



# Did the Global War on Terror end the CNN effect?

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## Abstract

While the Global War on Terror (GWOT) aimed to eradicate terrorists, it also allegedly claimed another casualty – independent media coverage of foreign policy – a key component of the CNN effect. To many analysts of this media effect, the launch of the GWOT clarified foreign policy priorities, much like the Cold War era. From this perspective, the media, which enjoyed relative freedom in their foreign policy coverage in the 1990s, became subservient to the state again after 9/11. This article challenges this conventional wisdom by first arguing that the media's foreign news agenda did not significantly change with the GWOT. However, problems with the notion of independent media framing, which existed in the 1990s, continued post-9/11. The article offers a nuanced understanding of the CNN effect that places the media's influence within the existing foreign policy decision-making structure. It also shows how the CNN effect can be a sustainable concept regardless of changing international security environments.

## Keywords

CNN effect, conflict, crisis, foreign policy, media effects, war

The 1990s was a period of much hope and optimism in international affairs. The end of the Cold War, in combination with growing international interactions and globalization, led many to believe that the world had entered an era of peace and prosperity. To some, this meant an end to traditional realist assumptions about international politics, with a shift from hard to soft power politics (Nye, 2004). It was not tanks and cruise missiles, after all, that brought down the Soviet Empire, according to soft power advocates, but rather fax machines, blue jeans and television.

A salient theme of this period was a belief in the mass media's power and effects. On the one hand, the media were identified as a key facilitator in the transfer of political

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ideas to eastern Europeans in the late 1980s, motivating them to challenge those in power. On the other hand, media images of international ‘victims’ were believed to have pressured policy makers towards military intervention in places like Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 and Somalia in 1992 (Kennan, 1993; Shaw, 1996). The presumed impact of the mass media on diplomacy and foreign policy led to the use of a new term – the CNN effect – that spurred much debate throughout the 1990s (Gowing, 1994; Livingston, 1997; Mermin, 1999; Robinson, 1999; Strobel, 1997).

Al Qaeda’s September 11th attacks on the US, however, put an abrupt end to this euphoria. From this perspective, the 1990s was a unique period in history with no obvious foreign policy threat or direction for the US and its Western allies; 9/11 changed that and brought clarity and direction to Western foreign policy in a dramatic fashion, leading to the launch of the GWOT. Like the Cold War era, there was once again an identifiable enemy that posed a credible threat to national security. As such, the media, which enjoyed a brief period of relative independence from the government in the post-Cold War era, were once again subservient to the government (Entman, 2004: 96–104). The CNN effect genie, so to speak, which had been granting wishes to Kurds, Somalis, Kosovars and others, was once more back in its bottle – a mere aberration of the 1990s (Entman, 2000; Gilboa, 2005; Robinson, 2005).

While claims that the CNN effect waxed and waned over the 1990s and 2000s, respectively, due to changing international security environments, appear plausible and logical, there are at least two shortcomings with this thesis; these are presented in this article over two sections. The first examines media coverage of foreign crises both before and after 9/11 to determine if any notable changes can be identified. In the 1990s, it was argued that the mass media focused on humanitarian crises that were not related to national interests, thus diverting the government’s foreign policy agenda. Livingston (1997) referred to this typology as the agenda-setting CNN effect. If this trend changed after 9/11 and the mass media no longer influenced the government agenda, but rather followed it, then two trends should be discernible in the media’s coverage of foreign conflict and crises. The first would be a relative increase in conflict and crisis coverage associated with the GWOT after 9/11; the second, a relative decrease in conflict and crisis coverage not related to the GWOT.

The second argument goes one step further and challenges an inherent problem with the original conceptualization of the CNN effect on independent media framing, which the GWOT period has only exacerbated. It claims that the version of the CNN effect that allegedly ended after 9/11 never actually existed because it was based on a false conception of the media’s relation to foreign policy, which placed the media as a force outside the confines of power. If reconceptualized in a more nuanced fashion as part of the foreign policy apparatus, however, the CNN effect represents a novel media effect that can be sustained across changing security environments.

## **Section I: humanitarian crises and media attention**

The first section is based on a quantitative analysis that seeks to understand the degree to which the media’s coverage of foreign policy changed after 9/11 and the launch of the GWOT. If the GWOT truly did shift the media’s agenda, then there should be a higher

level of coverage of conflicts and crises associated with the GWOT and a marked decline in those not associated with it.<sup>1</sup>

To conduct this assessment, two datasets were gathered and compared. The first compiles annual death statistics from different high-casualty conflicts over extended periods before and after 9/11. As man-made humanitarian crises are often due to conflict, death statistics from these conflicts can act as a proxy for identifying the relative scale of humanitarian crises. The second dataset is an index of news media coverage of the same conflicts over the same timeline.

### *Counting the dead*

To gather casualty data, extensive searches were conducted on the Uppsala University Conflict Management Dataset (Uppsala, 2009) over the period from 1995 to 2008. The years 1995 to 2001 were selected as the post-Cold War/pre-GWOT years, while 2002 to 2008 comprise the GWOT period.<sup>2</sup> As the GWOT was closely tied to the last seven years of the George W. Bush administration, it was necessary to select an equivalent number of years preceding 2002 for comparison.

The search was conducted by conflict from the three categories in the Uppsala database – war and minor conflict, non-state conflict and one-sided violence – and then combined for a conflict total.<sup>3</sup> Eight conflicts were analysed – Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq, Israel–Palestine, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan and the former Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> These each represented sustained conflict over the period of the study, except the former Yugoslavia, which was largely at peace after 9/11. These conflicts were divided into two camps. The first – Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Israel–Palestine – were closely associated with the GWOT. The second – DRC, Rwanda, Sudan and the former Yugoslavia – had limited or no connection to the GWOT, and were primarily considered humanitarian crises. These qualifications are examined in more detail later in this article when each conflict is assessed individually.

While the Uppsala Dataset under-reports the overall deaths and humanitarian suffering from conflict due to its inclusion of only documented violent deaths (Hawkins, 2008: 7–10), it is assumed that this under-reporting is somewhat similar across all cases due to the consistent methodology applied.<sup>5</sup> Overall, 88,571 deaths are recorded in the dataset between 1995 and 2001, and 83,905 between 2002 and 2008. The DRC recorded the most deaths in the first period, at 27.4 per cent of the total, while Iraq had the highest in the second period, at 31.6 per cent of the total. Tables 1a and 1b in the Appendix outline the deaths in this dataset from 1995 to 2001, in both absolute and percentage terms, while Tables 2a and 2b display the same data between 2002 and 2008.

### *Media attention to humanitarian crises*

The next dataset was gathered from an extensive search of Nexis.com in order to measure the volume of news stories on these conflicts over the time period of this study. For this research, six sources were searched for articles/segments and their collective volume was combined to create a news media index. Three of these were from television news transcripts (ABC, CBS and CNN news), and three from newspapers (*The New York*

*Times*, *The Times* and *Daily Yomiuri*). While four of the six sources were American, two international sources were also included from leading newspapers in the UK and Japan, creating a slightly more international index.

For each of these sources, names of conflicts from the casualty dataset were searched in combination with the following keywords separately: conflict, crises, war, massacre and genocide. Then the total number of stories in which at least one keyword was found from each media source was combined for a conflict total. In the pre-9/11 phase (1995–2001), 113,461 articles were found. Conflicts of the former Yugoslavia received the highest volume of coverage over this period at 39.8 per cent of the total. In the post-9/11 period, there was a substantial increase in the number of stories meeting the search criteria, with 219,311 in total. Of these, 119,998 of them, representing 54.7 per cent of the total, related to Iraq. Tables 3a and 3b summarize the media coverage by conflict in absolute and percentage terms between 1995 and 2001, while Tables 4a and 4b do the same for the period 2002 to 2008.

Finally, ratio tables were created comparing the percentage of media coverage each conflict represented as a percentage of total coverage for that year over the percentage of casualties in that conflict as a percentage of total casualties for that year. For example, if the DRC represented 10 percent of media coverage and 20 percent of deaths among the eight conflicts in the study in a particular year, its ratio would be 0.5. If, on the other hand, it represented 20 percent of media coverage and 10 percent of deaths, its ratio would be two. A number under one suggests that a conflict is under-reported relative to its humanitarian importance, while a number over one suggests that it is over-reported.

For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that if the media followed the government's agenda more closely after 9/11, there would be a drop in the ratio of conflicts not associated with the GWOT in the second period and an increase in the ratios of conflicts associated with it. In the following section, these hypotheses will be assessed in relation to the eight conflicts in the sample.

### *Analysis by conflict*

*Iraq.* In the post-Cold War period, the 1991 Gulf War, in which Iraq was a main combatant, was a groundbreaking event for the CNN effect. Through the Cable News Network's novel 24/7 breaking news format and live coverage via satellite technology, images from this conflict were sent to global audiences in instant and dramatic fashion. Many of the images from this conflict, such as the live night vision tracer fire over Baghdad, Amiriya shelter bombing, highway of death and post-war Kurdish refugee crisis, became iconic images forever associated with the CNN effect.<sup>6</sup>

Looking at the period 1995–2001, there are very few documented battle deaths in Iraq, only 242. Media coverage, however, was the third highest of the conflicts covered over this period at 16,990 articles, which represented 15 per cent of the total. The low number of deaths and high media coverage, therefore, suggest a substantial over-representation of coverage. One would expect some over-representation of this conflict, as it involved Western forces and the use of air power to enforce the no-fly zones created after the war. The media representation, however, is likely to be not as overstated in relation to the humanitarian crisis as it appears because most of the impact was non-violent, and linked to the international sanctions and their impact on child mortality rates.<sup>7</sup>

After 9/11, Iraq was thrust squarely into the crosshairs of the GWOT. The 2003 Iraq War, which lasted years after the initial attack, accounted for 26,545 documented violent deaths over the period 2002–2008. This figure was the highest among the countries covered over this period, representing 31.6 per cent of the total. The ratio of Iraq casualty to media coverage, however, was only 1.73, which was substantially below the 1995–2001 period.

Did the shift to the GWOT mean that the media followed the government's agenda on foreign policy more closely? The data in this case provide limited evidence to support this thesis, as Iraq coverage was disproportionately high both before and after 9/11. While the coverage of Iraq did increase substantially after 9/11, there was a good reason for this – the 2003 Iraq War, which led to substantially higher documented deaths, including the deaths of over 4,000 American soldiers.

*Afghanistan.* Afghanistan recorded the second highest casualties among the countries covered over the period 1995–2001, at 22,713. It also received little media coverage over this period until the last few months of 2001. Outside 2001, in which the ratio of casualties to media coverage was close to one, the previous six years recorded ratios in the range of 0.11 to 0.24, suggesting substantial under-reporting. This is not surprising, of course, and supports allegations that the West largely ignored Afghanistan after the Soviets left in the late 1980s. Afghanistan in the 1990s, as other studies have confirmed, suffered tremendously but received very low media attention in the West (Hawkins, 2002; Livingston, 1997). There was certainly no CNN effect in this forgotten war during the post-Cold War period.

After 9/11, Afghanistan was the initial focus of the GWOT. Like Iraq, the war in Afghanistan continued throughout the entire period under review due to an active insurgency after the initial ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001/2002. In fact, the Afghanistan casualties, which were the third highest in the second period, grew over this phase, suggesting a strengthening of the insurgency over the timeline. Media coverage of Afghanistan was also high, at 17.7 per cent of the total for the period. In ratio terms, however, Afghanistan overall was not substantially under- or over-represented at 0.90 over the entire period. The trend over the entire second period, however, was downward, suggesting that the media reduced their coverage of Afghanistan at the same time that violent deaths were increasing. In the last two years of this period, in fact, when casualties in Afghanistan were the highest, the ratios were the lowest at closer to 0.5.

The data from Afghanistan suggest that the media did substantially increase their coverage of Afghanistan when the country became clearly linked to Western foreign policy interests after 9/11. While deaths surprisingly decreased in Afghanistan in the years immediately after 9/11, media coverage increased quite dramatically. On their own, these findings support the notion that the media followed the government's foreign policy agenda after 9/11. They also challenge the assumption, however, that the media were more prone to follow major crises during the post-Cold War period. The media largely ignored Afghanistan in the 1990s, even though the humanitarian suffering there was on a much greater scale than other crises that the media covered, such as the Balkans and Israel–Palestine.

*Israel–Palestine.* Previous studies have identified the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as the most over-represented international conflict story (Hawkins, 2002, 2008). The findings

from this study confirm this both before and after 9/11. Before 9/11, the conflict was seventh in terms of violent deaths, but second in media coverage, yielding a ratio of over 25. After 9/11, Israel's ongoing conflict with the Palestinians was included in the GWOT by the George W. Bush administration. This did not make much difference in terms of the media, however, as coverage was already high. If anything, relative coverage dropped in the second period even as the humanitarian situation worsened with the end of the peace process and the start of the second intifada. In ratio terms, in fact, the scale of relative casualties to media coverage dropped from approximately 25 to 3.

The media coverage of this conflict before and after 9/11 suggests that other factors beside the GWOT drove media interest. It also suggests that the scale of the crisis is a non-factor in coverage. If scale mattered, then the media would have paid less attention to this conflict, as casualties were relatively limited, especially in the period 1995–2001, which was one of relative peace.

*Somalia.* Somalia, like Iraq, played an important role in CNN effect theorizing, and stands as the classic alleged case of both the agenda setting and impediment typologies of the effect (Livingston, 1997; Mermin, 1999; Robinson, 2002). Even today, it is widely believed that media images of starving people took the US into Somalia in 1992, while those of dead American soldiers took them out the following year. In the 1995–2001 period, conflict casualties and media coverage were both low in Somalia, at sixth and seventh, respectively. In ratio terms, however, Somalia garnered disproportionately high coverage over this period at over two, probably due to its place in Western memories related to the earlier US-led military role.

In the post-9/11 world, the Horn of Africa and especially Somalia were considered an important part of the GWOT, especially after the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) took control over much of Somalia in 2006. A subsequent war with the UN-backed transitional government, supported militarily by Ethiopia, and continued insurgency by the ICU and its offshoot, al-Shabaab, meant an intensification of the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Somalia over the second period. During the GWOT period, Somalia recorded the fifth highest casualties at 6,266 battle deaths. This was a marked increase from the 1,012 deaths recorded in 1995–2001. Somalia's media coverage, however, did not increase at nearly the same rate, only increasing from 2,686 to 3,739 stories between periods. In ratio terms, Somalia actually dropped significantly between the two periods, from 2.07 in 1995–2001 to 0.23 in 2002–2008. This case suggests that the GWOT had no impact on the media's interest in this conflict.

*Democratic Republic of Congo.* The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is considered the epitome of forgotten or stealth conflicts (Hawkins, 2008). The data from this study confirm past findings. Whereas the DRC recorded the highest number of deaths in 1995–2001 and was fourth in 2002–2008, its media coverage was sixth and eighth in the two periods, respectively. In ratio terms, the numbers are even more revealing, as DRC showed a figure of 0.12 and 0.10 over these two periods, respectively. While these numbers are low, they would be even lower if non-violent deaths were included.<sup>8</sup>

Like many conflicts in the 1990s, the DRC case again shows that the scale of the humanitarian crises was not the sole basis for media attention. The findings also demonstrate that the GWOT did not completely divert media attention away from crises that

were outside the scope of national interests. In the case of the DRC, there was a remarkable consistency of low coverage, even as the intensity of the conflict and battle deaths declined after the 2003 peace agreement.

*Sudan.* In the post-Cold War period, the conflict and humanitarian crisis in Sudan had many similarities to other African conflicts. There was a prolonged civil war involving thousands of deaths and bouts of famine, yet little Western media coverage. This made Sudan, according to a US diplomat, like ‘Somalia without CNN’ (cited in Taylor, 2003: 299). Over the period 1995–2001, Sudan had the third highest number of conflict deaths at 14,656 (16.5% of total), while it received the least media coverage at 2,367 stories, representing 2.1 per cent of the total for the period. In ratio terms, Sudan was the second lowest proportionately at 0.13.

Sudan had a mixed relationship to the GWOT. While it was labelled a state sponsor of terror, it was also considered a ‘strong partner in the war on terror’ (US Department of State, 2007) for its intelligence cooperation. However, much of the coverage of Sudan during the period 2002–2008 was related to the conflict in Darfur, which was not part of the GWOT. Sudan had the second highest recorded deaths over this period at 20,413.<sup>9</sup> While there was much more media coverage of the conflict in Sudan in the period 2002–2008 at 5,805 stories, this was offset in ratio terms by more battle deaths. This led to a continued pattern of under-reporting, leading to a ratio of 0.11 – the second lowest after the DRC.

*Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.* The states that formed the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda represented two crises closely associated with the CNN effect. In the first case, the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo were alleged to be part of the CNN effect in action when Western air forces intervened militarily in 1995 and 1999, respectively (Bahador, 2007). Rwanda, on the other hand, was an infamous case when Western media only offered distancing and uncritical framing and little pressure for a foreign policy change (Livingston and Eachus, 1999).

Media interest in the former Yugoslavia was the highest amongst the conflicts studied during the period 1995–2001 and yielded a ratio of 2.41. Rwanda data, which began the year after the genocide, were based on sporadic fighting often linked to conflict in the DRC. However, Rwanda still accounted for 11.6 per cent of the overall deaths and 3.4 per cent of total coverage in the first period, for a ratio of 0.29. Despite the genocide, coverage of Rwanda was still limited in the late 1990s.

Finally, conflicts in both the states of the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda had largely ended during the period 2002–2008, with the former Yugoslavia recording no conflict deaths and Rwanda only 369. Both of these conflicts were clearly not part of the GWOT. Interestingly, however, the former Yugoslavia still generated over 10,000 media stories related to conflict over this second period, which was substantially higher than all the African conflicts – even ones associated with the GWOT, such as Somalia.

### *Overall media trends*

Assessing the data in its totality, some interesting trends are discernible. As previous studies found, results show that the scale of the humanitarian crisis did not drive media coverage. The worst cases of humanitarian suffering in the DRC and Sudan, in fact, had

amongst the lowest levels of coverage in both periods. The study also confirmed that African conflicts garnered limited interest in the Western media, as the four African conflicts in this dataset were the bottom four in terms of media coverage in both periods. In 1995–2001, these four conflicts collectively accounted for only 11.2 per cent of the coverage, whereas in 2002–2008, they fell even further to a low 6.6 per cent.

The strongest driver of media attention in both periods appears to be Western (including Israeli) military involvement. This factor appeared to trump all others, including the macro security environment. In other words, the GWOT, on its own, did not seem to influence media coverage unless Western troops were involved. Several examples demonstrate this point. The first is Somalia, a conflict that spanned both the 1990s and 2000s. This conflict fell squarely into the GWOT in the second period. Yet a review of the two periods shows no pickup in coverage. In 1995–2001, coverage was 2.4 per cent of the total, whereas in 2002–2008, it was 1.7 per cent of the total. Even in the years 2006–2008, when it was most clearly part of the GWOT, it accounted for 2.0, 2.0 and 2.2 per cent of the media coverage, respectively. By contrast, the former Yugoslavia, which was not part of the GWOT, but did have Western peacekeepers and an important role in recent Western memories of conflict, had more than twice the media coverage of Somalia in 2002–2008.

Another data point to consider in this regard is the volume of media coverage devoted to active wars between the two periods that were not part of the GWOT. Amongst the list, only Sudan and DRC are zones of conflict that were active in both periods and not part of the GWOT. Together, these conflicts garnered 6,135 stories in 1995–2001 and 8,278 in 2002–2008 – an increase of 35 per cent. If the GWOT had refocused the media's attention, this type of coverage should have dropped.

The evidence from this review shows that the GWOT did not substantially change the media's foreign news agenda. Editorial decisions continued to be set based on traditional criteria such as ethnocentrism, in addition to other likely drivers of newsworthiness such as immediacy, drama and simplicity (Wolfsfeld, 2004: 16–23). When considering the media's role in the CNN effect, however, the agenda, or what is covered, is only the first media requirement. If there is to be a CNN effect, clearly the issue needs to be on the agenda. What this section has shown is that the GWOT did not dislodge the independent nature of this component, which continued to operate largely as it did before 9/11.

The second media requirement over the framing of the issue, or how the media interpret the agenda item, is more problematic. For a CNN effect to be possible, in which the government changes its policy due to media pressure, there clearly needs to be a difference between the media and government framing of the issue. As research on the CNN effect and humanitarian intervention has shown, images and frames that are proximate and show suffering, victimhood and criticism of a government's non-intervention policy are likely to pressure governments. Those that offer distancing frames that support a non-intervention policy, on the other hand, are likely not to create any pressure (Bahador, 2007; Robinson, 2002). But what makes the media adopt proximate and critical frames in some circumstances and distancing and supportive frames in others? And most significantly, what is the relationship of the media to the foreign policy decision-making apparatus?



Before answering these questions, it is important to acknowledge that the CNN effect is largely about foreign policy making and factors that contribute to its change. Yet much research on the CNN effect, both before and after 9/11, has failed to engage with the foreign policy analysis literature. As such, the original conception of the CNN effect somehow viewed the media as a force completely independent from the foreign policy decision-making apparatus. This made the CNN effect easy to debunk, even before the GWOT. In fact, all allegations of the CNN effect in the 1990s, whether in Kurdistan, Somalia or the former Yugoslavia, have been discredited on the basis that someone within the confines of power was already pushing for intervention, thus making claims of media independence ring hollow.

This article argues that while the media can be independent in their foreign news agenda, as previously demonstrated, they are not and never have been independent in their foreign policy news framing – at least in the idealized sense of the term. The following section makes this case by first reviewing the evolution of the foreign policy analysis literature and then placing the media within the decision-making apparatus both before and after 9/11. In this way, the article offers a nuanced interpretation of the CNN effect that is sustainable over different international security environments.

## **Section 2: media and foreign policy**

There is much debate within the foreign policy literature as to the nature of the decision making. While some theoretical approaches highlight the importance of macro-structures such as the international system, others place great weight on institutions and individuals. The study of foreign policy within the field of international relations began largely within the realist school, which placed great emphasis on the state as the primary actor in the system. For traditional realists like Morgenthau (1985), foreign policy goals were driven by the national interest, bound by the limitations of the state's relative power. Realism and neo-realism (or structural realism) both assume that states can act rationally by pursuing their interests through the selection of foreign policy options with identifiable payoffs. There is also an inherent assumption of near-perfect access to the information necessary for making such rational decisions. Rational actor approaches, which dominated foreign policy analysis until the 1970s, also assume that states are largely monolithic and unitary with significant control over their decision-making apparatus. In practice, of course, states are rarely unified in foreign policy decision making and often constrained by both organizational behaviour and intra-governmental politics (Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

Research on foreign policy in recent decades has expanded beyond rational actor models and placed greater emphasis on other factors including the character of the political leader, the nature of the state and the governance surrounding foreign policy. Within the first camp, researchers have found substantial differences amongst the governing styles of political leaders, such as US presidents, and concluded that character and leadership are critical to foreign policy formulation, management and results (Foyle, 1999). The second approach places significance on the nature of the state in foreign policy making. Within this context, democracies are often more constrained than autocratic states, especially regarding the use of force in foreign policy decision making, especially when

it relates to the use of force (Hill, 2002). When policy involves the military, democracies often require a high level of political elite consensus and public support, whereas autocracies often only need the will of a determined leader.

The third factor, which challenges the assumption of a unitary government found in rational actor models, identifies the fragmented and conflicting interests of government bureaucracies as the critical determinant of foreign policy outcomes. In most democratic states, foreign policy is not just created by one leader or department, but is a complex process involving the interaction of a number of powerful individuals and departments. These include departments primarily designated to manage defence, intelligence and the economy, that compete with foreign ministries to influence the political leader, who is often responsible for the final approval of policy.<sup>10</sup> In his classic case study on the Cuban Missile Crisis, Graham Allison identified organizational routines and competing interests amongst government departments as more important than any rational unitary process in determining the basis for the Kennedy Administration's policy decisions (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). As with Cuba and other cases, researchers have found that:

bureaucratic units pursue at best their own versions of the national interest and at worst their own parochial concerns, so that foreign policy-making becomes an inward-looking battleground in which decisions are produced by horse-trading more than logic. (Hill, 2002: 86)

From this perspective, foreign policy is at best tentative and subject to alterations with changing relationships, circumstances and events. Far from being more focused and certain with increased insecurity, evidence shows that it is just as vulnerable to change during periods of heightened insecurity. As Allison's detailed study of the Cuban Missile Crisis showed, even in this most insecure period when the odds of disaster stood at 'between one out of three and even' (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 1), according to President John F. Kennedy, policy was far from united and subject to various forces pulling in different directions.

It is within this context that unexpected media images and narratives, often from events-driven news (Lawrence, 2000; Livingston and Bennett, 2003), play a role in the policy battle by enhancing the standing of certain policy options over others. In the case of a potential humanitarian intervention in which the official policy is against intervention, the emergence of unexpected images and narratives of victims and suffering can bolster the position of those promoting intervention and weaken the hand of those in favour of the status quo. The Kosovo civil war, for example, featured a number of sensationalized incidents of humanitarian suffering in the form of civilian massacres, which helped US Secretary of State Albright move her policy preference of military intervention forward against an official policy of non-intervention favoured by other members of the National Security Council (NSC) (Bahador, 2007).

If, on the other hand, there is already a Western military intervention occurring and unexpected images of dead soldiers or civilians emerge, then policy makers favouring a withdrawal gain leverage on those supporting the intervention. The Somalia debacle of October 2003, in which American soldiers were killed and dragged around the streets of Mogadishu, for example, clearly strengthened the hand of policy makers who favoured withdrawal.

In both Kosovo and Somalia, however, media images and frames did not shift policy on their own. Instead, they played into the hands of those favouring a particular policy option in a competitive matrix of options and forces. If there was absolutely no political support for a policy option in the first place, it is likely that media images and frames favourable to that option would either not make it past media gatekeepers or simply have no effect on policy. For example, media images and frames challenging weapons of mass destruction claims before the 2003 Iraq War were limited because few in power were willing to openly challenge the war at that time (Bennett et al., 2007).

The argument that independent media coverage of foreign policy stopped after 9/11 is based on the underlying assumption that the media are somehow outside the political process. But if one examines cases in which the CNN effect was alleged in the 1990s, each case had advocates in the foreign policy-making apparatus that openly supported the policy shift. Media images and frames, as such, only helped to give leverage to certain policy-makers, who then used the new ammunition to push their policy preference. Interventions in Iraqi Kurdistan (1991), Somalia (1992), Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) were all openly being pushed by certain policy-makers on the inside. The iconic images and frames that flowed from these conflict zones only helped those already seeking intervention to gain an upper hand over those opposing such an outcome. Other humanitarian crises in places like Rwanda, the DRC and Afghanistan, on the other hand, remained non-interventions precisely because no political elite was pushing for intervention.

What is necessary for a media role is not a particular macro political environment, such as the post-Cold War era, but rather a certain level of political contestation for different policy options within the foreign policy-making apparatus. As the bureaucratic foreign policy model has argued, however, dissensus is a natural consequence of the system in which different bureaucracies favour different methodologies for dealing with international crises by the very nature of their institution and its mandate. As such, dissensus was likely during the Cold War, as was recorded during the Cuban Missile Crisis; it was prevalent during the post-Cold War phase, as seen during a number of interventions mentioned earlier; and it was also equally possible during the GWOT, as seen with US Secretary of State Powell's dissensus from other Bush NSC members in early Iraq War planning, before the president brought him into line (Hamilton, 2004).

Perhaps what is even more important than the macro political climate is the type of foreign policy inner circle the political leader chooses. If the group is selected based on its members' ability to provide objective and independent perspectives, for example, then there will most likely be greater policy choice and contestation. However, if the inner circle is chosen on the basis of loyalty to the leader, then there will be less policy choice and greater consensus. This sort of loyalty and ability to 'fall in line' was apparently highly prized in George W. Bush's NSC and perhaps this, more than the actual GWOT, explains the limited dissensus over foreign policy in the Bush administration (Woodward, 2008).

If the media are limited in their framing of foreign policy issues to the positions of the political elite, it is worth considering who fits within the definition of elite in this regard. So far, the discussion has largely focused on the executive branch of government. The NSC in the US, for example, which is dominated by cabinet members who are advisors

to the president, is clearly part of this elite. But there is no reason to exclude members of the legislature, such as key congressional members within the US, as part of this group. Other research has shown that when it comes to foreign policy, the media tend to index their framing to the range within forums such as the US Congress, where opposition party members form the contours of legitimate debate (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1989). This outcome, of course, makes sense if one considers basic journalistic routines. Journalists need credible sources for their stories. When it comes to foreign policy, the political elite provide journalists with a credible and easily accessible source that also gives them cover against flak from editors and concerned citizens.

If the media are not fully independent in their framing of foreign news from the political elite, then what does this mean for the CNN effect? Does it mean that the media are merely hollow instruments without any power or effect? The answer to this question is clearly no. The media do matter for political outcomes, but their effect needs to be understood within the confines of power, not outside it. The images and frames that the media show can surprise and change the dynamics of the debate, reordering the significance of different policy options. But those options need to be in play already. They can also strengthen, weaken or change the opinions of the political elite, who are not static, but do change their positions for personal or political reasons as events transpire. That is why images and frames that support a particular policy option, like those from the Racak massacre in Kosovo in January 1999, which strengthened the interventionist camp, also shifted the entire political landscape (Bahador, 2007). In such circumstances, those advocating a recently strengthened policy position are bolstered, while those against it or in the middle move closer to it either through a change of position or a weakened opposing hand. When this happens, it can change the hearts and minds of enough decision makers to shift the official policy. This is the 'effect' part of the CNN effect.

## **Conclusion**

This article challenged the claim that the GWOT ended the CNN effect. The first argument was based on an empirical study that reviewed the scale of conflicts and crises before and after 9/11 in relation to their media coverage. It found that the media still continued to operate a relatively independent foreign news agenda and were not significantly influenced by the GWOT. The largest driver of coverage appeared to be the involvement of Westerners and their military forces – a pattern similar to the pre-GWOT period. When conflicts related to the GWOT involved Western troops in a significant way, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, media coverage was high; when they did not, such as in Somalia, coverage was low. In addition, conflicts not related to the GWOT and not involving Western troops, such as those in the DRC and Sudan, continued to have low Western media coverage both before and after 9/11.

The second argument challenged the notion that the CNN effect ended after 9/11 by suggesting that the version of the CNN effect that apparently ended never actually existed even in the 1990s. That is because mass media framing never truly operated fully independently of those in power. For the media's effect on foreign policy to be understood, the media must be considered within the existing foreign policy decision-making apparatus. From this perspective, the macro security and political environment, while

important, is not the key determinant of the media effect. What is critical is the degree of consensus within the system. Given the nature of the beast, however, consensus will be rare, as different bureaucracies will naturally compete over the best methods for reaching solutions due to their internal incentive structures. Even in periods of high perceived insecurity when critical policy decisions had to be made, such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the decision to start the 2003 Iraq War after 9/11, there was dissensus and a lack of policy certainty. In fact, while there may be consensus over the threats strategically, dissensus over the tactics to deal with them may be increased precisely because the stakes are so high.

When considered together, these findings demonstrate that while the mass media can be understood as an independent agent regarding their foreign policy related coverage, they work within the confines of power when it comes to their framing and influence. Both arguments also demonstrate a pattern of continuity regarding the media and foreign policy between the post-Cold War era and the GWOT phase. September 11th certainly changed international relations, but it did not significantly alter the relationship between the mass media and foreign policy.

## Appendix

**Table Ia.** Pre-war on terror conflict deaths

Conflict	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
DRC	29	8,093	8,288	2,674	2,394	2,585	200	24,263
Afghanistan	1,000	3,040	2,083	7,799	2,465	3,107	3,219	22,713
Sudan	1,375	2,054	1,632	3,124	1,093	2,362	3,016	14,656
Former Yugoslavia	10,131	–	–	1,711	2,781	–	–	14,623
Rwanda	489	712	5,288	2,579	151	88	1,000	10,307
Somalia	350	450	–	–	37	–	175	1,012
Israel–Palestine	25	176	25	50	25	325	129	755
Iraq	100	109	–	–	33	–	–	242
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,499</b>	<b>14,634</b>	<b>17,316</b>	<b>17,937</b>	<b>8,979</b>	<b>8,467</b>	<b>7,739</b>	<b>88,571</b>

**Table Ib.** Pre-war on terror conflict deaths (% of total)

Conflict	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
DRC	0.2	55.3	47.9	14.9	26.7	30.5	2.6	27.4
Afghanistan	7.4	20.8	12.0	43.5	27.5	36.7	41.6	25.6
Sudan	10.2	14.0	9.4	17.4	12.2	27.9	39.0	16.5
Former Yugoslavia	75.1	0.0	0.0	9.5	31.0	0.0	0.0	16.5
Rwanda	3.6	4.9	30.5	14.4	1.7	1.0	12.9	11.6
Somalia	2.6	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	2.3	1.1
Israel–Palestine	0.2	1.2	0.1	0.3	0.3	3.8	1.7	0.9
Iraq	0.7	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2a.** War on terror conflict deaths

Conflict	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Iraq	85	8,618	3,844	3,206	4,379	3,827	2,586	26,545
Sudan	2,336	5,094	6,806	1,280	2,496	1,239	1,162	20,413
Afghanistan	187	502	715	1,366	3,291	5,871	4,489	16,421
DRC	4,061	3,126	569	92	151	689	801	9,489
Somalia	600	436	669	307	1,157	1,614	1,483	6,266
Israel–Palestine	709	463	427	176	1,367	547	713	4,402
Rwanda	59	–	75	92	46	69	28	369
Former Yugoslavia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,037</b>	<b>18,239</b>	<b>13,105</b>	<b>6,519</b>	<b>12,887</b>	<b>13,856</b>	<b>11,262</b>	<b>83,905</b>

**Table 2b.** War on terror conflict deaths (% of total)

Conflict	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Iraq	1.1	47.3	29.3	49.2	34.0	27.6	23.0	31.6
Sudan	29.1	27.9	51.9	19.6	19.4	8.9	10.3	24.3
Afghanistan	2.3	2.8	5.5	21.0	25.5	42.4	39.9	19.6
DRC	50.5	17.1	4.3	1.4	1.2	5.0	7.1	11.3
Somalia	7.5	2.4	5.1	4.7	9.0	11.6	13.2	7.5
Israel–Palestine	8.8	2.5	3.3	2.7	10.6	3.9	6.3	5.2
Rwanda	0.7	0.0	0.6	1.4	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.4
Former Yugoslavia	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 3a.** Pre-war on terror conflict media coverage (number of stories)

Conflict	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
Former Yugoslavia	12,451	5,738	3,379	3,715	13,605	3,253	2,978	45,119
Israel–Palestine	2,198	2,853	2,384	2,730	2,541	5,685	5,939	24,330
Iraq	1,138	1,923	2,428	4,847	2,109	1,560	2,985	16,990
Afghanistan	328	504	356	883	655	754	10,862	14,342
Rwanda	544	750	588	539	591	473	374	3,859
DRC	303	668	1,005	430	474	504	384	3,768
Somalia	576	322	221	221	328	306	712	2,686
Sudan	159	171	133	666	334	257	647	2,367
<b>Total</b>	<b>19,692</b>	<b>14,925</b>	<b>12,491</b>	<b>16,029</b>	<b>22,636</b>	<b>14,792</b>	<b>26,882</b>	<b>113,461</b>

**Table 3b.** Pre-war on terror conflict media coverage (% of total)

Conflict	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
Former Yugoslavia	63.2	38.4	27.1	23.2	60.1	22.0	11.1	39.8
Israel–Palestine	11.2	19.1	19.1	17.0	11.2	38.4	22.1	21.4
Iraq	5.8	12.9	19.4	30.2	9.3	10.5	11.1	15.0
Afghanistan	1.7	3.4	2.9	5.5	2.9	5.1	40.4	12.6
Rwanda	2.8	5.0	4.7	3.4	2.6	3.2	1.4	3.4
DRC	1.5	4.5	8.0	2.7	2.1	3.4	1.4	3.3
Somalia	2.9	2.2	1.8	1.4	1.4	2.1	2.6	2.4
Sudan	0.8	1.1	1.1	4.2	1.5	1.7	2.4	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 4a.** War on terror conflict media coverage (number of stories)

Conflict	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Iraq	9,897	32,719	20,721	14,796	16,030	15,033	10,802	119,998
Afghanistan	7,993	4,997	5,836	4,057	5,165	5,343	5,327	38,718
Israel–Palestine	8,277	6,778	5,052	4,326	4,282	3,574	3,382	35,671
Former Yugoslavia	1,836	1,992	1,308	1,238	1,357	1,071	1,507	10,309
Sudan	429	374	1,136	772	1,250	1,032	812	5,805
Somalia	627	579	403	350	629	595	556	3,739
Rwanda	305	378	417	416	384	303	395	2,598
DRC	396	361	249	301	438	329	399	2,473
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,762</b>	<b>50,181</b>	<b>37,126</b>	<b>28,261</b>	<b>31,541</b>	<b>29,287</b>	<b>25,188</b>	<b>219,311</b>

**Table 4b.** War on terror conflict media coverage (% of total)

Conflict	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Iraq	31.2	65.2	55.8	52.4	50.8	51.3	42.9	54.7
Afghanistan	25.2	10.0	15.7	14.4	16.4	18.2	21.1	17.7
Israel–Palestine	26.1	13.5	13.6	15.3	13.6	12.2	13.4	16.3
Former Yugoslavia	5.8	4.0	3.5	4.4	4.3	3.7	6.0	4.7
Sudan	1.4	0.7	3.1	2.7	4.0	3.5	3.2	2.6
Somalia	2.0	1.2	1.1	1.2	2.0	2.0	2.2	1.7
Rwanda	1.0	0.8	1.1	1.5	1.2	1.0	1.6	1.2
DRC	1.2	0.7	0.7	1.1	1.4	1.1	1.6	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 5.** Ratio of deaths to media coverage pre war on terror

Conflict	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
DRC	7.16	0.08	0.17	0.18	0.08	0.11	0.55	0.12
Sudan	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.24	0.12	0.06	0.06	0.13
Rwanda	0.76	1.03	0.15	0.23	1.55	3.08	0.11	0.29
Afghanistan	0.22	0.16	0.24	0.13	0.11	0.14	0.97	0.49
Somalia	1.13	0.70	NC	NC	3.52	NC	1.17	2.07
Iraq	7.80	17.30	NC	NC	25.35	NC	NC	54.81
Israel–Palestine	60.27	15.89	132.20	61.10	40.32	10.01	13.25	25.16
Former Yugoslavia	0.84	NC	NC	2.43	NC	NC	NC	2.41

**Table 6.** Ratio of deaths to media coverage during war on terror

Conflict	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
DRC	0.02	0.04	0.15	0.75	1.19	0.23	0.22	0.10
Sudan	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.14	0.20	0.39	0.31	0.11
Rwanda	1.31	NC	1.96	1.04	3.41	2.08	6.31	2.69
Afghanistan	10.82	3.62	2.88	0.69	0.64	0.43	0.53	0.90
Somalia	0.26	0.48	0.21	0.26	0.22	0.17	0.17	0.23
Iraq	29.46	1.38	1.90	1.06	1.50	1.86	1.87	1.73
Israel–Palestine	2.95	5.32	4.18	5.67	1.28	3.09	2.12	3.10
Former Yugoslavia	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC

## Notes

1. While this exercise does not show if cases of the CNN effect occurred more often before or after 9/11 since claims of the CNN effect also require policy change (which is not tested here), it does measure the media's coverage (or agenda) – the first component that is required for a CNN effect to be possible.
2. While part of this time period in 2001 falls after 9/11, the entire year 2001 is included in the pre-GWOT phase because the casualty data were only available on an annual basis and to maintain consistency in the unit of measure (years) in the entire dataset.
3. Whenever a best estimate was provided within a low to high estimate range, the best estimate was selected. In cases where only a range was offered, the mean was selected.
4. The DRC was called Zaire until 1997. The data for Zaire are included in the DRC data for 1995 and 1996. For the former Yugoslavia, separate searches were carried out under Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, and then added together. Searches were conducted to include all derivatives of a possible country's name or its people. For example, the search for Afghanistan was done as 'Afghan\*\*\*\*\*' which would include Afghan, Afghani, Afghanistan, etc.
5. It should be noted that in poorer countries, most of the deaths from the conflict were non-violent (from disease and starvation), undocumented, and therefore not captured in the dataset. This underestimates the true severity of these crises (Hawkins, 2008).



6. The Cable News Network's pioneering role in this form of news delivery and its alleged political effects associated the network's name with the effect, although the effect goes beyond the single network and applies to the broader news media's impact on politics and especially foreign policy.
7. According to UNICEF (1999), surveys conducted in Iraq in 1999 indicate that child mortality rates doubled from the previous decade, suggesting an estimated 500,000 additional deaths had taken place over the 1990s.
8. Estimates that include non-violent deaths associated with the conflict place the total number at over 5 million (Coghlan et al., 2007).
9. Like some other conflicts, this was a fraction of the overall death and humanitarian suffering. Estimates that include non-violent deaths place the total number at approximately 300,000 (Degomme and Guha-Sapir, 2010).
10. In the United States, the president has attempted to coordinate these various interests in recent decades through the National Security Council (NSC).

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