Spin-doctors, mandarins, and media moguls: How political communication insights advance Foreign Policy Analysis

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June 2012

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Contemporary democratic foreign policy is made and implemented under the constant gaze of an international, interconnected, 24-hour media market. Governments, convinced that public support for their positions depends in large part upon their portrayal in newspapers, on television, and online, increasingly make media management strategies integral to their conduct of foreign affairs. Traditional Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has often regarded communication as a peripheral area when compared to the core of substantive decision-making. This paper argues, however, firstly that the distinction between policy substance and policy communication is intrinsically flawed, secondly that it fails to reflect the actual practice of 21st-century foreign affairs, and thirdly that it underestimates the utility of important insights generated by media and communications scholars, particularly into the impact of agenda setting, priming, and framing practices on the direction and significance of public debate.

The paper goes on to propose a new model for FPA which embeds public debate-management practices within the substantive policymaking process, demonstrating the compatibility of FPA and communication studies approaches despite their often very different starting points. In effect, it outlines the impossibility of disaggregating the way a policy is publicly sold, from the way it privately is made.

Finally, this paper highlights the inherently iterative nature of political communication as it pertains to foreign affairs. It recognises not only the impact of public opinion, and the media, on foreign policy, as well as the ability of policymakers to shape public debate to their own advantage, but also the way the very practice of political communication itself can feedback into the substantive decision-making process.

Introduction: Bringing political communication in

Students of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) recognise that democratic foreign policymaking is both inspired and constrained by aspects of the domestic environment. Public opinion, party politics, the institutional structure of a state, and the news media each exert a potential influence over decisions about how leaders engage with international affairs. Under certain circumstances the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy breaks down, and the fate of an administration becomes bound up in its ability to act successfully overseas. Often, as in the cases discussed here, these circumstances involve the use of military force. This paper focuses on one fundamental domestic influence on democratic policymaking during times of war, namely the interaction between leaders and the modern print and broadcast media. Although the way governments seek to ‘sell’ wars to their domestic constituents has concerned observers for some time, it was only in the aftermath of the Gulf War that FPA began to treat news management as an important component of the policymaking process (Nincic 1992, 17, Bennett 1994, 12). Most
subsequent studies have tended to identify any “deliberate attempt [on the part of politicians] to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way” as propaganda (Casey 2008, 5, emphasis in original). Propaganda is such an emotive term, however, that analysts face pressure to consider it critically, challenging the alleged threat it poses to democracy. It should nevertheless be possible to study news management without resorting to polemic. That will be the goal of the approach proposed here.

Although FPA accepts that news management is important, it still frequently fails to recognise just how important. Typically analysts assume that “substantive foreign policy” and “information policy” are distinct (Cohen 1973, 132). The former is regarded as the preserve of statesmen, and the latter a subsidiary function carried out by underlings appointed specifically for the task. When direct domestic-level influences over policymaking are acknowledged, they tend to be regarded as relevant only to the communications side of the model, rather than to the substance of decision-making. Party politics, public opinion, and media coverage are held to affect “tactics, timing, and political communications strategy rather than determining the ultimate goals of an administration’s foreign policy” (Graham 1994, 201). In many ways this limited recognition of domestic inputs into policymaking reflects the origins of FPA in efforts to render foreign affairs in formal, predictable, rational choice terms. Of course the domestic communication of a policy decision is ancillary to the decision itself, adherents of this approach argue, for decision-making is guided by immutable imperatives and national interests, while communication both leads and follows the whims of the capricious rabble known as the mass public. Analysts need only determine the particular combination of interests and capabilities at play in a given circumstance, and they should easily be able to predict foreign policy behaviour. How a government chooses to ‘sell’ its actions domestically is irrelevant.

If this caricature ever accurately reflected the study of foreign policy, advances in recent decades have alleviated its worst excesses. FPA has extended its conceptual toolkit to embrace a wide range of new, bounded-rational or outright irrational sources of influence on policymaking. It
has expanded into lower levels of analysis and invented entirely new ones through concepts such as bureaucratic politics. It has responded to the rise of constructivism into the mainstream of International Relations, its parent social science. Oddly, however, FPA has accepted the claim that language “is a way of constructing reality and not merely reflecting it” (Jackson 2005, 23) without recognising the difficulties this notion raises for the supposed distinction between foreign policy substance and communication. Crucial aspects of foreign policy are socially constructed; a decision comes to be regarded as ‘legitimate’ or ‘successful’ only as a result of rhetorical interactions between policymakers, their international allies and rivals, and the various active contributors to the domestic public debate. At a conceptual level, then, news management, which involves efforts to gain power over these interactions, is central to the process by which democratic foreign policy is made, implemented, and subsequently remembered by members of a society. Official communication cannot be a peripheral element in the policymaking process if the entire notion of substantive foreign policy is socially constructed.

News management, furthermore, has over the course of recent conflicts become increasingly well integrated into democratic decision-making systems. Policymakers have accepted its virtues and adopted its assumptions. They have invited ‘spin doctors’ into the policymaking process, seeking advice so that policy is not only sold to the citizenry via the media, but shaped the better to facilitate that sale. As a consequence of this functional integration, foreign policy is now made in democratic states with one eye on how it will ‘play’ to journalists and their editors. Decisions over not just the timing and the communication of an action, but also its form, the vehicles through which it is launched, and even whether it should go ahead at all, are influenced by actual and anticipated news coverage and editorial commentary. More externally-oriented policymaking practices, and indeed policymaking entities and actors, have been sidelined by the rise of the inward-looking ‘spin doctor’, a phenomenon seen recently and starkly in the way the US and UK governments approached the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The shift of emphasis towards communication is fuelled by technological developments in recent decades, which have facilitated a massive expansion
in the reach of modern journalism. It has its political origins in US policymakers’ (perhaps misguided) beliefs about the role of hostile media coverage in bringing about the debacle of Vietnam (Hallin 1986, 211-212, Taylor 1992, 270). So extensive (and intensive) were the efforts launched by NATO leaders, responding to memories of earlier failures, to manage public opinion during the Gulf War that the conflict was dubbed in the West “the mother of all polling events” (Everts and Isernia 2005, 264). As the US geared up for a second strike against Saddam Hussein in 2003, “the Bush administration was nearly as preoccupied with how the combat was portrayed as with the combat itself” (Krebs and Jackson 2007, 35-36). In Britain under Tony Blair, “how the government described its objectives became as important as its actions and achievements” (Hollis 2010, 3). What matters to democratic leaders today, then, is how their activities will impact their domestic constituents. Having accepted the vital role journalists play in determining both the context and the criteria for their policies’ assessment, they have logically too integrated news management into the foreign policymaking process.

FPA may be a late adopter when it comes to recognising the importance of news management to foreign policy, at least when compared to policymakers themselves, but scholars working in other parts of the social science universe have been busy developing a range of theories that help explain the interaction between governments, publics, and the modern media. By importing a number of refinements derived from the media and communication studies literature, FPA can improve its account of how news reporting and editorial commentary affect policymaking. Concepts such as priming, framing, and agenda setting help explain how ‘spin’ affects the media, and how the media influences public opinion. Insights into the way professional values and economic imperatives affect what information becomes ‘news’ improve upon the ‘conveyor belt’ image of journalists as simple transmitters of facts to audiences. The recognition that news producers are independent, self-interested actors subject to a range of pressures beyond policymakers’ control explains in large part the gap between how powerful governments think they are, and how powerful the media thinks they are. Not only can individual journalists influence foreign policy under certain
circumstances, but the conditions established by the structural characteristics of the 21st century global commercial media market always have an effect to some degree. Even when policymakers do not feel compelled to act in response to media pressure, or to public pressure transmitted or elicited by the media, they still pay attention to what is being reported, and take steps to influence it in directions they consider favourable. That very interest can constrain policy choices, introducing an indirect source of media influence. In the spirit of maximising “diversity in the discipline”, then, FPA should seek to draw on communication studies insights in the course of its own analyses.

**Substance and communication: the conceptual level**

Every major foreign policy action has consequences for domestic public debate. Every attempt to ‘sell’ a foreign policy decision involves at least the possibility of substantive consequences. At a conceptual level, then, the distinction between the substance and the communication of foreign policy is flawed, since the absolute categorisation of a particular decision or action as either ‘substance’ or ‘communication’ is impossible. Some activities belong more in one category than the other, but none falls exclusively into either. Partly this is a consequence of the constructivist interpretation of democratic policymaking. If our understanding of reality is socially constructed through language, then communication creates substance, and substance requires communication. Partly, too, it reflects the substantive impact of communication decisions, identified already by established FPA in the form of domestic audience costs theory.

The most obvious consequence of bringing constructivism to bear in the study of domestic sources of influence over democratic foreign policy is the need to acknowledge that the nature, significance, meaning, and consequences of a particular stance are all socially constructed. A range of actors, including on the one hand government ministers, officials, and advisers, and on the other opposition politicians, journalists, civil society activists, business leaders, and knowledgeable experts drawn from academia and think-tanks, engage in a rhetorical competition over the definition of the international arena, the policies by which a state seeks to influence it, and the outcome of those policies, in ways that serve their interests or match their beliefs. Each seeks to achieve “hegemony”
over public debate by establishing their preferred line as the only legitimate way of describing reality (Jackson 2005, 19, Gaskarth 2006, 327). An example of a hegemonic discourse would be the definition of *al-Qaeda* as a “terrorist” organisation. No mainstream speaker, in the West at least, seriously challenges the application of this label to Osama bin Laden and his cohorts, yet its use is nearly always subjective (Silberstein 2005), and certainly in this instance disputed, once views expressed beyond the West are taken into account. Both the language and the content of public debate are affected by the successful attainment of hegemony by a single discourse, and the process of competition between rivals seeking hegemony exerts similar if weaker effects. What this means is that, even at the most abstract level of analysis, one cannot isolate the ‘substance’ from the ‘communication’ of foreign policy because it is only through communication that we determine what constitutes substance, and give it meaning. To give a further example, if we deconstruct the concept of ‘national interest’ upon which much of the FPA literature depends, we soon conclude that it lacks a firm basis in observable reality. Far from being a straightforward term representing an obvious component of the world ‘out there’, we find it is nothing more than a rhetorical label, deployed for political purposes by political actors, and subject to contest and re-definition through public debate (Burchill 2005, 211). That does not mean it has no impact on foreign policy; quite the opposite. Its impact derives however from its success as a rhetorical device, rather than from its effectiveness as a reflection of something that actually exists.

The use of military force might appear to be an area in which limited scope exists for rhetoric to re-define reality, but the actual effect of public debate over the collective experience of warfare can be stark. Both the legitimacy of a decision to launch military action and the subsequent place of a conflict in the memory of a society depend on the outcome of a series of linguistic exchanges. Arguably legitimacy “can be established only through rhetorical action”, given that it constitutes a subjective rather than an objective judgement (Krebs and Jackson 2007, 38). There is no absolute standard for assessing legitimacy that applies in all cases; policies can only be considered legitimate as a consequence of public debate. This point applies in domestic affairs as well, but the weakness of
international law, by removing legality as an easy heuristic for legitimacy, exacerbates the effect when foreign policy is concerned. Governments play a crucial role in this process through their news management activities, seeking actively to influence media coverage and so to condition public opinion more widely (Baker and O’Neal 2001, 680). For this reason, many leading democratic policymakers now accept that “modern warfare involves as much hand to hand combat in the television studio as on the battlefield” (Cook 2003, 49).

In theory, democratic publics know all too well when military action has been unsuccessful (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995, 843). Unmediated evidence abounds about the costs borne during a campaign, the goals it achieved, and its moral rectitude. Where publics expect operations to be cheap, visibly rising financial and human losses quickly undermine support for fighting on (Gaubatz 1995, 541). Domestic morale will generally hold up provided the overall course of a campaign is likely to lead to success in a just cause, even in the face of bad news about progress from the front (Taylor 1992, 274, Eichenberg 2005, 24, Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2005, 8). There appear, then, to be a range of substantive reasons why wars are won and lost in the hearts and minds of domestic publics that have nothing to do with communication. The problem, however, is that the centrality of popular perception to judgements about the outcome of a confrontation raises the significance of rhetoric. Costs, casualties, goals, and success all matter, but “each of these factors are often endogenous and malleable by elites” (Baum and Groeling 2010a, 443). Leaders, and their rivals in public debate, advance their preferred interpretations of the limited information emanating from a conflict. The public chooses between them, but rarely asserts its own independent views. Since all public experience of war is mediated in some way, with few civilians able to observe it first hand, most judgements are based in practice on rhetoric rather than reality.

That is not to say rhetoric is all-powerful; far from it. Under certain circumstances official efforts to lead the public debate can do more harm than good to the way the populace understands and responds to military action (Wolfe 2008, 93-94). Where external indicators of reality flood into the public sphere without first being filtered through government press offices, gaps between the
position on the ground and the official account of it are revealed, and policymakers’ credibility can collapse. This phenomenon has been identified within the FPA literature as the main consequence of “the elasticity of reality”, a term denoting the room that policymakers have to extend the accepted interpretation of events within the public debate away from objective indicators, but the latent possibility of “reality reasserting itself” and revealing the flaws in official rhetoric. One cannot ‘spin’ away an obvious military defeat; enemy troops occupying the streets usually put paid to that possibility. But where room exists for interpretation, as is generally the case in the sort of decentralised, postmodern conflicts that have defined the period since the end of the Cold War, political communication is at least of equal importance to military prowess in determining how domestic audiences will react. In other words, “both rhetoric and reality matter, albeit to varying degrees under differing circumstances and at different points in time” (Baum and Groeling 2010a, 445). When victory cannot easily be defined in terms of countries conquered and battles won, the result is that “winning is about narrative, not sheer brute force” (Michalski and Gow 2007, 198). Success, consequently, “depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins” (Nye 2005, Nye 2009, 162-163, Nye 2011a, 19, Nye 2011b, 18). At a more applied level of analysis, then, the conceptual distinction between policy substance and policy communication again falls down.

Not only is the substance of foreign policy shaped by communication, but communication can have substantive consequences, clearly illustrated by the notion of ‘domestic audience costs’. When states interact with international rivals and allies in relation to a given issue, one of the primary difficulties they face is of how best to signal their seriousness of intent. By making public commitments to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances, they stake their political credibility on standing their ground, and open themselves up to challenge by political rivals should they fail (Ramsay 2004, 460). Having made a strong statement of intent, they will appear weak if it does not find reflection in their actions (Heffernan 2006, 593). Apparent weakness in foreign policy can undermine a leader’s broader political credibility even where the specific policy at point is considered unimportant by voters. Audience costs thus aid policymakers seeking to establish the
credibility of commitments advanced by other democratic states (Fearon 1994, 577). Depending on the exact nature of the commitments, and on the structure of the political system in which they operate, leaders who choose to assert their negotiating lines in public may suffer punishment for reneging, or may even be unable to do so (Partell 1997, 504). This is especially the case in democratic states, because of their greater transparency when compared to authoritarian rivals (Leblang and Chan 2003, 387).

Provided a potential adversary knows enough about democracy to recognise the risks a leader takes in staking their credibility on a chosen course, they are “more likely to believe the democratic leader’s threat, and so acquiesce without a fight”, if it is made in public than if it is made only in private (Baum 2004b, 190). This credibility is not absolute. It may be limited, for example, where a government is unable to guarantee the ratification of an agreement (Putnam 1988, 439, Eichenberg 2005, 9, Kreps 2010, 191). Equally, areas about which a domestic audience evidently cares little will elicit less credible threats than those perceived as vital (Trumbore 1998, 545, Clare 2007, 732). As the contrast between Saddam Hussein and Mu’ammar Qadhafi’s responses to the 11 September attacks shows, the establishment of audience costs is not an exact policy science. The varying understanding that rivals may have of the nature of democracy intervenes to alter its exact effect. Saddam Hussein never recognised the shift in the American willingness to tolerate bloodshed engendered by the shock of 9/11. He continued to believe, up until the point of his removal from power, that he faced a greater threat from Iran or from his own recalcitrant subjects than from an attack by the supposedly decadent West (Iraq Survey Group 2004). Increasingly belligerent rhetoric emerging from Washington, despite the commitments it implied on the part of the Bush administration, did little to shake this belief. Had he recognised the greater tolerance for casualties in the US after 11 September, Saddam might have recognised also that Americans were far from unwilling to fight, and likely also to punish policymakers who threatened force and failed to use it. Qadhafi, by contrast, recognised the impact of 11 September of the US political and public consciousness. He sent a message of condolence to President Bush following the attacks, escaped
inclusion in the ‘axis of evil’, and made a deal in 2003 to abandon his WMD programmes without the need for an explicit threat of force against him.

The creation of potential ‘audience costs’ signals to actors operating at the international level that a leader is constrained by domestic pressures from adopting certain positions, pressures created by the act of sending the signal. Once expectations have been established, the domestic political consequences of failing to escalate a confrontation come to outweigh the (political) risks of proceeding, even where this means going to war. Because foreign policymaking usually involves a series of decisions spread out over an extended period of time, this effect can lead to successive communications having a cumulative effect on a developing policy stance. Statements made in relation to immediate circumstances limit future options, often in ways that could not possibly have been anticipated at the time. Substantive foreign policy is, through the domestic audience costs effect, constantly shaped and constrained by communication decisions, while communication can in turn be used as a substantive policy tool by exploiting the same effect for signalling purposes.

Domestic audience costs theory has been used to integrate the ‘soft’ constructivist approach to understanding foreign policy into a ‘hard’ rational choice model based on bargaining and office-seeking (Tomz 2007, 821). It can be seen at work in recent conflicts, particularly in the British experience during the “9/11 wars” (Burke 2011). Prior to the launch of strikes in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Tony Blair worried that statements made by recalcitrant members of his own Cabinet might undermine his efforts to signal to the Taliban that the US and the UK really were serious about taking military action should they fail to hand over Osama Bin Laden (Campbell and Stott 2007, 569). Democratic leaders frequently fret that autocratic rivals will fail to appreciate the difficulty of maintaining a united front without coercion. Arguably, Blair was later himself “trapped” into taking military action “by the arguments he made” in public about the need to deal with the perceived Iraqi threat (Coates and Krieger 2009, 248). Having committed to supporting the US and ensuring the Baghdad regime disarmed, he could not have rolled back to a more neutral stance in the face of divisions at the UN without appearing to have folded. At a conceptual level, then, and in both
abstract and applied terms, the communication and the substance of foreign policy are intrinsically linked.

**Substance and communication: the practical level**

This interrelationship is further visible in the practical arrangements by which foreign policy is made in democratic states. It follows from the functional integration of news management into the policymaking process that has taken place over recent decades. Media advisers no longer simply receive fully-formed policies and then set about presenting them to the public through journalists. They now contribute actively to policy formation. Modern technology has made the news so immediate that leaders feel they have no time to let advice filter through established bureaucratic hierarchies before responding to an argument or an event (Meyer 1989, 9, Gilboa 2002, 743, Hoffman 2002, Blair 2010, 446). Instead they maintain direct relations with ‘spin doctors’, and ensure that press concerns are addressed as an “organic part of the [policymaking] equation” (Meyer 1989, 38). Inevitably, access to the heart of policymaking affects both the nature of news management and the power of news managers. Media advisers no longer focus simply on ‘selling’ policy decisions; they advise at the stage of substantive policymaking what sort of positions might possibly be sold (Meyer 1989, 11). Policymakers are thus given information and guidance which encourages them to choose substantive courses of action that fit with communication imperatives. As one former British government press officer put it, “at this juncture, it no longer becomes possible to distinguish in any useful way between the substance of policy and its presentation” (Meyer 1989, 38-39). The same officials are responsible for both, and they consider variables that might be labelled ‘substantive’ or ‘rhetorical’ interchangeably in making decisions.

The fact that policymakers try to influence the news proves that it concerns them (Cohen 1973, 181, Jacobsen 2008, 339), though not necessarily that they have any idea what they are doing (Cohen 1995, 70). News management has achieved such prominence as a result of policymakers’ acceptance that media support leads to public support and their belief that public support is vital for policy success. On the face of it, this belief appears to lack firm basis in fact. Other than in moments
of crisis or conflict, most voters pay little attention to the details of foreign policy. As the discussion of the domestic audience costs model in the previous section suggests, however, perceived weakness, incompetence, or dishonesty in foreign policy conduct can damage a leader’s broader profile and so their electoral prospects, even if the specific issues under consideration are of little concern to their constituents (Nincic 1992, 93). Having identified the retention of power as the primary goal of democratic leaders, some analysts have suggested that they are more likely to focus on longer-term trends than on short-term headlines (Baum 2004a, 606). News management, from this perspective, remains very much a subsidiary activity when compared, for example, to opinion polling or more strategic communication. What analysts miss in taking this line, however, is the belief held by many democratic leaders that short-term media support is both intrinsically and extrinsically useful. Columnists and commentators are regarded as opinion-leaders, so their views potentially affect the sort of long-term trends that lead to electoral success or defeat. News coverage, meanwhile, both informs citizens, and fuels judgements about which issues are worth weighing at election time (Knecht and Weatherford 2006, 710). News management is useful not only in seeking to manage these trends, but also in insulating policymaking as far as possible from the daily tumult of public debate (Bennett 1994, 14). None of this means that the media actually exerts any sort of broader effect. What matters is that policymakers believe it does.

In engaging in news management, democratic leaders interact and compete with a range of rival actors, including political opponents, public actors, and international rivals. Government officials utilise “press releases, speeches, and briefings” (Norris, Kern and Just 2003, 12-13), as well as “interviews with journalists, advertising, article and pamphlet writing, and the filing of legal briefs” to promote their preferred line (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 6). Actors from across the governing bureaucracy are drawn into the news management process, with “spokespersons for relevant government agencies, including the military, security, law enforcement, and intelligence services” (Norris, Kern and Just 2003, 12-13) drawn into the mix alongside “ambassadors, intelligence officers, and journalists” (Gilboa 2002, 732). A successful news management operation
requires both “time and skill” to transform critical coverage into positive reinforcement for government decisions (Entman 2004, 120). Often the competitive nature of the democratic public sphere will militate against a significant level of control being achieved by any one actor, state or otherwise, and policymakers will instead have to settle for a more nuanced approach. This is where the ability of individual media managers becomes crucial.

Policymakers do not manage political communication personally, although some contribute to specific tasks such as speechwriting. Often they claim to pay little attention to day-to-day headlines. Even the most apparently disinterested leader, however, will still hire ‘spin doctors’ to handle news management for them (Hill 2003, 276). These figures can gain considerable authority simply by virtue of their proximity to power. Under Tony Blair, it was “arguable that Director of Communications Alastair Campbell, his eye constantly on the media...had more influence over New Labour foreign policy than did the various ministers nominally in charge of the UK’s external affairs” (Daddow 2011, 226). Unlike Blair’s Cabinet colleagues, Campbell had direct access to the Prime Minister, and attended closed policymaking meetings from which even the most senior civil service officials were excluded. Measures of huge significance, such as the “Doctrine of International Community” speech Blair made in Chicago in 1999 seeking to encourage the US to intervene in Kosovo, were launched without the Foreign Office even being informed, let alone consulted (Kampfner 2003, 53). Public communication had become a central activity of government, and one jealously guarded by the Prime Minister and his closest aides. New Labour, then, apparently was “wedded to the idea that presentation, and hence image, were indispensable to effective policymaking and implementation” (Hollis 2010, 30). The Blair government’s experience shows that the invitation of ‘spin doctors’ into decision-making has been both a cause and a consequence of the inseparability of the substance and the communication of foreign policy. Campbell’s presence in Downing Street focused policy discussions on presentational issues, and he was there in the first place because Blair believed good presentation was essential to successful policymaking. Disasters such as the second, ‘dodgy’, WMD dossier show too the danger of “according as much importance to
the *presentation* of the government’s case as to the *substance*” (Hollis 2010, 62, emphasis in original). It is difficult to present something successfully if it doesn’t actually exist.

Political leaders are often regarded as having the upper hand in their efforts to lead public discussion of their foreign policy decisions. Governments usually hold the power of initiative in deciding what issues are brought to the media’s attention, while their institutional authority enables them to exercise a degree of control over the definition of ‘national interest’ (Hill 1981, 59-60). They have access to the media, and they are in a position at least to derive influence from that access (Silberstein 2005, 2-3). Outsiders frequently feel unable to question what they are told by ministers. Journalists fear “stigmatisation as traitors and possible legal sanctions” for rejecting the official line (Carruthers 2000, 166-167), and they recognise that “they are in a weak position to second-guess officials who have access to the latest top-secret information” (Casey 2008, 12). Foreign policy may be up for debate within the public sphere, then, but certain aspects of the conduct of statecraft remain beyond the reach of ordinary observers. Interestingly, however, policymakers tend to be “far more convinced of their own limitations in this sphere” compared to journalists’ perceptions of them (Casey 2008, 13). Although most models assume the media will be heavily influenced by official positions, particularly during times of war, “those prosecuting wars continue to complain that news media are a ‘problem’, insufficiently supportive, perhaps even siding with the enemy” (Robinson, Goddard, et al. 2009, 534). Partly this sense of persecution stems from an unwillingness on the part of policymakers to accept that the public simply does not ‘buy’ the argument they are ‘selling’. Few accept evidence of continued hostility to their plans in public debate as a sign of anything other than unduly critical journalism (Stothard 2003, 3). Partly, too, it reflects a mistaken belief that the function of the news is to transmit information from government to the governed; a belief long challenged in the media studies literature, and analysed in more detail in the following sections.
Media logic: priming, agenda-setting, and framing

Foreign policy analysts have historically been sceptical about the existence of a “mass market for detailed information on foreign affairs” (Almond 1950, 232). Ordinary citizens are thought to be far more concerned with matters that directly affect their daily lives than with the more abstract and remote issues arising in the international arena. Several studies of public opinion have even pointed out that, from a purely economic perspective, it is entirely rational for the average voter to ignore foreign policy much of the time (cf. Page and Shapiro 1992). Few individuals have sufficient leisure to justify the level of commitment necessary to gain viable first-hand knowledge of the wider world, and fewer still stand to gain or lose substantially from events overseas. Armed conflict changes the calculus slightly. While “in the ante-bellum period, nobody has to fight and nobody has to pay” (Lippmann 1922, 241), a decision to go to war can mean serious consequences for democratic publics. This effect has been reduced in the postmodern era by the shift away from ‘total war’, but it still occurs to an extent. In addition, more recent studies of the interplay between public opinion and foreign policy have noted that the lack of information most citizens hold about international affairs cannot be taken as evidence that they do not care about what goes on beyond their state’s borders (Risse-Kappen 1991, 481). Ignorance does not necessarily equate to indifference, particularly given that the easy availability of information in the internet age makes finding out about an issue that has suddenly sprung to prominence relatively straightforward.

The communication studies literature identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which official messages may be able to influence what voters think about an issue; priming, agenda setting, and framing. Priming is the process through which communicators seek to establish favourable conditions for the receipt of future messages (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982). It is generally a passive consequence of the combined effects of the other mechanisms rather than something policymakers actively do. Agenda setting involves influencing what issues warrant discussion in public debate. An example would be a conscious effort to produce official statements about a relationship with an allied state in order to highlight a successful bilateral summit. Framing
means the use of linguistic devices, including select vocabulary and turns of phrase, to paint international issues, events, personalities, and policies in a manner that supports the government’s overall agenda. Repeatedly describing an action as terrorism tends to delegitimize it just as emphasising that a state is an ally portrays its conduct in a more favourable light (Solomon 2009, 282). This effect operates independently of the actual behaviour being described; framing is thus the main process by which rhetoric influences the representation of reality, potentially to a greater extent than reality itself.

Arguably most democratic governments aspire to prime audiences to accept their decisions regardless of the specific actions they are taking at any given time. Agenda-setting and framing tactics are then deployed whenever active efforts are required to manage media (and so public) support. Policymakers take an interest in setting the media agenda because audiences use the emphasis placed on an issue in news coverage to gauge its importance (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176, Page and Shapiro 1992, 284, Knecht and Weatherford 2006, 714). A newspaper, in other words, “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963, 13). If a policy decision receives prominent, front-page attention, public opinion is likely to respond. Indeed, experimental studies carried out in the US have shown significant shifts in citizens’ perceptions about the importance of foreign affairs when international matters appear central to the public debate played out in news broadcasts compared to when the primary focus remains on the domestic arena (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982, Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Simon 1993). Recognising that news editors can only cover a limited number of stories sufficiently prominently to activate the broader public into concerning itself with any one issue area, policymakers seek to influence the media agenda in the hope of increasing the focus on areas in which they are perceived to be performing well, and shifting it away from less favourable topics of discussion (Hilsman 1987, 229). Studies looking at the role of public opinion in policymaking have identified government communications as key determinants not just of the media agenda, but also of the shape of public
opinion more generally (Cohen 1995, 123, Splichal 1999, 26, Jakobsen 2000, 134). From an FPA perspective, these findings suggest that democratic leaders concerned about their domestic support base would do well to focus their communication efforts on agenda setting. To an extent it does not matter how an issue is discussed in public debate if the scale of its consideration is so limited that only a small sliver of society pays it any attention.

Media experts continue to debate the extent to which journalists exert a reciprocal influence over foreign policy by way of the agenda-setting effect. Often the most dramatic events in the international arena are those driven by crisis. Policymakers are largely powerless to influence media coverage of an unexpected foreign war or a major ecological disaster in anything other than a reactive manner. As a result, during the 1990s analysts divined a “CNN effect” driving western states’ decisions to intervene in conflicts taking place around the world. News coverage was held to make even the most far-off crisis immediate to domestic publics, forcing governments to respond in situations where no clear national interest was at stake. Partly the perceived impact of the global news media reflected the sudden absence of the Cold War as a unifying principle for Western states’ foreign policy profiles. No longer able to classify every decision to act overseas in terms of the battle against global communism, Western leaders struggled to develop a coherent alternative narrative to explain their involvement (or lack of involvement) in areas as diverse as Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and the Balkans. Even before the Soviet Union’s demise, however, scholars had begun to suggest that “when the press shares a measure of agreement it has the power to move an issue to a spot near the top of the national agenda...even if the crisis has been created by the press, the government must deal with it” (Hilsman 1987, 233). This initial image of media power was subsequently qualified by the suggestion that it applied primarily “when there exists uncertain policy vis-a-vis an issue” (Robinson 1999, 308). The prevalence of uncertainty in the post-Cold War period may, then, have exacerbated an otherwise insignificant influence. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century the CNN effect was being dismissed as “a fallacy of common wisdom” (Michalski and
Gow 2007, 128), perhaps in part because the ‘War on Terror’ had re-established a common narrative through which all overseas activity could be explained.

A possible solution to the discrepancy between earlier and more recent accounts of the media’s role in setting the agenda for democratic foreign policymaking arises from the recognition of the interrelationship between policy substance and policy communication. Given media agenda-setting is primarily an act of communication, it may be that the media’s influence over the government arises initially in the rhetorical sphere. Policymakers are not necessarily forced to address to any great extent a policy area simply because the media has become interested in it, but they usually will make at least some comment in response to questions put to them by journalists. The Blair government’s decision to release its ‘dossier’ on Iraq’s WMD programmes in September 2002, for example, with all its substantive implications and consequences, was driven by “a growing clamour for information from the media” that had grown up over the summer months (Butler 2004, 71). This is not quite the same as the media having the power to influence directly the agenda for policymaking, but nor is it a minor point, given the potential for communication decisions to impact substantive policy.

Agenda setting is only the start of the story of the public debate over foreign policy. Having determined what issues will receive prominent media coverage, policymakers and their counterparts in the public sphere next engage in framing contests to determine how particular aspects of the debate are to be described. News organisations play a key role at this level of interaction, with even the most studiously neutral report offering information about the temporal or geographical context of events that can help sway audience opinions (Altheide 1987, 165). A common example of the impact of framing effects comes in the tendency to gauge the representativeness of a public demonstration with reference to an editorial viewpoint rather than by looking at the makeup of the participating crowd. Journalists sympathetic to the cause advocated by a protest tend to present it as highly representative of public opinion; their opponents as merely a minority voice not worthy of mainstream attention (Miller 2002, 158). There is considerable debate over whether governments or
media organisations exert more influence over the framing of foreign policy in the news. They interact constantly, not only challenging but also reinforcing each others’ frames, adopting and reinventing rhetorical flourishes and substantive arguments until it is unclear where any one line originated. Such is the level of interpenetration of news-making and policymaking that both journalists and politicians have been diagnosed with a “mutual dependency syndrome” that undermines their independence in the interests of smooth communication (Thussu 2005, 4th Edition, 275, 277). Where powerful actors within the news industry clearly favour a particular policy course, their efforts to promote it through framing can affect the way leaders behave (Lippmann 1922, 243, Cook 2003, 261, Entman 2004, 94). If the position thus promoted actually accords with what an administration intended to do anyway, however, the effect is to “increase the likely influence of...leaders on public opinion” (Shapiro and Jacobs 2000, 243). Studies looking at the way rhetoric supports the international use of force have found successful framing, whether facilitated by a supportive media or not, a crucial element in the development of public approval (Wolfe 2008, 2).

If news management is a contest, it follows logically that the contest can be lost (Entman 2004, 18). Where the governing class is united on an issue, the media can generally be relied upon to follow its lead. Once divisions emerge, however, journalists will pursue them relentlessly, developing in the process their own counter-frames, and causing increasing difficulties for news managers trying to gain hegemony over public debate (Page and Shapiro 1992, 284, Powlick and Katz 1998, 29). Efforts to ‘spin’ away a controversy can, in turn, further exacerbate it. When the Blair government found itself struggling to win public support for the invasion of Iraq, it responded with an array of tactics, ranging from big-ticket ministerial speeches through to off-the-record, backroom briefings of selected journalists. By constantly changing the focus of the official line, however, this campaign (to call it a strategy would be to exaggerate its coherence) caused confusion and, ultimately, damaged the case for war (Williams 2005, 192-193). It also prompted a reaction from the media itself. As one Downing Street aide lamented, “in response to perceived government spin, journalists have taken it
upon themselves to add their own spin to stories” (Powell 2010, 204). In the end, so significant was this reaction, and so major the damage caused by efforts to combat it further, that it was arguably the “selling – or the mis-selling” of the Iraq war that made it so controversial in later years, as much as military failures on the ground (Danchev 2007, 193, Dunne 2008, 353).

Media logic: independence and self-interest

Communication studies insights suggest that there is nothing surprising about journalists’ aggressive assertion of their independence in response to what they perceive as excessive news management (cf. Esser and Spanier 2005, 27). Far from being simple representatives of received truth to audiences, reporters and commentators “function as strategic, self-interested gatekeepers of public information” (Baum and Groeling 2009, 437). They play a role in providing information about public opinion to leaders (Everts 2000, 191), and about leaders’ conduct to the public (Cohen 1973, 78, 1995, 100, Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3, Powlick 1995, 433). They are, at the same time, entities with concerns of their own, derived from ideology, professional values, or simple economic imperatives (Splichal 1999, 223). Consequently, “the information on which the public depends in determining whether or not to support a foreign policy initiative may be systematically distorted for reasons having more to do with the professional incentives of journalists than with the merits of the policy” (Baum and Groeling 2010b, 2).

In recognising that the news is produced not by some objective and disinterested process of packaging information into saleable formats, but in response to commercial pressures and professional imperatives, we introduce a crucial element from the critical media studies literature into the study of foreign policy. The modern media market is potentially hugely profitable and immensely competitive. If there ever existed a halcyon age in which ‘facts’ were transmitted to audiences without their being tainted by the profit motive that drives this complex system, it has long since passed (Habermas 1962, 1992, 21). In order to become ‘news’, information must first pass through what Herman and Chomsky called “news filters” established by the economic logic of the industrial-scale media. Five “filters” are identified; ownership, advertising, source dependence, flak,
and the general attitude of “anti-communism” (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the politics of its authors, Herman and Chomsky’s “propaganda model” purports to explain how the news has become a tool for the surveillance and control of previously free democratic societies by economic and political elites (with the emphasis on the economic). This critical stance is unnecessary, however, in the adoption by FPA of the underlying argument that the economic imperatives of the modern mass media influence what news gets reported. It is perfectly possible to recognise the range of factors that influence journalists and editors in the course of their work without attributing their effects to elite conspiracy. The introduction of the economic factor actually points towards a normatively neutral approach, by highlighting the structural basis of the forces at work, rather than their reliance on individual or even collective agency.

The drive for profit has influenced the way the modern media presents foreign policy in three main ways. Firstly, in a search for larger audiences, news organisations have developed novel formats for transmitting information about international affairs. Millions of living rooms play host to substantive foreign policy discussions through the influence of light-hearted “soft news” broadcasts (Baum 2002, 272, 2003, 2006, 123). Such programming focuses on the personalities of individual leaders (Heffernan 2006, 582), and favours dramatic, human-interest narratives over more traditional analytical accounts (Baum 2004c, 313). It thus appeals to the sort of news consumers normally repelled by the dry consideration of foreign policy minutiae. Secondly, the need to reflect audience preferences in order to retain audience loyalty has undermined journalistic professionalism in the use of source material. Opinions are sought out which confirm the editorial line of a particular publication, and so which align with the perceived preferences of its core consumers, rather than on the basis of any abstract commitment to truth. Thirdly, there is constant pressure for novelty. Nuance is banished from the headlines, and every piece of information that can be framed as evidence of crisis, is framed as evidence of crisis. Where insufficient new information exists to fill column inches (and attract audiences to advertising), journalists create their own crises with
whatever source material they have available. If this means framing a subtle argument from a politician as evidence of imminent threat or active dishonesty, then that is what they do.

To an extent “it is impossible to disentangle the personalities, the politics and the policies” involved in foreign affairs (Meyer 2005, 219). Focusing on individuals is a well-established heuristic used by uninformed publics in considering foreign policy (Lippmann 1922, 13). Personalisation is not, then, necessarily a problem for governments. Nor is the development of alternative ways of presenting news about foreign affairs. Soft news audiences learn about international events as an “incidental by-product” of their search for entertainment (Baum 2003, 269). Their inclusion in the public debate arguably democratises the discussion over foreign policy. The democratising effect is advanced further by the news industry’s reliance on attracting audiences, which implies that, unlike politicians, “the newspaper editor has to be re-elected every day” (Lippmann 1922, 321). Arguably, then, a successful media organisation is both more representative of and more responsive to public preferences. This argument has been attacked, however, by officials and academics who argue that purchasing decisions determine neither the accuracy of reporting (Powell 2010, 205), nor its sobriety (Altheide 1987, 174), only the degree to which reports tell consumers what they wish to hear and in the manner in which they wish to hear it. The effect of the success of mass-market media has further undermined the business case for more substantial ‘hard’ news (Magder 2003, 33, Baum 2006, 127). In order, meanwhile, to maintain a constant level of public interest in foreign affairs, journalists feel driven to play up the prospect of military action under any given circumstance, particularly where they can identify a “villain” by whom a violent clash is to be triggered (Baum 2003, 10). The result is that audiences are not necessarily well equipped by news coverage to play any sort of coherent role in policy debates. Because of its remoteness from everyday experience, foreign policy offers particular opportunities for “manipulation” in the interests of governments and reporters alike (Page and Shapiro 1992, 283). This is arguably one reason why the commercial “marketplace of ideas” has failed repeatedly to support a rational and well-informed public debate over democracies’ decisions to go to war (Thussu 2005, 4th Edition, 279, Hamelink 2004, xxii, Kaufmann 2004, 5). It has not been
helped by policymakers’ energetic news management efforts, which have reached new heights even compared to the “long tradition of overstatement” in this area (Freedman 2004, 7).

Journalists exercise “an almost exclusive gatekeeping role” when it comes to what information gets reported within a political system (Hill 2003, 274). Their professional values incline them to seek authoritative sources for balanced stories, but the economic realities of their industry require an additional focus on surprising stories, crisis, and conflict (Baum and Groeling 2010b, 20). Audiences are believed to pay attention to ‘hard’ news about foreign affairs only when it appears ‘new’. They do not maintain a constant watch over international events, but they are prepared to commit time to updating their views if they believe significant developments have taken place (Gaber 2007, 223, Gelpi 2010, 93). In addition, then, to fostering an atmosphere of crisis through their framing efforts, journalists present their source material in such a way as to encourage audiences to feel the need to learn more about current events. This pressure makes nuance impossible, initially in news reports, and vicariously in government communications. Tony Blair has complained repeatedly that he was unable publicly to make his (subtle) private case for preparing for war in Iraq because the British media made no distinction between contingency planning and overt aggression (Blair 2010, 402). Newspapers, “each terrified that they [would] be the last to get in on the storyline”, responded to the prospect of war by speculating relentlessly about its imminence and likely impact (Cook 2003, 113). The government then engaged in more news management, and journalists reacted, and a deepening spiral of cynicism and spin developed that undermined the quality of the entire public debate. Crucially, this effect again occurred as a result of structural pressures rather than individual agency. It should, then, be visible wherever commercial media operate, despite the considerable variations between markets in terms of issues, personalities, and policies.

Alongside these economically-driven pressures, the professional commitment that journalists exhibit to basing their stories on authoritative sources leads to what media studies scholars term “indexing”. Seeking to quote only those individuals who actually hold the power to
influence events, “the media calibrate news judgements rather precisely to the clout of the powerful actors whose remarks or actions are covered: the higher their power to shape newsworthy events, the more attention they receive” (Entman and Page 1994, 97). Provided, as was discussed above, there is a degree of unity in the political elite, the access that officials gain as a result of the indexing effect gives them considerable scope to influence what gets reported (Nacos, Shapiro and Isernia 2000, 4, Norris, Kern and Just 2003, 296-297). Where there is opposition from among credible groups, the media “is like a prism. It will reflect, focus, and magnify their views” (Kern, Levering and Levering 1984, 195). The result is that elite divisions, or elite unity, are reflected in the pages of the press, and often in turn more attentive and informed citizens become more closely tied to elite views (Bennett 1994, 24, Zaller 1994, 186, Everts and Isernia 2001, 17). The exact impact of indexing is held to vary from case to case, however, reflecting the way the balance of power can shift even within a state depending on the precise issue under consideration (Althaus, et al. 1996, 412).

The most important implication of the indexing phenomenon for FPA arises when considering the policymaking practices of democratic states other than the US. Policymakers in Washington have more influence over international affairs than leaders in any other state, democratic or otherwise, by virtue of their position at the helm of the world’s last remaining superpower. American journalists thus naturally ‘index’ their coverage of foreign policy to what the administration of the day is saying, drawing in comments from significant external forces, such as Congress, along the way. From the perspective of a news organisation based in London or Paris, however, Washington remains the centre of global power. British and French journalists will feature their own governments’ positions prominently, but they will usually also refer to what is being said across the Atlantic. The effect does not work both ways. It was unthinkable to an American official during the build-up to war in Iraq that the US media might pay more attention to Jacques Chirac than to Donald Rumsfeld; many incorrectly assumed that the converse would be true in terms of media coverage of events in the capitals of other democratic states. Consequently more effort was devoted by Bush administration officials to firing up the Republican party ‘base’ than on putting out
messages that went over as well with public opinion in Europe as they did in the US (Kampfner 2003, 169, Campbell and Stott 2007, 581). What this means for the role of news management in foreign policymaking is that, for most democratic leaders (including on occasion for US presidents), their domestic headlines are shaped as often by statements made beyond their borders as by what they themselves say. In order to pursue an effective communications strategy, therefore, they must either align rhetorically with allies, or prepare to respond rapidly to public statements that differ from their own established stance. The global nature of the modern news media, then, creates interpenetration between different domestic public spheres. Governments of powerful states feel little effect, but their enemies and allies alike must adjust their positions in response to official messages never meant for international consumption, created with little regard to their impact overseas. Once again this effect is a consequence of the structural conditions imposed by the modern commercial news media, rather than a product of individual agency in any recognisable form.

Conclusions: Feedback

It is impossible to distinguish adequately between the substance and the communication of democratic foreign policy. Supposedly substantive concepts in the FPA vocabulary, such as ‘national interest’, ‘legitimacy’, and even ‘success’, are socially constructed through public debate, and so heavily influenced by official communications. Government efforts to lead the news, and through the news to lead the public, send signals to their international counterparts about their plans, and constrain their future choices by establishing potential domestic audience costs. Because foreign policy tends to unfold over extended time periods, the influence of communication over substance develops cumulatively as the consequence of a series of consecutive smaller commitments. Eventually policymakers become ‘trapped’ into a given course by the combined logic of their own earlier public arguments. This effect would be significant in itself, even without factoring in the structural effect of the economic and professional imperatives affecting the modern news media. When considered alongside ideas brought in from the communication studies literature, however, it
appears vitally important. Foreign policy communication and foreign policy substance are intertwined, and communication is shaped according to pressures emerging from the nature of commercial journalism. Under pressure to maximise audiences while retaining their independence and demonstrating their balance through the citation of multiple authoritative sources, individual reporters focus their attention on certain types of story and certain frames of reference. Policymakers who seek seriously to influence what information becomes news must, then, shape their efforts in accordance with these pressures. Policy communication, and so indirectly policy substance, is consequently constrained by the structural imperatives of the 21st century media market. The media, and the public through the media, thus exert a degree of influence over the substance of foreign policy, at least indirectly. This effect occurs not because of what the media does but because of what it is, a global, commercial force affecting domestic politics in a range of interconnected states. The “feedback loop” between public, press, and policymaking helps explain how democracies legitimise and assess foreign policy adventures, and also how these processes interact with more concrete activities like the deployment of military force (Nincic 1992, 15). Leaders navigate a network of “circular” political relationships (Verba, et al. 1967, 333) in which public opinion about foreign policy, and the policy itself, are “partly constituted by each other and partly constituted by other factors” (Everts and Isernia 2001, 17). What results is an iterative, multi-directional interaction, rather than one that could readily be rendered into causes and effects (Hansen 2006, xvi, Baum and Potter 2008, 40, Baum and Groeling 2010b, 2-3). The scale of governments’ news management efforts, and their integration into substantive policymaking, mean that in the 21st century it is no longer viable for FPA to maintain that a decision can usefully be studied in terms of how it is ‘made’ without reference to how it is ‘sold’; both selling and making policy are part of the same process, and both must be considered together.

From a policymaking perspective, the effect of these relationships can be severe. When decisions to go to war are assessed in retrospect, governments find that journalists exert considerable power over public opinion. If their experience of official news management has been
too negative, for example where military spokesmen are no longer thought credible as sources of information, many news reporters react by adopting a deeply critical stance in making judgements about the effectiveness of a campaign. It was in many ways the failures of ‘spin’ prior to the Iraq war that really damaged the British government’s credibility during the years of occupation, rather than the subsequent disasters on the ground (Cook 2003, 287, Heffernan 2006, 588). Blair himself blamed much of the negativity circulating in public debate on journalists’ “strong desire, conscious and subconscious, to see [the invasion] fail” (Blair 2010, 441). This was however a consequence of his own failure to win their support before giving the order to use force. Because ‘victory’ is itself socially constructed in the post-Cold War, postmodern era of international relations, communications failures inevitably have substantive consequences. The communication process itself is complex, and subject to a range of forces explored and explained by media studies scholars, but insufficiently integrated into models of foreign policymaking. Recent experiences suggest that FPA should take these insights more seriously than it presently does. In the 21st century, notions of priming, framing, and agenda-setting are indistinguishable from the supposedly more substantive concepts that we expect to see occupying statesmen. Their consequences, too, are far more important than the traditional FPA approach would admit. If FPA is to keep pace with developments in the media, in news management, in media studies, and in public debate, it needs to make better use of the full range of ideas expressed in social science circles. This paper has begun to suggest how the adoption of communications insights might take place, and the benefits that would result for our understanding of democratic foreign policymaking. Further work is needed to make its observations stick.

Word Count: 9,847
Bibliography


