

The Commercial Media Cycle's Effect on National Security

Aaron Cowley

In their search for news, the modern American news consumer faces no shortage of information choices. With the news environment so dominated by the advertising dollar and competition for the consumer's attention, it is easy to see how the value of news could be compromised by efforts to make it more appealing. Given this environment, it is useful to explore whether the American public is best served by receiving the news it most desires as opposed to the news it most needs. To address this question, this paper will show that a dangerous commercial media cycle can leave American consumers ignorant of news that differs from their preconceptions, and that this resulting ignorance can have a negative impact on US policy. Finally, to illustrate this cycle and its negative impacts, this paper will show that the dangerous commercial media cycle leaves Americans ill informed to affect Israel-Palestine policy, and that the US' pro-Israel policy contributes to the threat posed by Islamic extremists. The dangerous commercial media cycle is the first issue to discuss.

The American media informs the public via a cyclical process that generally precludes challenges to the public's preconceived notions. "The yardstick by which the business performance of media companies is measured by investors includes few notches that mark public interest concerns about creativity, independent thought, and diversity. Instead, the measurements gauge sales, advertising revenue, and profits."¹ America's consumer-based media system requires that news outlets, in order to secure advertising sponsors, report the type of news in the manner that the consumer prefers. This system ensures that the public gets the news it requests by way of viewership or subscription. However, it does nothing to ensure that the news is accurate, balanced or informative beyond supporting the public's predilections. "Having advertising rather than consumers as the primary source of income means that the way to increase profit is to produce a product that has a minimal threshold appeal to the maximum

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number of demographically desirable consumers.”² The business-dominated system requires that the American media provide news that the public desires thereby reinforcing the public’s previously held views and public policy.

The news media’s failure to provide information that runs counter to public opinion makes it difficult to change policies supported by the public’s most deeply held views. The democratic nature of the American political system means that American public opinion inherently drives foreign policy, regardless of the quality of information upon which those opinions are based. Beyond the intuitive notion that public opinion shapes policy, Page and Shapiro showed that “public opinion is often the proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion.”³ Therefore, uninformed public opinion can have alarming implications for policy. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the effect that US policy has on its war against Islamic extremists is perhaps the most illustrative example of these ramifications.

Through unfair policies, the US may have elevated Israeli interests above its own. A 2003 Pew survey, that included traditional US allies, captured the fact that most of the world believes the US policy toward Israel is unfair to Palestinians. “In 20 of 21 populations surveyed – Americans are the only exception – pluralities or majorities believe the United States favors Israel over the Palestinians too much. This opinion is shared in Israel: 47% of Israelis believe the U.S. favors Israel too much, while 38% say the policy is fair and 11% think the U.S. favors the Palestinians too much.”⁴ Despite world and even Israeli opinion, the US media continue to use uneven news coverage to feed this excessive level of support for Israel.

Mearshimer and Walt point out that, “While serious criticism of Israel occasionally reaches a large audience across the United States, the American media’s coverage of Israel tends to be strongly biased in Israel’s favor, especially when compared with news coverage in other

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democracies.”⁵ The US media continue to deliver desirable Middle-East news, and in doing so, fail to provide the public with information that may contradict previously held opinions. Armed with no new perspective, the public shapes policies that continue massive support for Israel. Given this lopsided reporting on the conflict, it is useful to examine what predilections may drive the American public to seek such pro-Israeli news.

There are likely many reasons for the American public's desire for pro-Israeli news, but the powerful tie of religion may be chief among them. A 2003 Pew survey found that “44% of Americans expressed their belief that God gave the land that is now Israel to the Jewish people.”⁶ Further, a 2006 Pew survey “reports that more than one in five Americans (21 percent) cited ‘religious beliefs’ as the primary reason for their position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict... Only the media had a greater influence (35 percent) than religion.”⁷ Since news outlets need to report the news in a manner that appeals to the largest percentage of consumers, it appears unlikely that American news agencies would risk financial consequences to offer news that runs counter to the public's religious beliefs. The real danger of such one-sided reporting lies in the effect it has on the US fight against Islamist insurgents.

An appropriately informed American public could influence Congress and the White House to alter policies that currently contribute to the Islamist insurgents' recruiting efforts. The first requisite for a successful insurgency is a cause attractive enough to unite the population to support the insurgent.⁸ The US position toward the Palestinians provides such a cause to the Islamic extremists who pull recruits from the population of the Muslim world. It is increasingly clear that “the single issue that fuels the Global Islamist creed, as it does many other terrorist groups in the Middle East, is the Israel-Palestine issue.”⁹ Middle-East expert William Quandt summarized the consequences of such ongoing US support when he said, “No doubt bin Laden's

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motives for attacking the US go well beyond a concern for the Palestinians. But certainly some of the passive support for Muslim extremism and some of the recruits who flock to al Qaeda must be understood to be a result of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the United States' image as biased and hypocritical.”¹⁰ To illustrate how the public's ignorance can affect US policies that run counter to its own interests, it is useful to examine one recent policy involving a UN report on Israeli actions in Gaza.

In September 2009, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) released the Goldstone Report, which strongly criticized Israel's actions in Gaza during a 22-day conflict that ended in January of that year.¹¹ The report resulted from a “U.N. fact-finding mission to Gaza... [and] found that both Israeli security forces and Hamas militants had committed serious war crimes and breaches of humanitarian law during the Gaza conflict, possibly amounting to crimes against humanity. Among other findings, the Goldstone report stated that Israeli soldiers had deliberately targeted civilians in Gaza.”¹² While virtually unreported in the US media, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the report and its claims against Israel. While the Goldstone Report has been widely publicized in the Middle East, and Europe, the report received virtually no attention in the US at the time. On the day of the report's release the US media were focused on the death of Patrick Swayze, the H1N1 scare and the domestic healthcare debate. US media did not cover the Goldstone Report until five months after its release and even then, reporting was scarce and portrayed it as an unfair action of an “anti-Israel” UNHRC.¹³ While international debate of the Goldstone Report continues to roar outside the view of the US public, the US rejection of the report has become fodder for anti-American sentiment in Muslim countries. Media in the Arab and Muslim world eagerly tout the US

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position as yet another example of one-sided support for Israel,^{14,15,16} thereby fertilizing the recruit-baring soil for violent Muslim extremists.

The public's perception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents but one example of the dangerous commercial media cycle contributing to policies that run counter to US interests. It may be possible for the American public to recognize the danger of the cycle and demand news that falls outside the constraints of their pre-conceived notions. The nature of the cycle itself makes this unlikely, but there may be other developments capable of altering it. The information age may offer such opportunities through new types of news dissemination and consumption. Lower costs and general diffusion of news sources could combine to provide Americans with more news they need as opposed to news they want. Whether it be the combined ubiquity of the internet and digital video cameras, or the emergence of non-profit news agencies, there may be hope to break the cycle. However, even if the cycle does remain unbroken, public discussions of its existence can foster ideas to help Americans become better prepared to affect policy changes that truly are in the best US national interest.

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Notes:

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 3. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Effects of Public Policy on Policy," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar 1983), pp. 175-190, published by American Political Science Association, 175.
 4. Pew Global Attitudes Project, *How Global Publics View: War in Iraq, Democracy, Islam Governance, Globalization; Views of a Changing World*. (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, June 2003), 5.
 5. John J. Mearsheimer, and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 169.
 6. Jodie T. Allen and Alec Tyson, "The U.S. Public's Pro-Israel History; In Mid-East Conflicts, Americans Consistently Side with Israel," Pew Research Center (July 2006), <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/39/the-us-publics-pro-israel-history>
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