an effect.

Other peculiarities show up in the later stages of the war. In September 2007 General David Petraeus issued a report which garnered great attention suggesting that the war had started to go well for the United States and that it was reasonable, though not guaranteed, that further progress would ensue. The report, as might have been anticipated, caused war support to rise, but this actually happened *before* Petraeus reported, presumably in anticipation of what he was going to say—about which there was considerable informed advance speculation. Immediately after the report was issued, support for the war actually dropped to about where it had registered previously.

Then, the situation in the war actually did improve and, in particular, American casualty rates very substantially declined. In result, erosion of support for the war seems essentially to have ceased, something predictable if one assumes American casualties are what matter (Mueller 2005, 49).

In contrast to all this, some scholars have argued that support for war is determined by the prospects for success rather than by casualties—that Americans are “defeat phobic” rather than “casualty phobic” and therefore that “persuading the public that a military operation will be successful” is “the linchpin of public support” (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009, 236–7). Essentially, the argument seems to hold that Americans, or at least a substantial portion of them, don’t really care how many casualties they suffer so long as their side comes out the winner. This perspective led, in part, to an effort by President George W. Bush to push the idea of “victory” in a set of speeches at the end of 2005 (Shane 2005). As with his very considerable efforts to sell his Social Security plan earlier that year (Jacobson 2007, 206–18) or his father’s effort to keep memories of his 1991 war at the peak of the American consciousness, the campaign proved futile, as can be seen in Figure 41.1. The experience is one of many that suggests that the efficacy of the bully pulpit has often been much overrated (Edwards 2003).

After the 2007 Petraeus report, however, things *did* actually improve in Iraq to the point where, by 2009, some could claim that victory had been achieved. The public clearly got the message: within a year after the Petraeus report, the percentage of people who thought US efforts were making things better rose from 30 to 46 while those believing they were having no impact dropped from 51 to 32. And the percentage holding that the US was making significant progress rose from 36 to 46 while the percentage concluding that it was winning the war rose from 21 to 37. Despite this change, however, as Figure 41.1 suggests, support for the war did not increase—nor did it do so on measures tapping those who favored the war, those who felt it had been worth the effort or the right decision, or those who favored staying as long as it takes. Successful prosecution of a war, it appears, is unlikely to convert people who have already decided it was not worth the costs (Mueller 2005, 49). American casualty rates also declined after 2007, but this, too, had no effect on support for the war, although there had been studies predicting that decreased casualty rates would cause support to increase (Gartner 2008, 105).

In fact, the most significant public opinion development in this war seems to owe virtually nothing *either* to the media *or* to opinion leadership by party leaders: the creation of a massive partisan division on the war. The public, or much of it, has viewed war through partisan lenses (Mueller 1973, 116–22; Zaller 1992; Berinsky 2009, ch. 5). However, as Gary Jacobson has documented, the partisan split for the Iraq War of 2003 was considerably greater than for any military action over the last half century (2007, 131–8). An interesting comparison can be made with the 1991 Gulf War. In the run-up to each, Democrats were predictably less likely to support the prospective wars than were Republicans, but what is surprising is that the partisan gap was *far* wider in the 2003 case than in the 1991 one even though Democratic leaders in Congress stood in strong opposition to going to the earlier war, while in the later one they mostly remained silent or were even generally supportive of the effort (Jacobson 2007, 133, 136). That is, partisan elites disagreed far more in the run-up to the earlier war, but partisan public opinion differences were far greater in the later one. The effect continued during the Iraq War itself as the Democratic base jerked a reluctant party leadership toward an anti-war stance.

THE SPECIAL IMPACT, IF ANY, OF VISUAL INFORMATION

Insofar as the erosion of support in wars is related to casualties, the phenomenon is caused by the fact of cumulating combat deaths. Pictures in the media of dead bodies, body bags, or flag-draped coffins are not necessary. Somehow, the notion that support declines with casualties became expressed as “support drops when they start seeing the body bags,” and this vivid expression apparently led, in turn, to the naive notion that for people to become disaffected they actually need to *see* the body bags. In consequence, perhaps, the military in the Iraq War of 2003 enterprisingly tried to keep pictures of body bags and flag-draped coffins out of the media presumably in the hope that this would somehow arrest the decline of support.

To insist on the importance of pictures is to suggest that people are so unimaginative that they only react when they see something visualized. Yet, Americans were outraged at the Pearl Harbor attack weeks—or even months—before they saw pictures of the event (Mueller 1995, 98–9). They hardly needed visual stimuli. Moreover, the Vietnam War was not noticeably more unpopular than the Korean War for the period in which the wars were comparable in American casualties, despite the fact that the later war is often seen to be a “television war” while the earlier was fought during the medium’s infancy (Mueller 1973, 167; see also Mandelbaum 1981; Lichty 1984; Hallin 1986; Strobel 1997).

During the Gulf War of 1991, one reporter observed that “You can be certain that if saturation bombing of the Iraqi capital becomes an American tactic, stomach-churning footage of bombed-out schools and hospitals will find their way on to American

screens” (quoted in Taylor 1992, 11). But the immunity the American public showed to the images of a bombed air-raid shelter in Baghdad and of the war’s much publicized “highway of death” suggests there was little effect. The “highway of death” pictures do seem to have influenced American policy by inspiring concerns in the administration about how the visuals might affect public opinion. But these concerns were not justified: it appears that the public was scarcely moved by these pictures (Mueller 1994, 122).

Relatedly, during the Second World War an experiment was made to determine whether “realistic” war pictures would hurt morale. It found that those who were exposed to such pictures were not any more or less likely to support the war than an unexposed control group. Those exposed, however, did become more favorable to showing people realistic war pictures (National Opinion Research Center 1944). Moreover, efforts of the military to use vivid propaganda films during that war to indoctrinate new draftees were ineffective (Kinder and Sears 1985, 706).

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA: PLACING ITEMS ON THE SHELF

One view in all this would be to see the media as purveyors or entrepreneurs of tantalizing information. They report on a wide variety of topics and they are constantly seeking to turn people on—and, accordingly, to boost sales. For example, the editors of *Time* or *Newsweek* would be quite happy if every one of their cover stories became a hot button item. Not all, however, do so.

An interesting example of the phenomenon arises in the case of the Ethiopian famine that received such big play and was so affecting in the mid-1980s. This is often taken to have been a media-generated issue because it was only after it received prominent coverage in the media that the issue entered the public’s agenda. But a study by Christopher Bosso (1989) suggests a different interpretation. At first the media were reluctant to cover the issue at all because they reckoned this African famine (like other ones) to be a dog-bites-man story. Moreover, the story had received some play, and it had stirred little response, thus suggesting that the customers were not interested. However, going against the consensus, NBC television decided to do a three day sequence on the story in October 1984. This inspired a huge public response, whereupon NBC gave it extensive follow-up coverage and its television and print competitors scrambled to get on the bandwagon, deluging their customers with information that, to their surprise, was actually in demand.

There is a sense, of course, in which it could be said that NBC led opinion and put the issue on the public’s agenda and that the media “magnified” the event. But the network is *constantly* doing three-day stories, and this one just happened to catch on. It seems more accurate to say NBC put the issue on the *shelf*—alongside a great many

others—and that it was the public that put it on the agenda and demanded the magnification. Ironically, Bosso's study is published in a book titled *Manipulating Public Opinion: Essays on Public Opinion as a Dependent Variable*. It seems clear, however, that in the case he documents, it was the media that was the dependent variable. In a very important sense, the public was manipulating the media, not the other way around.

In the case of the Gulf War of 1991, as noted earlier, the agenda does seem to have been set far more by the public (and by the dramatic events themselves) than by the media. Journalists and editors reported what was going on, and they correctly doped out that their public wanted more news about events in the Gulf. So instructed, they supplied that need, but they did not invent it, nor did they invent the issues that, for a while, so engrossed the public. Then, when the customers tired of the issue in the wake of the successful war, the media dutifully shifted their attention, despite the strenuous efforts of the previously influential President to keep the war euphoria and glow alive. The message and the customer dominated, even intimidated, the medium.

The caprice of the customer also explains a phenomenon often taken to be a great failing of the media: the lack of follow-up. Thus, in a classic book analyzing coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Peter Braestrup takes the press to task not so much for misreporting the offensive itself as for failing to follow up, for neglecting to reassess the event in its aftermath when more and fuller information became available. Instead, the press simply let its often erroneous first impressions become the established story. There were some notable exceptions, but these were rare and they lacked resonance with the public—which, of course, explains their rarity (Braestrup 1983, ch. 13).

Something similar can be said for the Gulf War of 1991. It generated huge interest within the public during its approach and execution: indeed, a few days before the war began, 22 percent of the public said they thought about the crisis in the Gulf every few minutes and another 27 percent said they did so at least once an hour, while only 10 percent were so blasé as to claim they thought about it at most once a day (Mueller 1994, 214). However, that interest abruptly evaporated at its end, as discussed above, and, stimulated by the demands of its consumers, the once war-obsessed media quickly moved on to the next issue. The author of a book published a full year after the war observes that, "the complete story of why and how [the war] happened has gone largely untold" (US News and World Report 1992, p. vii), even as John Simpson of the BBC mused, "not many people seem interested in finding out what really happened" (1991, p. xiv). If their readers and viewers lose interest, the media will, perforce, follow suit.

DELIBERATION, REASON, AND CAPRICE

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Ultimately, democracy is based on the notion that "the people shall judge." Various "opinion leaders," including those in the media, bring out ideas and perspectives and try to sell them to the public (sometimes even by "pandering"). The public then

"judges"—chooses which of the many issues before it are worthy of its attention and which of these it is willing to embrace.

The process is perhaps less one of "deliberation" than one in which reason is blended with a considerable amount of caprice, and it is distinctly inexact in part because, far from being the attentive, if unpolished, policy wonks dreamed of in so many theories about democracy, real people in real democracies often display a lack of political interest and knowledge that approaches the monumental (Mueller 1999, 183–5; Gans 1979, 226). However, as much of this discussion has suggested, people often seem quite capable of making up their minds without much reliance either on the media or on "opinion leaders" (Page and Shapiro 1992; Mueller 2002, 149–57).

As anyone who has spent time in a newsroom knows well, they are inhabited by a class of people, editors, who spend their lives assessing stories and potential stories and guessing whether their customers will ignore the story, whether the story has a lasting power of a day or so, or whether it is likely to enjoy a longer run. Every reporter has gone in with a seemingly interesting story or angle only to be greeted with the ultimate put-down: "Nah. Nobody's interested in that." Whether editors really know what they are doing in gaging their customers' likely response to a story would be an area worth investigating. One would probably want to remove from consideration those stories that are so obviously big that no predictive skills are necessary: the sudden death of Princess Diana or of pop star Michael Jackson, for example. But even with that, editors perhaps do, on balance, get it right. And, of course, if they do guess wrong, they can quickly abandon a story that doesn't stir interest while jumping on those that do.

This does not mean stories are necessarily composed solely with the market in mind—something, actually, that would be unwise because of the difficulty of predicting what consumers of the news will actually be interested in. In fact, in a study about how journalists decide what is news, Herbert Gans finds that they do not "directly take the audience into account when selecting and producing stories," but rather that they assume "what interested them would interest the audience" (Gans 1979, 229–30). Journalist Daniel Gardner substantially agrees. Reporters, editors, and producers do not calculate their stories in order "to boost revenues and please their corporate masters," he concludes. Rather, "they do it because information that grabs and holds readers grabs and holds reporters. They do it because they are human." A story is likely to be "newsworthy" if it includes "novelty, conflict, impact, and that beguiling and amorphous stuff known as human interest" (Gardner 2008, 167–8). But "human interest" means that, for the story to succeed, it must interest humans.

Then, once a story that is deemed (or calculated) to be likely to interest humans (that is, consumers) is put on the shelf, the media, as in the Ethiopia case, follow up on those items that stimulate their customers' interest. If they give an issue big play, it may arrest attention for a while. This momentary arresting of attention can be simulated in experiments, but, as suggested at the outset, the key issue is not momentary diversion, but whether the issue has legs: whether it actually *takes* (see also Zaller 1994, 201). Research in this area should examine not momentary rises in attention and interest, but ones that last.

And even more important, it is vital to avoid selection bias in which one focuses on the issues that do catch on after the media gives them play while neglecting the huge number of issues initially given equal play that never generate much of a stir at all. In his *Selling Intervention and War* John Western has looked at a variety of instances in which the people attempting to do the selling failed as well as ones in which they were successful. He repeatedly finds that the public has often "resisted persuasion," and that sales pitches work when the arguments made were ones "the public was willing to accept," when they "strike a chord" or "resonate" with the public (2005, 5, 20-1, 179, 229).

No one would seriously argue that the public paid so much attention to the deaths of Jackson and Diana because of extensive media coverage—the causal direction was clearly the opposite. Do the murders at Fort Hood by a deranged Muslim psychiatrist in 2009 capture infinitely less attention than the O. J. Simpson murders because the media is gate keeping or servicing its customers? Was there so little coverage of the Cambodian genocide of 1975-9 because the public at the time did not want to be reminded of the recently ended war in Vietnam, or because the media decided not to prime or frame (Mueller 2002, 170)? Why, despite considerable media coverage and impassioned advocacy by reporters, was so little interest roused in the public about the war in Bosnia in the early 1990s? Why did the public react to the famine in Ethiopia, but not to the far greater humanitarian disaster that has transpired in the eastern Congo since 1997? Why is the sex life of Madonna or Britney Spears or Tiger Woods of more interest than that of figures of more historic importance, or even of other celebrities? Why do the often quite colorful terrorist plots rolled up in the United States over the years since 9/11 generate only a few days of coverage? Also of research interest would be a systematic examination of the process by which the 2003 Iraq War generated partisan division far in excess of what would be expected from media and partisan elite effects (Jacobson 2010).

Like the media, public relations people are focused on predicting what people will be interested in, and they too are at the mercy of the whims and caprices of those they are seeking to "manipulate." For example, Richard Reeves's book *President Kennedy* came out in 1993. Seeking to imagine a hook for promoting the book, the publisher decided to try to link the Kennedy experience to that of Bill Clinton, an attractive, newsworthy Kennedy admirer who was then in his first year as president. As it happened, the book did come out at a commercially propitious time, but that had nothing to do with Clinton. The year 1993 just happened to be the thirtieth anniversary of Kennedy's assassination and, for some (or no?) reason, this stirred a flurry of interest that helped Reeves's book sales considerably. By contrast, there was no comparable flurry on the fortieth anniversary. Who knew? Who knows?

Promoters and "opinion leaders" have their hands full, and characteristically they fail much more often than they succeed. Indeed, if extensive purposeful promotion could guarantee acceptance, we'd all be driving Edsels. Or, put another way, anyone who could accurately and persistently predict public tastes and whims would not be

writing about it, but would move to Wall Street to become in very short order the richest person on the planet.

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