

Television and Foreign Policy in an Information Age

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A. New Technology for Public Diplomacy

During the past quarter century a set of fundamental changes have taken place both in the foreign policy process and in the gathering and dissemination of international news. The new set of circumstances facing policy-makers, the press, and the public today may be traced to technological change, along with concomitant shifts in economics and politics (Larson, 1984). Although technologies are listed separately here, in reality they are highly interrelated and synergistic in nature.

1. Satellites

Communication satellites are the most conspicuous technology affecting the conduct of foreign policy today and its coverage by the news media. The ubiquitous satellite earth station makes possible the live or timely transmission of television news from virtually all nations in the world. It is no longer necessary to construct such facilities to ensure that diplomacy will be appropriately televised, as President Nixon did for his 1972 visit to the People's Republic of China.

Remote sensing satellites play a lesser, but sometimes important role in foreign policy. For example, during the May 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in the U.S.S.R., Western news agencies gained their first picture of events through satellite photography. Landsat, a private U.S. remote-sensing satellite in operation since 1972, provided initial pictures and the new European SPOT satellite, utilizing sophisticated microchip technology, offered more detailed pictures (*Newsweek*, 1986). Future improvements in remote-sensing technology will make it possible, from a purely technological standpoint, for television coverage of events such as the war in Afghanistan or the Falklands-Malvinas conflict, where other factors prevent conventional coverage.

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2. Electronic newsgathering

The portable, lightweight cameras and editing equipment used in television newsgathering are an increasingly influential complement to satellite technology for the dissemination of television news. They greatly simplify the process of overseas newsgathering and transmission which, until the early 1970's, required film developing and relatively cumbersome editing. As ENG equipment becomes smaller, incorporates more powerful editing capabilities, and gains the capability to transmit directly from correspondent to satellite, it may pose new policy issues or exacerbate current ones for governments and the news media.

3. Computers and microelectronics

Microchip or microelectronic technology is the most pervasive of all the technologies affecting modern media and foreign policy since it is integrated in some way or to some extent with each of the other technologies. For example, television news correspondents use small computers for both word-processing and communication with their home organizations. Microelectronics are integral to electronic newsgathering and transmission equipment, communication satellites, jet aircraft, and most other new communication technologies.

4. Air travel technology

Modern air travel also influences today's foreign policy process. The frequency of summit diplomacy as well as meetings of high-level government officials has increased with access to high speed jet travel. Virtually the same technology is available to television and the other news media, as illustrated by the frequent practice of diplomats and members of a press pool sharing the same plane. The prospect of newer technologies such as hypersonic, sub-orbital vehicles suggests that technology for travel will continue to influence the conduct of foreign policy and the media role in that process.

5. Other technologies

While the preceding technologies have a major impact on the big media, including television, other communication technologies can influence the foreign policy process in a less direct and often less public manner. Smaller

technologies have been influential in disseminating information among dissident or disenfranchised groups. For example, the telephone, photocopying machines, the audio cassette recorder and the video cassette recorder all make it more difficult to restrict the flow of information across national borders or within nations. Audio cassette recordings of the Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious leaders played a well-documented role in the revolution which overthrew the Shah in Iran. During the Spring of 1986, accounts of the 1980 Kwangju incident, videotaped by German, Japanese and U.S. news organizations have circulated widely among university students and dissident groups in the Republic of Korea.

B. Media Roles in the Foreign Policy Process

Cohen's (1963) landmark study identified three major roles of the press (here television news) in the foreign policy process. In their role as *observer*, the news media gather and disseminate information about international affairs. As *participant*, the press works closely with policymakers, at times providing them with information and at other times using information gleaned through this close relationship. Finally, as *catalyst*, the press provides international affairs information to the public. Although these three roles are not mutually exclusive, they provide a useful framework for analysis. They continue to circumscribe the role of today's press, including television news, even though the significance of each role and its fundamental characteristics have changed decisively.

1. The observer role

Perhaps the most important change in the observer role of the media in recent decades has been the substitution of the moving visual image for words and still photographs. The live or timely transmission of events such as war, assassinations, hijackings, hostage-seizures, summit diplomacy, international meetings, or natural disasters is now the expected norm.

Assessment of the significance of this change suggests at least two issues. One is the question of the relative amount and quality of information that can be conveyed through video versus print or audio media. The front page of the *New York Times*, for example, contains more information than the entire written script for an early evening network news broadcast in the

U.S.. On the other hand, it would be difficult to argue that print media coverage of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat could have had the same political impact in the United States as television news. The impact of the immediate and sustained coverage of his assassination was doubtless intensified by prior indepth and personal coverage of the man, including his historic visit to Jerusalem and the Camp David summit with President Carter and Prime Minister Begin. In addition to the power of the visual image *per se*, television news accounts are characteristically structured as narrative or drama, and often have entertainment value (Sperry, 1981). Questions concerning the quality of information, the words of newspapers versus the dynamic visual images and sounds of television, deserve further exploration.

Another issue is the effect of the visual character of television news on the range of topics most likely to appear. U.S. commercial television news, it is charged, favors the visually spectacular over stories that cannot so easily be portrayed with eye-catching visuals. This helps to explain the predominance of hard news and crisis coverage. It also explains the repeated finding that U.S. television news covers major events *post hoc*, with little attention to ongoing social processes, especially in Third World nations. Iran prior to the seizure of U.S. hostages is an excellent example of this phenomenon. From 1972 through 1978, Iran accounted for approximately one percent of all international news broadcast by the U.S. television networks. Even after the revolution, coverage dropped to very low levels (April through October, 1979). Saturation coverage began with the hostage seizure in November, 1979, and through the hostage release in early 1981, Iran accounted for more than one quarter of all international news broadcast by the networks (Larson, in press).

With the rise of television news, a second major change in the observer role of the media has to do with the training and characteristic practices of foreign correspondents. Foreign affairs reporters for U.S. television news organizations increasingly come to the job with a television, rather than print journalism background (Batscha, 1975) and are attracted more by the challenges of television newsgathering than by those of a particular geographical area or nation (Pollock, 1981). These same reporters practice what some call "parachute journalism" and other refer to as a "firehouse" model of newsgathering. They are peripatetic, ready to fly long distances to cover breaking news, from a home base in the U.S. or in one of each network's

dozen or so overseas bureaus. As a result, correspondents may frequently come to a story without the background, including linguistic and cultural expertise, that might be possessed by a permanently-based foreign reporter.

2. The participant role

The media participate in the foreign policy process both by providing government officials with an account of world events and by broadcasting or publishing information from a variety of official sources. The relationship between reporters and officials has been well documented (Cohen, 1963; Sigal, 1973), but it has changed dramatically with new information technology, principally satellite television. In the case of U.S. foreign policy, television is a participant in at least four ways.

First, it serves the traditional role as a source of information and intelligence for senior foreign policy officials. Despite television's brevity and its focus on spot news, senior policy officials regularly monitor the content of major news broadcasts (Cutler, 1984; Haig, 1985). Under normal circumstances they do so in order to keep track of events or current policy statements, at home or abroad. Their attention is largely dictated by the broad, immediate reach of television, and its political consequences. With fifty million people or more watching the major network television news broadcasts each weeknight, an official dare not be out of touch. Furthermore, for certain types of situations, such as terrorist incidents, television may be the preferred source of information, precisely because of its visual and immediate nature. During the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in Beirut, CBS News apparently had access to more information than the U.S. government. According to a CBS official, "A State Department official reacted with horrified disbelief when told by CBS News that the hijackers had separated and removed hostages with Jewish-sounding names." (Joyce, 1986:171)

Second, television provides a forum for public debate and discussion of foreign policy issues. It convers a virtually continuous elite dialogue on events and issues of the day. Although the incumbent president and foreign policy officials from the executive branch of government command the greatest access to air time, opposition leaders and other interest groups, within the U.S. and from other nations, are also seen and heard. With increased use of the new television technologies, the elite dialogue becomes more global in scope.

Third, television can provide a direct and sometimes exclusive channel for diplomacy. For a period of time following the seizure of American hostages in Iran on November 4, 1979, television news became a principal channel of communication between the governments of Iran and the United States, as they attempted to establish direct nonpublic contact with each other (Mowlana, 1984; Salinger, 1981).

Fourth, television correspondents frequently assume a diplomatic role. Satellite technology makes it possible for correspondents like Ted Koppel of ABC's "Nightline" to regularly interview heads of state or senior officials of foreign governments. For example, all of the U.S. television networks gave heavy attention to the political crisis surrounding the recent election in the Philippines, featuring interviews with a variety of policy elites in both the U.S. and the Philippines. A number of network news broadcasts originated from Manila, a practice seen with increasing frequency when major events overseas involve the U.S. and circumstances permit it.

Interviews with officials of foreign governments may yield important new information. U.S. government officials were reportedly surprised by then-President Marcos' decision to call for elections, a decision they first learned of through an interview with Marcos by NBC television correspondent David Brinkley. Marcos later revealed, in an interview with Ted Koppel of ABC, that he made the decision to call for elections during the prior interview with Brinkley.

3. The role as catalyst

The role of television and other media as a catalyst focuses on how they are used by the public to satisfy its interests in foreign affairs and the implications of such patterns for international news coverage and foreign policy. Major questions deal with the structure of the foreign policy public and the potential influence of the public at large on policymaking elites.

Based on modern democratic theory, prevailing models suggest that the foreign policy public is a pyramid-shaped structure consisting, from top to bottom, of policy elites, an interested or attentive public, and a non-attentive public (Almond, 1961; Lippmann, 1965). According to this general model, it is only the relatively small number of policy elites, inside and outside of government, who have any direct influence on the foreign policy process. Within such a framework, television has substantially changed the nature

of the process, whether or not it has enlarged the scope of public participation. It has done so principally by making the ongoing elite dialogue on foreign policy issues visual and immediate. In the United States, one symptom of this change is the presence of television cameras in both houses of congress, with coverage available continuously on cable television.

As an alternative conceptualization, the agenda-building approach (Cobb and Elder, 1983) suggests a more active role for the public at large. Although government officials remain the primary actors in making policy, there are also policy entrepreneurs outside of government. The mass media allow such individuals or groups to introduce and expand issues to the point where they are part of the public agenda. Because of its reach and visual impact, television is an important complement to other mass media in the agenda-building process. For example, many people credit BBC and later NBC News broadcasts showing graphic pictures of the famine in Africa with placement of that problem on the public agenda. The problem had already been treated in some depth by the print media, but without the political impact carried by television pictures of starving children.

C. Television's Influence on Foreign Policy

According to Lloyd Cutler, who was White House Counsel during the Carter administration, "TV news now has a much greater effect on national policy decisions—especially foreign policy decisions—than print journalism has ever been able to achieve and more than most experienced observers realize" (Cutler, 1984:113). The influence, he noted, was because television has a wider reach and faster impact than print media, both of which must be taken into account by policymakers. The following sections discuss four ways in which television has influenced foreign policy: (1) image politics, (2) timing, (3) the public character of diplomacy, and (4) personalization of diplomacy.

1. Image politics

Perhaps the greatest influence of television on the foreign policy process is to elevate the importance of images in international affairs. Perceptions and images of other nations were considered important in international relation long before the advent of satellite television. However, the new

media technology elevates concern with images to new heights and even traditional realist theories of international relations need to account for the growing importance of the image-making apparatus in the conduct of power politics (Tehrani, 1984).

The new image politics evokes a different response from different governments, as the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union illustrated earlier this year. The United States and other Western nations used "news management" practices, providing satellite photographs, briefings by appropriate government officials and other information, in an effort to encourage coverage of the disaster. One main theme of the coverage was the closed nature of Soviet press and society, as illustrated by that country's failure to promptly notify other nations about the accident. On the other hand, the initial Soviet approach to the Chernobyl situation was to invoke direct government control over media coverage of the incident. Information came out slowly, a small amount at a time. Despite these radical differences in approach by the U.S. and Soviet governments, both nations did use television to convey information to the public at home and abroad, each seeking to build a different public image of the accident and its consequences. In the United States, Chernobyl received heavy and sustained attention, while in the Soviet Union, coverage began with a trickle and only slowly increased.

2. Timing

Another influence of television on foreign policy is its compression of the time allowed for government to take actions or institute programs and achieve results. For example, Cutler (1984) suggests that either the timing or the public announcement of several decisions by president Carter and president Reagan were influenced by television. They included the grain embargo following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, response to discovery of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba during the summer of 1979, and the public response to Soviet downing of a South Korean airliner in September 1983.

In the United States, the four-year presidential term of office has always put some pressure on the administration to implement policies and achieve results quickly. Televised attention to campaigns and the lengthy series of presidential primaries greatly increases such time pressure. In short, presidential politics are a major television news topic roughly two out of every four years, often putting foreign policy issues on the public agenda and

pressuring the incumbent administration, The 1968 presidential campaign in which the Vietnam War became a major issue was one example. In 1980, heavy network television attention to the human drama of the U.S. hostages in Iran coincided with presidential election campaigning. According to one analysis, "Jimmy Carter certainly inflated the hostage issue and milked it for partisan gain, using the Rose Garden for cover against Teddy Kennedy. But even if he had behaved more responsibly, it is anything but clear that he could have kept things in proportion when the networks brought chanting demonstrators to out nightly and Walter Cronkite "began counting the days." (Destler, Gelb and Lake 1984: 153)

From a different perspective, television's influence on the timing of foreign policy decisions has less to do with the reach visual impact or immediacy of the medium and more to do with the overall impact of television on political culture. Television's characteristic mode of portrayal, by juxtaposing short video segments of persons or events that may have been widely separated in space and time, has the effect of accelerating events in the worlds it portrays. This effect has been referred to as the "fast-forward effect" of television (Ranney, 1983). This new language of television may influence political culture in at least two ways. First, audience or public may become impatient with partial solution or policies which take a long time to show result. Second, there may be an equal public impatience with complex or abstract problem because of the difficulty in communicating them through television.

3. The public character of diplomacy

Although the nature of "public diplomacy" has been discussed for years, new communication and information technologies have facilitated what Abba Eban calls "...the collapse of reticence and privacy in negotiation." (Eban, 1983:345) He views this change. Thought about by the intrusion of the media into the negotiation process, as irreversible and the most powerful, far-reaching transformation in the modern diplomatic system. "The modern negotiator cannot escape the duality of his role. He must transact business simultaneously with his negotiating partner and his own public opinion. This involves a total modification of techniques." (Eban, 1983: 345).

Diplomacy involves all of the news and information media, but in an age of increased summitry and high-level negotiations, television has been the

primary catalyst for change. The President, the Secretary of State and many other officials are regularly seen at home and abroad, performing their dual role of addressing their counterparts from other nations as well as the American public. Furthermore, as information channels proliferate and television coverage is shared between systems from different nations and regions, diplomats must be cognizant of the many national or regional publics which might receive their remarks or gestures.

4. Personalized diplomacy

The increasingly public and televised nature of foreign policy has also personalized the process, coinciding with an increase in summitry. When Richard Nixon first visited the People's Republic of China in 1972, portable satellite earth stations preceded him by several weeks so that his arrival could be televised to the U.S. public during prime time (Larson, 1984). Such technical measures were no longer necessary by the time of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem which epitomized the intensely personal nature of summitry in a television age (Katz, 1984).

Television has also influenced the personal qualities expected of politicians in general and diplomats more particularly. Eban (1983) notes that since much diplomacy is now conducted through public communication, rhetorical skills have become much more important for today's diplomats. More particularly, in the United States, television presentation skills appear to be one prerequisite to becoming president. As Cutler puts it, "Mastering the art of TV presentation is now critical to governance." (Cutler, 1984: 123, 124)

D. Television and North-South Relations

Based partly on the preceding description, it is possible to address the more normative question of how new television technologies influence North-South Relations. Three aspects of that question are of concern here. First is the issue of U.S. television's performance in coverage of the Third World. Second is the matter of Third World policy questions. Third is the question of how such coverage relates to U.S. policy toward the Third World.

1. Third World coverage by U.S. television

Three forms of evidence suggest that American television is following a

structural pattern similar to print media and hence should be subject to some of the same criticism.

First, the content of television news provides strong evidence that it follows approximately the same pattern as earlier media in its coverage of the developing nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Quantitatively, although developing nations comprise about three-quarters of the world's countries and more than half its population, they made up only 42 percent of all national references on television news and 39 percent of direct visual reporting during the 1972-1981 period (Larson, 1984). Furthermore, much of that quantity was concentrated on a few nations involved in the Vietnam War or conflicts in the Middle East. Not surprisingly, U.S. television also shows a higher proportion of crisis content in coverage from the Third World versus coverage of other nations.

From a different, more qualitative perspective, television may be viewed as an agent of socialization which, through its repetitive presentation and mythic modes, promotes certain "ways of seeing" the world. A study of network television coverage of ten nations, undertaken from such a perspective, identified three major themes or motifs in coverage of the Third World. The first was social disorder, including political violence, political subversion, and military combat. The second was flawed development, centering on governmental corruption, human rights abuses and Communism. Finally, there was primitivism, with a focus on the exotic or barbaric elements of Third World nations (Dahlgren with Chakrapani, 1982).

Second, U.S. television's use of satellite technology is shaped by the organizational, political and economic forces that characterize commercial media and their relationship with government. In principle, the communication satellite makes possible the live or timely transmission of visual news from anywhere in the world, as well as two-way communication. However, the available evidence suggests that satellite technology is a necessary, but not a sufficient cause of more broadly based visual news coverage. During the period from 1972 through 1981, the presence of a satellite earth station showed no statistically significant relationship to visual news coverage. The strongest predictor of such coverage is the presence of a network bureau (Larson, 1984).

In short, the priorities of the commercial networks, reflecting organizational values as well as foreign policy priorities of the U.S. government, wield a

great deal more influence over the flow of visual news to the American public than satellite technology *per se*. Rather than contributing to more broadly-based visual coverage, satellite technology appears to have contributed to the spot news bias of American television by facilitating the trend toward "parachute journalism."

Third, the patterns of training and deployment of foreign correspondents for the U.S. television networks are a cause for concern. As already discussed, correspondents increasingly come from a television rather than print background and display more interest in newsgathering techniques than particular regions or nations. Such trends simply underscore the already limited capability of the television networks to provide historical context, background and analysis, as opposed to spot news coverage in many nations of the world.

2. Third World policy questions

Third World countries have several reasons for concern over the changes that new media bring to the foreign policy process. First, they highlight the structural problem of dependence on transnational news organizations in most developing countries. UPI-TN, Visnews, and the U.S. television networks are dominant forces in the gathering and distribution of videotaped television news around the world. Although new communication technologies offer the potential to increase and broaden the flow of visual news in the world, new patterns are slow in coming. For the present, many nations must depend on the Anglo-American system.

Second, many developing nations lack skilled personnel in the image-making industries. The conduct of modern diplomacy, with its emphasis on rhetoric and television presentation, calls for skills in such areas as public relations, advertising, and television production. In short, many nations lack the capability of dealing effectively with modern "news management" techniques.

Third, as mentioned at the outset, one reason for other nations to carefully examine American television and foreign policy is the possible influence of the U.S. model on practices in other countries. However, the direct relevance of the U.S. experience is tempered by the variety of cultural and political circumstances under which broadcasting develops. Perhaps the one universal is that governments view television, and its news broadcasting in particular,

as politically very powerful. For that reason, significant questions will continue to arise concerning the impact of technology on television, the financing and content of the medium, and its role in the foreign policy process.

3. U.S. policy toward the Third World

Ironically, current patterns of televised international affairs coverage in the world's largest "information economy" may as often harm U.S. policy interests as help them. With minor exceptions, the trend toward increased public reliance on television as a source of international news has neither been accompanied by a broadened conception of television news nor an increased quantity of information from the Third World. Instead, the new power of satellite television is most often used to cover spot news or crisis when it occurs, and to convey the statements and activities of key U.S. government officials. In Iran, the revolution was already underway before U.S. media, including television, provided any major coverage of the bankruptcy of the Shah's regime or the nature of the Shiite branch of Islam (Mowlana, 1986).

In the midst of proliferating communication channels and technological advances in television coverage, a central problem is how the U.S. will formulate coherent policies toward nations of Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and large parts of Asia when these regions are barely visible on its major international news medium. Of course, the print media continue to play an important role. However, the nature of the foreign policy process appears to require television attention, with its broad reach, immediacy and visual impact, to stimulate policy initiatives. If present patterns continue, U.S. policy may continue to be reactive, responding as events occur in many developing nations, rather than implementing a plan of action based on awareness and analysis of social, political and economic changes in those nations.

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