THE ACCURACY OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF FOREIGN POLICY RHETORIC AND EVENTS

MADALINA-STELIANA DEACONU
ms_deaconu@yahoo.com
Titu Maiorescu University

Abstract: The current study has extended past research by elucidating public perceptions concerning the offensive or defensive nature of U.S. military engagements, the representation of elite rhetoric in the news, the independent role of the media in both generating and responding to public attentiveness, the reporting function of journalists, and the media’s reliance on packaged news. The purpose of this article is to describe the findings from this review and to discuss implications and future directions for practice-related research with the causes and consequences of public support for the overseas application of military force, the dominant source of “legitimate” information, the strategic incentives of media actors and their potential effects on the nature of the information, the assessments of elites and citizens concerning the status of a military conflict, and the impact of new media on story selection patterns and public opinion. Keywords: media coverage, foreign policy, elite rhetoric

1. Introduction
The mainstay of the paper is formed by an analysis of the effects on mass public attitudes of partisan website news coverage, news coverage of controversial policy debates, attitudes regarding the overall quality of the news media, and the public’s actual role in foreign policy. These findings highlight the importance of examining the response of democratic publics to casualties, the ideological orientations of news outlets, the prevailing media representation of reality, and the degree of niche targeting of political information-oriented websites. Scholarly research reveals strong correlations between the effects of elite rhetoric and “reality” on public opinion regarding Iraq, the relative influence of elite rhetoric and reality over the course of the conflict, the content of new and traditional news media coverage of foreign policy, and the nature of media coverage of foreign policy. In the present paper, I focus on the nature of political communication in democracies, differences in partisan polarization over the Iraq conflict, the role of the free media in the foreign policy of democracies, the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, and the role of credibility in mediating the persuasiveness of information to consumers. The overall results provide strong evidence for the effects on public opinion of elite communication, the processes by which the changing media environment is shaping political discourse, the nature of the media’s influence on policy, the news choices of journalists, and the meanings and implications of partisan messages in the media. The paper generates insights about the immediate or short-term effect of dramatic events on public attitudes, the role of audience costs in the foreign policy behavior of democracies, the strategic intervening role of journalists, the potential influence of the Internet on politics and political discourse, and the
effects of media coverage on public opinion regarding foreign policy.

2. The Effects on Public Opinion of Elite Communication
Baum and Groeling hold that media representations of elite debate in Washington concerning Iraq tend to guide public opinion regarding the conflict. The public receives much of its information about actual “events on the ground” through the news media. As the public gathers more information over time, the potential gap between reality and its representation by elites through the media recedes. Baum and Groeling contend that as the U.S. engagement in Iraq has continued, typical citizens have increased their store of information about the conflict. Attitudes regarding the war have solidified relative to early in the conflict. Only over time can citizens retrospectively evaluate the reliability of news consumed in the past.

At the outset of the conflict the public depends on a representation of events provided by elites. In foreign policy, communication matters over both the short- and longer-term. As Potter and Baum put it, the ability to generate audience costs depends on the electorate’s capacity to vote a leader out of office and on modes of political communication that prevent the excessive manipulation of information. A free media is integral to the process of generating audience costs. Leaders cannot be relied upon to divulge “bad news” themselves, while a captive media is a tool of those in power. When the press is an effective independent actor, the actions of leaders are transparent to the public. Audience costs may play a significant role in the process of generating credible commitments, and will be varied and context dependant in democracies. Potter and Baum outline the role of media in the dissemination of foreign policy information, and examine the likely effect of political knowledge on the audience cost mechanism. The media transmit to citizens the incumbent government’s preferred framing of foreign policy. Media frequently transmit elite messages with largely intact frames. The public is forced to rely on media reporting, and through it the opinions of trusted elites. The media are more responsive to leaders’ preferences than to the public as consumers of information. The media provide information that furthers those leaders’ capacities to control the framing of events. Potter and Baum insist that early in conflicts, the media are least likely to naysay. The political elites provide the media with much of their information, while elites expect the media to repay the favor by conveying their preferred frame. The 24-hour news cycle transmits dramatic, vivid images to consumers in near-real time, and thus the pressure to sustain an uninterrupted flow of news may force the media to transmit more unfiltered information to the public. The duration and magnitude of the public’s informational disadvantage may shrink as the speed and volume of news increases. Potter and Baum reason that the potential for a “CNN Effect” to enhance leaders’ capacity to generate audience costs may be illusory. The public’s attention to matters of foreign policy is at best intermittent and generally quite low. Understanding the ebb and flow of public information and attention tells us when these costs are or are not likely to arise. An uninformed or inattentive public cannot serve as the source of audience costs. An active role is the sine qua non of an audience cost framework. Even if the average individual knows relatively little about
foreign policy, the public can act efficiently and rationally. The public’s knowledge of and engagement in foreign policy is inconsistent over time and circumstance. As Potter and Baum put it, rallies may emerge from the interaction between preexisting individual preferences and the information environment. In the face of a significant informational disadvantage, the public uses elite positions as a critical cognitive shortcut. Public opinion turns against conflict as casualties rise. The public’s tolerance for casualties is based on factors such as elite consensus, multilateral support, and traditional missions. The primary mechanism involves electoral punishment for contravening long-standing preferences. Leaders have considerable leeway in deciding when and how to engage their citizenry. Public opinion is a phenomenon moderated by public attentiveness, circumstance, elite framing and the actions of the media.

3. The Nature of the Media’s Influence on Policy
Baum and Groeling aim to determine when and how public opinion is influenced by various partisan messages emanating from different sources and media outlets. The public engages in little, if any, evaluation of the content of public discourse, and plays a proactive role in deciding whether to support or oppose presidential foreign policy initiatives. The underlying preferences and routines of news organizations have shifted markedly. Baum and Groeling point out that sophisticated and motivated consumers are able to seek out news sources that reflect their own ideological preferences. Perceived credibility enhances the persuasive power of a message. The ideological reputations of the networks mediate the persuasive power of the information they present to consumers. Credibility effects might vary across categories of actors, while relatively subtle partisan messages can have large effects on opinion. According to Baum and Groeling, politicians have increasingly worked to shape how the public perceives different news outlets. News outlets with independent reserves of credibility and prestige have become less influential.

Groeling and Baum claim that news organizations maintain ultimate control over the content of their news programs. Newsworthiness entails a premium on stories that are actually new. Negativity is pervasive and dominant in modern news coverage. The press favors negativity and conflict in their story choices. Newsworthiness varies systematically from unified to divided government. The media present an inaccurate representation of elite rhetoric.

4. The Effects of Reality Relative to Its Representation by Elites via the Mass Media
Baum and Groeling say that the mass media are the key intermediaries between citizens and their leaders. Citizens learn virtually everything they know about foreign policy from the mass media. Baum and Groeling explain the foreign policy communication process as the outcome of a three-way strategic interaction between and among the press, the public, and the political elite. In foreign policy matters, citizens are responsive to what they see and hear from political elites. Citizens employ the opinions of trusted elites as an information shortcut or heuristic cue. The credibility of media messages, their sources, the messengers communicating those messages, and the context within which the messages are delivered
mediate the influence of news on consumers. News coverage typically does not faithfully reflect the mix of elite rhetoric in Washington. Journalists are not solely *reporters*, they are also *interpreters*. Baum and Groeling emphasize that partisan politics has extended to the “high politics” of foreign policy. Journalists’ preferences shape the representation of elite discourse available to citizens in times of foreign crises. The new media increasingly allow citizens to self-select into ideologically friendly environments. Not all elite statements are equally persuasive to the public. Partisan and costly credibility apply to messengers and to the context within which those messages are embedded. The extent of elite discretion in framing events varies over time. The media play an active role in shaping the nature and extent of citizens’ exposure to rhetoric and reality. Foreign crises are especially hard cases in which to find an independent effect from media or elite rhetoric. Communication plays a *crucial* and *independent* role in influencing public support for the president during foreign crises. Journalists apply common standards of newsworthiness in their story selections. Baum and Groeling write that the news wires can serve as an effective baseline estimate of the actual universe of potential news stories. Some Internet outlets seek mass audiences, while many other Internet outlets are overtly niche-oriented, seeking to attract a smaller, but more loyal, segment of the overall audience. Partisanship is a key line of demarcation allowing websites to attract a relatively loyal audience. Many of the most widely visited political blog sites tend to be overtly partisan. Non-partisan news media *do not* select stories because they advantage a specific party. Baum and Groeling gain insight into political news values and decision-making by tracing the news choices of several news organizations. Blog users are individuals to whom typical members of the public turn for interpretations of political issues and events. News coverage in the blogosphere and the attitudes of blog consumers may influence political opinion among the broader citizenry.\(^5\)

5. Conclusions
The goal of the present study was to determine if there are relationships between journalists’ standards of newsworthiness, opinion dynamics in wartime, variations in media coverage of casualties in Iraq, the long-studied effects of traditional media exposure, and the effects of elite rhetoric via the media on public opinion regarding Iraq. The results of this study further establish the importance of the relation between the nature and extent of media coverage of US military conflicts, the role of a free press in providing reliable information to citizens, the effects of information and rhetoric on war support, the public’s preferences in media coverage, and the influence on public opinion of the framing of conflict events embedded in media reporting of elite rhetoric. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the current literature by examining the implications of the elasticity of reality for news coverage, the factors contributing to the persuasiveness of information, the incentives and interactions of citizens and media, the effects of reality relative to its representation by elites via the mass media, and the elasticity of reality with respect to Iraq.
References


