The News Does Matter:
Why and How Politicians Manipulate Journalists

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This is the era of media politics. The use -- even manipulation -- of the mass media to promote political objectives is now not only standard practice, but in fact essential to success. Recent instances of high-stakes media games include the national telecast of a presidential deposition, the immediate publication by the House Judiciary Committee of evidence submitted by Special Prosecutor Starr, and, more routinely, but in reality far more important, the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars for television advertising during election campaigns and policy debates.

Why is it that public relations and media advocacy have so thoroughly penetrated all governmental arenas, including even the traditionally invisible judicial process? The answer is that policy advocates, elected officials, and their paid political strategists all realize that America’s collective political consciousness is immutably grounded in the content and form of news programming. Most people have neither the time nor inclination to seek out information about political matters from sources independent of the media. Access to news, however, is relatively costless, in terms of both time and money. For all but a tiny number of Americans, the media is, therefore, the sole point of contact with the world of public affairs. Events and stories that fail journalistic tests of “newsworthiness” are, as the proverbial tree falling in the forest, non-existent. Is it any wonder that those who seek to influence public opinion and the policy process invest so heavily in media management?

Over the years, the “spotlight” function of the media has devolved to different news outlets, depending upon technological and market-based factors. The development of broadcasting in the 1940s elevated television newscasts over newspapers as the daily medium of record. More recently, the preeminent position of network newscasts has
been challenged by the proliferation of cable channels, the expansion of local news programming and, of course, the advent of online news outlets. Changes in the prominence of particular outlets have, not surprisingly, been associated with changes in the nature of the news itself. The substitution of television news for newspapers not only reduced the delivery time for news, but also changed the focus of the news to issues that are more active or visual in content, such as crime and terrorism. Moreover, as the number of media channels has increased, the competition for audiences has intensified. Increasingly, the need to entice and captivate audiences has taken precedence over the old-fashioned norm of journalism that informs.

Notwithstanding these dramatic changes in the shape of the industry and the product, the basic axiom of media-based politics remains fixed: those in a position to influence the content and imagery of news gain the upper hand in Washington D.C., Sacramento, or other policy arenas. It matters little that journalists strive for “objectivity” or freedom from partisan bias, because, as described below, for every news story, there are winners and losers.

Effects of News on the Mass Public

Agenda-Control

If there is one thing social scientists and communications specialists all agree upon, it is that ordinary citizens keep the world of public affairs at arm’s length. As casual observers of the political scene, individuals do not monitor the entire political universe; instead, they attend selectively to a few issues that appear important at the moment. Of course, apparent importance is very much a matter of what editors and journalists choose to cover or ignore since the prominence of issues in the news media is
the major determinant of the public’s perception of issue importance (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Since government officials (most notably, the President) are the principal sources of news, they are in an especially advantageous position to simultaneously influence the media and public agendas.

The most convincing evidence on media agenda-setting effects was provided by carefully controlled experiments carried out by Iyengar and Kinder (1987). These studies revealed that the insertion of only a modest degree of news coverage into network newscasts induced substantial shifts in viewers’ beliefs about the importance of issues. In one experiment, for example, viewers were shown a series of newscasts containing either three, six, or no stories dealing with U.S. dependence on foreign sources of energy. When exposed to no news coverage on this subject, 24 percent of the participants cited energy as among the three most important problems facing the country. When participants watched three stories on energy issues, 50 percent of them regarded energy as an important problem. Finally, when the “dose” was increased to six stories, energy was cited as an important national problem by 65 percent of the viewers.

Agenda-setting researchers have also identified several antecedent factors that condition the media’s ability to shape the public’s priorities. These include the personal relevance of the issue, the political involvement of the audience, and the prominence of coverage. In general, the more remote an issue or event is from direct personal experience, the weaker the agenda-setting effect of news coverage. Thus, people who are personally affected by issues in the news are particularly likely to have their agendas set by the media. After being exposed to news reports detailing the financial difficulties confronting the social security fund, elderly viewers of network newscasts were found to
be much more likely than younger viewers to nominate social security as one of the most important problems facing the country (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In addition, viewers who participate more actively in the political process tend to be less susceptible to agenda-setting effects. As Iyengar and Kinder note, “The more removed the viewer is from the world of public affairs, the stronger the agenda-setting power of television news.”

Finally, the manner in which a news story is presented significantly affects its ability to set the public agenda. Stories that are more likely to catch the public’s attention -- front-page news, newspaper stories accompanied by photographs, or lead stories in television newscasts -- tend to be particularly influential.

The effects of news coverage on issue salience has important consequences. The issues deemed significant by the electorate become the principal yardstick for evaluating candidates and governmental institutions. This “priming” phenomenon (weighting issues in accordance with their perceived salience) has been documented in a series of experimental and non-experimental studies (for a recent review of priming research, see Krosnick and Miller 1996). For instance, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that the news media’s sudden preoccupation with the Iranian hostage issue in the closing days of the 1980 presidential campaign caused voters to think about the candidates’ ability to control terrorism when choosing between Carter and Reagan. Naturally, this logic proved disadvantageous to President Carter. More recently, voters exposed (immediately prior to the 1998 congressional elections) to Democratic campaign literature that emphasized the Republican “witch-hunt,” were more likely to vote in accordance with their feelings toward President Clinton (Iyengar and Lowenstein 1999).
In sum, people pay attention to the world of public affairs through the media. Issues and events in the news are judged to be important and treated as relevant considerations for evaluating the caliber of public officials.

Framing Issues and Events

The concept of framing refers to the effects of presentation on judgment and choice. In the psychological literature on judgment, it is well known that choices depend upon whether outcomes are labeled as potential gains or losses. Analogous effects have been detected by public opinion researchers who elicit diverging opinion responses by changing the wording of survey questions. When asking people about the desirable level of government spending, for instance, the stimulus “people on welfare” typically elicits less charitable responses than the stimulus “poor people.” (Smith 1987).

Researchers have extended the concept of framing to media news presentations. Television news coverage of political issues embodies two distinct frames of modes of presentation -- the episodic and thematic news frame. Episodic framing depicts issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events -- a homeless person, an unemployed worker, a victim of racial discrimination, the bombing of an airliner, an attempted murder, and so on. The thematic news frame, on the other hand, places public issues in some general or abstract context. The thematic news frame typically takes the form of an in-depth, “backgrounder” report dealing with general outcomes or conditions. While episodic reports are often visually appealing, thematic reports, consist primarily of “talking heads” (see Iyengar 1991).
As might be expected, television news is more episodic than thematic. This pattern of coverage has consequences for viewers’ attitudes. The episodic frame draws viewers’ attention to the actions of particular individuals rather than societal conditions (see Iyengar 1996). Poverty is thus understood as a consequence of insufficient effort and motivation, crime and terrorism as a consequence of lawlessness and disregard for human life. Confronted with news coverage describing particular instances of complex issues, people reason accordingly: poverty and crime are caused not by deep-seated economic conditions, but by dysfunctional behavior. The same logic applies to the question of “treatment”: the appropriate remedy for crime is not improved job training programs and economic opportunity, but harsh and unconditional punishment. By shaping viewers’ attributions of causal and treatment responsibility for issues, the news frame indirectly influences policy preferences. People who subscribe to individualistic accounts of crime, for example, are more apt to favor greater spending on law enforcement and to express greater support for the police (see Iyengar 1991; 1996).

Recent work has focused on the framing of crime in local newscasts. The focus on a particular perpetrator and the visual emphasis of television mean that, as depicted in the news, the principal antecedent of criminal behavior is race (see Gilliam and Iyengar 1999; Entman 1992). By associating crime and race, local news necessarily interjects racial stereotypes into the public’s understanding of crime. Viewers are compelled to evaluate their racial beliefs in light of what seem to be empirical realities. Experiments by Gilliam and Iyengar (see Gilliam and Iyengar 1999) demonstrate that the presence of a black rather than white perpetrator in local news reports is meaningful to viewers. Specifically, the skin color of the alleged perpetrator matters to viewers’ opinions
concerning both race and crime. Using computer-based editing techniques, the researchers present the same individual as either a white or African-American male. The results show that when the suspect in the news was African-American, significantly more viewers endorsed punitive criminal justice policies (the death penalty, "three strikes," increased funding for prisons). In addition, the racial manipulation strengthened viewers’ racial stereotypes (ratings of blacks as lazy and unintelligent) and lowered evaluations of black leaders such as Jesse Jackson (Gilliam and Iyengar 1999).

Not only does exposure to news about crime influence viewers’ attitudes, we can expect that it will also serve to increase the relevance of racial stereotypes as a basis for judging the performance of elected officials or for choosing between candidates for elective office. A recent study by Mendelberg is revealing (Mendelberg 1997). Mendelberg found significant priming effects of exposure to the 1988 “Willie Horton” advertisement used by the Bush campaign. Among participants exposed to the Horton ad., racial prejudice was a stronger predictor of support for particular social welfare and civil rights policies than among control participants who did not view the ad. Of course (as the use of the Horton ad by the Bush campaign itself reveals), the audience's exquisite sensitivity to matters of race is grist for vote-seeking public officials. We can only anticipate that racial appeals -- either explicit or coded -- will become even more frequent during political campaigns. In effect, the emergence of local news as a major source of information makes race an even more central component of American public life.

Effects of the News on Elites

The potential to set the public agenda and frame issues to partisan advantage have drawn political elites inexorably into the media arena. The ability to govern is
increasingly dependent upon public image. Old-fashioned forms of governing, which emphasized negotiation, bargaining and give-and-take between rival policy makers, have been replaced by efforts to cultivate the appearance of effective and responsive leadership -- through rhetorical posturing, credit claiming and blame avoidance. By appealing directly to the public, elected officials aim to strengthen their power and leverage over their opponents. The more positive the news media’s treatment of the official, the more favorable that official’s image with the public. As public support builds, so too does the incumbent’s stature and clout with rival officials. The most well known example of this cycle concerns the President: the higher the president’s public approval rating, the greater the congressional deference to his policy proposals and vice-versa.

The rapid development of “going public” (Kernell 1993) can be traced to the gradual encroachment of election campaigns on the policy process. Campaign techniques such as television advertising are now used long after election day. The “Harry and Louise” ad campaign mounted by the health insurance industry, proved instrumental in swaying moderate Democrats and Republicans in Congress against the Clinton health reform package. Following suit, the pharmaceutical industry has launched a massive ad campaign in opposition to extending prescription drug benefits to Medicare recipients. As these cases illustrate, elected officials and interest groups have accumulated considerable expertise in the use of public relations techniques while attempting to influence elections, and it is only natural that they seek to capitalize on this expertise when formulating and debating legislation.

The most visible indicator of media-based governance is the time political leaders spend communicating with the public. Because power requires public popularity, and
popularity depends upon effective media management, virtually all officeholders employ press secretaries or other media functionaries whose principal task is to publicize and orchestrate news coverage of the incumbent’s actions. At the White House, the media arsenal includes daily press briefings, photo opportunities, “messages of the day,” scheduling of events that are likely to be deemed newsworthy, leaking information to reporters, and so on. In recent years the amount of time and resources devoted to cultivating the press and “spin control” has risen so steeply that the president’s key advisors are hard-pressed to do anything else! As Lloyd Cutler (who has advised several Democratic presidents) lamented:

I was surprised by how much the substantive decisions in the White House are affected by press deadlines, and, in particular by the evening television news. So that if something happened, let us say, on a Monday, or somebody strongly criticized the President or one of his programs, everything stopped. Whatever you’d been working on as the great priority of the next morning you had to put aside in order to reach a decision about how the President would respond in time for the evening television news. (from Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar, 1993, p. 202)

Thus, the front lines in the battle over public policy have shifted from committee or staff offices to broadcasting studios and editorial offices.

Not only does the strategy of going public impose high opportunity costs on those who hold office (in the sense that media management displaces policy research and development), it also runs the risk of creating unrealistically high public expectations of public officials -- expectations that few incumbents can hope to fulfill. The state of the American economy is increasingly tied to global forces beyond the reach of any president’s influence. By constantly claiming credit for positive events, presidents, senators, and congresspersons run the risk of being blamed for negative events. There was not much President Carter could do to prevent the OPEC cartel from raising oil prices in
the 1970s. Yet Carter was widely blamed for the rampant inflation in the United States that was produced by the sudden surge in energy costs. The strategy of image building thus cuts both ways.

A more ominous by-product of the importance accorded to popularity is that officials can be enticed to actions simply because of the anticipated impact on public image. Perhaps President Clinton would not have categorically denied his relationship with Monica Lewinsky on national television had he not calculated the policy and reputational costs of simply refusing to discuss the allegations. Perhaps President Carter would not have authorized the ill-fated mission to rescue the American hostages in Iran had he not perceived a need to demonstrate his toughness and resolve.

The importance of imagery may also deter presidents from making decisions. In particular, because popularity is now the essence of policy stewardship, presidents, senators or governors are loath to tackle complex problems that may require difficult or unpopular solutions. Rather than acknowledge that crime reduction requires fundamental changes in the structure of economic and educational opportunity, leaders gravitate to more simplistic, but appealing solutions (such as “three strikes” laws). A catch-22 develops: proposing tough answers to persistent problems costs popular support, but without popular support, there is no opportunity to address these problems. Politicians are left to pursue and protect popularity for its own sake.

Conclusion

Because most Americans’ sense of the state of the nation depends upon what they see or read in news presentations, politicians have become adept at managing their images (and those of their opponents). An important byproduct of the new style of
governing is a changed relationship between officials and reporters. The new class of
elected official is adept at shaping news coverage and manipulating reporters. The
authors of *The Media Game* were among the first to identify this imbalance in the flow of
public information.

Elected officials, candidates, and their consultants have developed
intricate strategies for using or evading the media to their advantage. The
media, on the other hand, have only just begun to develop counter-strategies
for protecting their independence and monitoring the candidates. Reporters
have yet to insist on their rightful role in the democratic process
(Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, p. 234).

If anything, the situation has worsened in recent years. As the level of public
relations sophistication available to political leaders has increased, the degree of
professionalism and substantive expertise among reporters has diminished. For a variety
of reasons, including the content appeal of “infotainment” as well as the competitive
requirements imposed on the personalities and appearances of journalists, the media
today is generally less able to resist official sources. The traditional ideal of independent,
and even “oppositional” journalism has begun to fall by the wayside. As this essay
suggests, the imbalance between politicians and journalists should give all Americans
great cause for concern. The line between news and propaganda is all too frequently not
observed.

The press has undertaken efforts to monitor the candidates (and their paid
advertisements in particular) in recent years. Although there is considerable doubt over
the efficacy of “adwatches” and other forms of what Ross Perot has termed “gotcha”
journalism, it seems obvious that more systematic attempts at boosting journalistic
autonomy are worth considering in the context of the daily news cycle. Perhaps the most
important step would be to further journalists’ introspective awareness of their role in the
political process. For, for as this paper has argued, the news may be neutral and objective by design, but it is far from neutral in impact.
References


