

BOOK REVIEW

Baum, M., & Groeling, T.J. (2010). *War stories: The causes and consequences of public views of war*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 329 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-13859-6.

What has become of the active journalists during the Vietnam War like Walter Cronkite who was able to influence foreign policy of the United States? Drawing on a collection of earlier published research into the news coverage of conflicts in which the United States was involved, the authors show that something changed dramatically over time. In the so-called “strategic bias” theory, they argue that the interaction between elites, the media and public opinion is a three-way process in which each group’s behaviour is essentially strategic. Starting from an overwhelming amount of hypotheses, data and results, the book provides the reader with interesting insights into journalism and the effects of news coverage on public opinion in “a second partisan press era”. The authors base their hypotheses on a variety of theories, which are discussed very briefly, making the theoretical basis rather shallow. Moreover, the different chapters provide unnecessary repetition of the theoretical basis, which does not add to the readability of the book as a whole.

News media continues to play an important role in informing people about foreign policy. Politicians try to use the media to get their messages across, often framed in a more positive way than is the actual reality. The media, especially in the early stages of a conflict, tends to rely on elites in Washington for news about developments. However, no longer can the media be regarded as a neutral mediator between politicians and the public. The authors show the wide gap between what the elites say about foreign policy and what they have said according to the press. The media provides people with a distorted picture of what is said by the elites for their own self-interest. Journalists become strategic players in the field of political communication. Members of the public use various cues to gauge the credibility of different sources and judge the news according to their own perceptions and preferences. When offered more and more media, they tend to focus heavily on media outlets that, in general, strengthen the opinions they adhere to in the first place.

Another interesting aspect in the book is the discussion of the influence of new media on the communication process between politicians and audiences. The authors show that new media expands and enhances democratic citizenship. However, they also show the negative side of the development and

present evidence suggesting that the rise of new media is increasing audience fragmentation, with citizens consuming only news that is consistent with their prior beliefs. The authors call it a second partisan press era, making bipartisan consensus on foreign policy even harder to achieve for future leaders. Even when consumers do not find news they like, they are more and more able to discount opposing news by assigning ideological reputation to individual sources and media outlets. According to the authors, this tendency may give elites “a greater capacity to manipulate public opinion regarding foreign policy over time, especially among their fellow partisans, and to sustain such manipulations for longer periods of time (p. 288)”.

With respect to foreign affairs though, the authors also show that manipulation is especially possible in the early stages of a conflict, but is more complex than the indexing theory (Bennett et al., 2007) suggests. Journalists tend to favour stories that are novel or surprising. In a political context, this means that journalists are more likely to cover conflict than praise for the president, especially when stemming from his own party. Often—in line with the indexing theory—journalists tend to quote elite people when dealing with foreign affairs. In this way, politicians have found it possible to frame the news in their favour. The so-called “rally round the flag” effect does not occur when it is not backed-up fully within the party in power. In a separate chapter on this subject the authors found “little evidence that presidents can consistently anticipate substantial rallies when they use force abroad”. Although the elite may be able to frame coverage on attacks abroad in the early stages of conflict, the process of support for any attack abroad is more complex than just a reaction on the tenor of the elite debate in the coverage. Besides back up from within the party in power, elite quotes covered in the news are also important. The more counterarguments, the weaker the public support can become. Another interesting aspect the authors found is the costliness of the messages. When the elite is stating news that is in conflict with earlier positions of the political party or that might be harmful for the party, the message is more likely to be published and have a greater influence on public opinion.

In a series of chapters, the authors discuss these developments, introduced by a chapter in which they give an overview of the theoretical bases. In each chapter, one expects a more complete picture of the theory. However, the chapters more or less repeat what was stated before, and after only a few pages the authors discuss the actual study. One striking example of this theoretical shallowness is the discussion about media partisanship. The authors state that “the nature of the media’s influence on policy has evolved from what scholars often refer to as the ‘CNN-effect’ which emphasized the importance of the 24-hour news cycle and live coverage of events, to what we refer to as an

emerging 'Fox effect' " (p. 31). The authors subsequently state that the reputation of the media influences the reception of the news by the audience. In this case, the researchers ignore the fact that the CNN effect has nothing to do with partisanship to a specific party, as the Fox effect does. In line with this reasoning, the authors simply state that left-leaning media will cover more in favour of Democrats and less about Republicans (see Hypothesis 3): a typical "chicken or egg" question, which the authors ignore in their theoretical discussion. After all, what determines the fact that a newspaper is left-leaning or right-leaning? Probably, the fact that the media coverage is more in favour of a Democrat or Republican, respectively?

Moreover, the authors struggle with the concept of reality. They defend the existence of an elasticity of reality that is the deliberate distortion of reality by elites in order to promote their vision and policies on the crisis. The authors state that, over time, news increasingly reflects actual events (p. 38). They present a figure showing the convergence of reality and elite rhetoric. Hereby, the authors forget that there are other influences at hand than just the elites. Their in-depth focus on just the Iraqi war is a disadvantage for the authors, because in the Iraqi war they did find evidence for their theory, but research shows that journalists have covered other conflicts in a distorted way and created a reality in which they believed (Ruigrok, 2008). The authors do not discuss this independent role of the press vis-à-vis the conflict.

Whereas Cronkite, with his Vietnam editorial did influence a great number of people and also influenced the course of events, Baum and Groeling show in their book that current journalists do not have the same impact. They are considered less credible and less trustworthy by the public. They show that the "war of words" within the media becomes more powerful and further apart from the actual strategic interests of the country. More and more media is providing information to smaller audiences who, in contrast, are very loyal.

A difficult situation for future presidents who want to "sell" ambitious plans on foreign affairs. In order to gain public support, more strategy is needed. First of all, the situation makes it easier to mobilize the bases. However, to persuade the opponents is the new challenge. Therefore, the authors argue that political leaders need to focus on the rival media to be successful. Support from rivals will have a bigger impact on the constituency than the news coverage of the political leader himself.

Despite the lack of theoretical depth due to the numerous theories discussed and the fact that the book is a collection of separate studies causing unnecessary repetition, the book provides interesting thoughts on the changed relationship between politicians, the media and the public in the United

States. A number of lessons can definitely be drawn for journalists, politicians, academics as well as for critical citizens.

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