

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling. *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010. 352 pp. \$70.00 (cloth). \$26.95 (paper)

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Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling's book *War Stories* is a theoretically and empirically rich attempt to explain public attitudes toward war. They integrate the literatures on elite debate, the news media, and objective conditions in building their explanation of public support for war. Plus, they add a dynamic element, arguing that the impact of these three factors on public opinion varies depending upon the stage of the war. Finally, their theory is general enough to be applicable to foreign-policy crises as well as to war.

In a short review, it is hard to do justice to a theory that leads to 15 major hypotheses. Several of the authors' theoretical advances are worth pointing out here. First, they offer an account of journalist motivations, which they apply to foreign-policy news reporting. Baum and Groeling argue that journalists seek novelty, conflict, balance, and authoritative sources for their news stories, and that the structure of politicians' public debate will determine the mix of these attributes in the news. Importantly, journalists are especially likely to report when members of the president's party attack or criticize the president. According to Baum and Groeling, such intra-party conflict is not cheap talk, in contrast to when opposition members criticize the president. Since intra-party criticism has costs to the party, it is highly credible to news readers. In a mirror image, opposition-party support for the president is also credible. From this theoretical foundation, Baum and Groeling offer numerous hypotheses about the tone of news in foreign-policy crises and early stages of war. Their account differs markedly from the existing theoretical paradigm for news about foreign-policy crises, the Media Indexing Hypothesis, which argues that news is generally supportive of the executive in foreign-policy crises. Baum and Groeling's theory can identify when the news media will produce supportive news, as the Media Indexing Hypothesis predicts, but also when news will be critical of the president. This alone represents a major advance in our understanding of news reporting in the foreign-policy realm.

But Baum and Groeling go beyond new ideas, also offering some important advances in our understanding of public opinion. Here, they enter the debate

between those who argue that news alone affects public opinion versus those who look at objective conditions, especially casualty counts. Baum and Groeling argue that, inasmuch as the public can access credible objective information about war, such information will help structure public attitudes toward war. But when information is not easily available, as is the case in the early stages of a war or crisis, the public will rely upon news reporting. This leads to a cycle in which public opinion is more news dependent early in the war or crisis but becomes less so later on, what they call an “elasticity of reality.” However, if the war turns in a new direction, countering existing attitudes about the war (e.g., whether the war is going well), the elasticity-of-reality cycle may restart.

Their theory presents further nuances and theoretical insights, but Baum and Groeling are not content to merely explicate a theory; they also test it with a variety of data. Consequently, their book is a tour de force of theorizing and empirical analysis, and overall they find considerable support for most of the many hypotheses they derive.

War Stories is structured as nine chapters. In Chapter 1, Baum and Groeling pithily review and critique the literatures on news reporting of elite rhetoric in foreign policy and public opinion about foreign policy and war. Despite the brevity of the chapter, it covers a lot of territory and does a good job organizing often far-flung research. Baum and Groeling present their theory in Chapter 2. Several highlights of the theory have already been discussed. The core elements of their theory concern the motivations of politicians and journalists, how those motivations interact to produce news, and the relative importance of news and objective conditions on public attitudes toward war, crises, and foreign policy. Although their theory is complex and nuanced, the exposition is clear and concise.

Chapters 3 through 8 present their empirical analyses. In their analysis, Baum and Groeling utilize a variety of data, from time series to survey analysis to experiments. Often conscious of the limitations of specific data sets, Baum and Groeling, when possible, use their many data sets to test the same set of hypotheses. Doing so not only builds confidence in the empirical support for their work but also underscores the care with which they go about testing their claims. Furthermore, each chapter contains an appendix, where Baum and Groeling present the technical details of their statistical analyses. The body of the chapter provides graphs and other nontechnical presentations of the findings so that readers with little or no statistical background can follow the logic and thrust of what they are doing. Doing so makes the book quite reader friendly in one regard, but at the same time presents a high concentration of findings per page.

Substantively, Chapters 3 and 4 test hypotheses regarding elite rhetoric on foreign policy, the types of rhetoric covered in the news, and public reactions to that rhetoric. The primary data employed in this chapter are a massive content analysis of elite rhetoric in the news for the 42 uses of military force from

1979 through 2003, classic rally events. Here, they find that criticism from the president's party has a higher chance of news coverage than that from the opposition and, contrary to the Media Indexing Hypothesis, news coverage of such events is not always supportive of the president. In a novel test of media bias, they find that the Sunday morning network talk shows are more likely to interview presidential critics, providing evidence for their notions that journalists privilege novelty and conflict in news reporting. These chapters also provide evidence that credible and costly public comments by political elites elicit a stronger reaction from the public than less costly comments, for instance, opposition criticism of the president.

Chapter 5 presents an experimental test on 1,610 UCLA undergraduates of the reputation of news media outlets, the cable networks Fox and CNN in particular, and the mediating effects of party identification on opinions. Here, they present an intriguing and unexpected finding: While these new media outlets will have a positive effect on attitudes of those with consistent predispositions (e.g., Fox and Republicans, CNN and Democrats), on everyone else, news reports have little persuasive power.

Chapter 6 continues the theme of the polarized new media using time-series content analyses of news reports from Fox, NBC, and CBS from 2004 through 2007. In Chapter 6, Baum and Groeling also offer a test of their elasticity-of-reality hypothesis. Among their arresting findings is that in the early stages of war, elite rhetoric barely resembles objective indicators, like casualties, and that there is considerable variance in war coverage across the networks. Chapter 7 provides more support for the elasticity-of-reality hypothesis, adding a content analysis of newspapers and coverage of presidential rhetoric into the analysis and the effects of various types of rhetoric and news coverage at different points on public opinion. Chapter 8 considers Internet news outlets. They find different patterns of news reporting depending upon the partisan reputations of the various Internet outlets, and that news consumers in general have a preference for news that reinforces their partisan predispositions. From this, they contend that Internet news media may play a role in the rise of polarization.

Chapter 9 reviews their findings, puts the findings into perspective, and discusses their implications. Baum and Groeling argue that the new-media system of cable and the Internet, because it increases mass polarization, has undermined the foreign-policy consensus that has historically characterized much of U.S. foreign policy. The new media make it easier for presidents to mobilize their base but harder to rally support from the opposition. Although they are not explicit about it, this resembles domestic policy in the current era of new media. I wish the authors had spent more time drawing parallels and differences between foreign and domestic policy in this new-media age. As an agenda for future research, it would be useful to draw out those parallels as well as apply the logic of their study to other nations.

War Stories by Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling makes an invaluable contribution to several literatures—politician-journalist interactions, news production, public reactions to news, foreign policymaking, and the new media. That *War Stories* has so much to say about so many important topics is a remarkable achievement. I learned much from this thoughtful study. It changed my thinking about a number of topics, and I recommend it to those interested in news production, communications research, public opinion, and policymaking.

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