

Western Media Coverage of the Syrian Crisis: A Watershed for the CNN Effect?

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Abstract

What explains the absence of the CNN effect in the foreign policy decision-making process in the post-9/11 political context? A significant body of literature examines the CNN effect, the influence of the media on public opinion, and the effect this influence has on policy decision-making. However, this theory has not been applied to a case since the late 1990s. This paper analyzes the case of non-intervention in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons against a civilian population to determine the applicability of the CNN effect theory in the post-9/11 context. By applying Robinson's Policy-Media Interaction Model to television (CNN, Fox News) and print (New York Times, Washington Post) media coverage, this paper determined that the CNN effect should not have influenced this decision since the conditions favorable to influence policymakers were not present. The lack of influence in a case similar to previous events where the CNN effect did play a role suggests that the media agenda has shifted to cover the legal discourse of intervention rather than the normative, humanitarian discourse that gave rise to the CNN effect theory. Robinson's model is adapted to compare the empathy and critical frames used in the original model against a legal frame to determine that the legal agenda has a stronger presence. This concludes that in a transformed media environment, the CNN effect does not play the same role in mobilizing public opinion as it once did.

Keywords: Media, Intervention, Policy

1. Introduction

The media plays an ever-increasing role in shaping policy decisions and public opinion regarding the actions of policymakers, especially in the era of the 24-hour news cycle. This paper analyzes the case of the Syrian civil war to understand the role media pressure has on government decision-making in times of crisis, and provides a situation in which the CNN effect can be examined in the political context of the post-9/11 world. Analysis of the news coverage of this event determined that the shift in the framing of events from the focus on the humanitarian aspects of crises to a focus on the legal discourse surrounding interventions has caused the media to lose the influence on policy that it once had. This paper will argue that the CNN effect has passed its apogee of influence and is no longer relevant in the politic

2. Methodology

By applying Robinson's Policy-Media Interaction Model, this paper will determine that the conditions for the CNN effect were not present in the coverage of the Syrian civil war. In order for the CNN effect to be present, Robinson suggests that the media must take sides in the political debate, and the critical media coverage will create bargaining power for policymakers pressured to respond with a policy or face a public relations disaster.¹ However, analysis of

the coverage of the Syrian crisis reveals that in this case, the media did not favor either side of the political debate, which caused it to remain non-influential.

To determine whether the conditions were right for the CNN effect to occur in the Syrian civil war, the following sections will analyze media coverage surrounding the initial release of video footage of the chemical attacks, and the policy response that came approximately three weeks later. Due to the large volume of data, the analysis was limited to the dates most likely to see the CNN effect occur. The areas with the highest amount of media coverage are most likely to spur the largest emotional response, so they are separated and compared with the total data set. The paper will analyze the points with the most coverage, which were August 21, 2013, August 29, 2013, and September 9-10, 2013, and data collected from one week after each of these points. News coverage and political statements made within one week after the event are included in the data set to provide a sufficient sample size to determine whether the necessary factors are present. Analysis of this data will determine whether the necessary factors are present to see the CNN effect occur, and when it is clear that these factors are not present, it will determine the other framing devices to explain why this is not the case.

The data analyzed includes print sources (the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*) and television transcripts (CNN, Fox News Network). Studies show that more Americans get their news through television, but print media is shown to have a stronger readership base among policymakers and readers with a higher level of education.² To capture policymakers as well as the general public, both mediums are included. CNN and Fox News are included to balance out the political spectrum and control for potential bias in the coverage. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were selected because despite the fact that they have similar political leanings, they both provide a significant amount of foreign affairs coverage.

This analysis will follow Robinson’s Policy-Media Interaction Model to analyze the coverage by selecting a series of words that invoke an emotional or critical response, and measuring the frequency at which they appear in the articles. The first level of analysis uses descriptors that describe the individuals affected by the crisis. These descriptors are shown in Table 1. Robinson’s model additionally looks at a second level of descriptive images used in the coverage of the crisis. Some of the included terms are specific to the Syrian conflict, and others are borrowed from Robinson’s 2000 case study of Kosovo and Srebrenica.³ Table 2 depicts the final set of second-level descriptors.

Table 1. Basic level descriptors

<i>Empathy descriptors</i>	<i>Critical descriptors</i>
Refugee	Syrian
People	Sunni
Women	Men
Children	Soldier
	Civilians

Table 2. Second level descriptors

<i>Empathy descriptors</i>	<i>Critical descriptors</i>
Suffering	Bombing
Murder	Shelling
Scared	Instability
Mass killing	Free Syrian Army
Bodies	Extremists
Execution	Humanitarian crisis
Genocide	Blast
Ethnic cleansing	Air strike

To determine policy certainty versus uncertainty, speeches and press releases made by President Barack Obama and other White House officials, as well as the debate in congress are included in the original data set. Ideally, the data set would contain statements made by the State Department and the Pentagon, however the volume of data was not manageable in the allotted time.

A close reading of the body of coverage between August 21 and September 17, 2013 led to the identification of a set of recurring legal descriptors, shown below in Table 3. Since legal descriptors do not reflect individuals or

descriptions, they appear as a single group throughout the analysis. The selection criteria for legal descriptors required that the descriptors refer to a topic that would have been relevant prior to the beginning of the discussion of possible targeted strikes in Syria. Legal descriptors such as congressional approval, presidential leadership, and the War Powers Resolution are not included in the set of descriptors. Although they did appear frequently throughout the discussion of limited strikes by the United States, they would not have been relevant prior to the release of the footage of the chemical attacks and they do not provide conclusive information about a shift in the media agenda. The inclusion of descriptors only relevant once the debate over intervention began would have skewed the result of the analysis, since these terms would appear 100% more frequently in the window between August 21 and September 17. Since the value used to determine the presence of one agenda over the other is based on average change, including descriptors only used during the window of analysis skews the result. These descriptors are omitted to measure the shift in discourse, rather than the discourse itself. By focusing solely on descriptors that have relevance before as well as during the window between August 21 and September 17, the analysis will show that the legal discourse has a stronger presence than the empathetic and critical discourses used in Robinson’s original model.

Table 3. Legal descriptors

<i>Legal descriptors</i>	
Red line	United Nations
Precedent	War crime
Authorization	International community
International law	

3. Analysis

The analysis of the media coverage of the Syrian crisis is broken into two parts. The first part follows Robinson’s Policy-Media Interaction Model to determine whether the CNN effect is present using a comparison of emotional and critical descriptors. The second part uses an adaptation of Robinson’s model to determine whether the agenda present is focused on the legal aspects of intervention by comparing the frequencies of critical and legal descriptors.

3.1. Conditions for the CNN effect

In order for the CNN effect to be present, both basic and secondary level empathy descriptors must appear at a higher frequency than critical descriptors. In this data set, the basic level empathy descriptors appear at a higher frequency than critical descriptors, but secondary level critical descriptors appear at a significantly higher frequency than empathy descriptors. The description of the refugee crisis, suffering women and children, and the humanity given to these individuals by the use of the word ‘people’ should give an element of empathy framing to the crisis. However, the detached language of ‘bombing,’ ‘shelling,’ and ‘extremists’ removes the human element experienced by the viewers and readers.

To further capture the likelihood of the CNN effect, the coverage from August 21, 2013 to September 17, 2013 is isolated and the descriptor frequency during this window is presented in comparison to the total. The level of political uncertainty is highest during this time window, which satisfies the first ideal condition for the CNN effect to occur. President Barack Obama, after pondering the use of a targeted strike on Syrian chemical weapons facilities, passed the decision onto Congress to decide Syria’s fate, sparking a media debate over presidential war powers and whether congressional approval was necessary to launch limited strikes. For a period of several weeks pending the final vote, the American government was deeply divided over whether the United States should be involved, which created the necessary political dissensus¹ for the CNN effect to occur.

If the CNN effect were present in this window, there should have been an increase in empathetic language to sway the hearts and minds of the American public and build support for the decision. The window between August 21 and September 17 contained 69.57% of the total words written or spoken about the crisis in the media. If the same proportions of critical and empathetic descriptors were used throughout the conflict, it would be expected that approximately 69.57% of the times each descriptor was used would have appeared in this window. Table 4 depicts the total frequency of each descriptor, the frequency between August 21 and September 17, the percent of the total mentions that appear in this window, and the difference from the expected percentage.

Table 4. Total second-level descriptor frequencies compared with percentage of coverage from August 21, 2013 to September 17, 2013.

<i>Empathy descriptors</i>	Total frequency	Aug. 21-Sep. 17	Percentage of total mentions	Difference from percent of coverage (69.57%)	<i>Critical descriptors</i>	Total frequency	Aug. 21-Sep. 17	Percentage of total mentions	Difference from percent of coverage (69.57%)
Suffering	129	76	58.91	-10.66	Bombing	717	410	57.18	-12.39
Murder	97	69	71.13	1.56	Shelling	310	91	29.35	-40.22
Scared	25	18	72.00	2.43	Instability	44	22	50.00	-19.57
Mass killing	17	10	58.82	-10.75	Free Syrian Army	271	120	44.28	-25.29
Bodies	278	81	29.14	-40.43	Extremists	223	129	57.85	-11.73
Execution	194	134	69.07	-0.50	Humanitarian intervention	35	10	28.57	-41.00
Genocide	25	10	40.00	-29.57	Blast	86	25	29.07	-40.50
Ethnic cleansing	15	6	40.00	-29.57	Air strike	42	29	69.05	-0.53
			Average difference:	-14.68				Average difference:	-23.91

The average difference between the frequency of the empathy and critical descriptors in this section and the percent of total coverage (69.57%) is used to determine which agenda had a stronger presence. The empathy descriptors appeared 14.68% less frequently than the percent of total coverage, whereas if the CNN effect were to be present, it is expected that the empathy descriptors would be used more frequently (>69.57%). However, the critical descriptors appeared 23.91% less frequently than the percent of total coverage in the selected window as well. According to Robinson’s model, when the CNN effect does not occur, the frequency of critical descriptors is higher than the frequency of empathy descriptors.⁴ Since the empathy descriptors appear less frequently, it is unlikely that the CNN effect would have occurred under these conditions. Had the media framing of the conflict provided favorable conditions, the divided political situation would have satisfied both ideal conditions for the CNN effect. However, since neither the empathy nor the critical descriptors were prominent during the window with the most policy dissensus, the media would not have created the necessary emotional response to mobilize the population and pressure the government into action.

3.2. Presence of a third agenda: legal framing of humanitarian interventions

The decreased presence of empathy and critical descriptors suggests that the content is portrayed through a different lens. A recurring theme throughout the coverage from August 21, 2013 to September 17, 2013 was the legal rhetoric focused on President Obama’s authority to launch targeted strikes against the Assad regime. In this section of the analysis, Robinson’s Policy-Media Interaction Model is adapted to determine whether the legal framing surpassed the empathy and critical framing typically associated with the coverage of humanitarian crises. Table 5 depicts the total frequency of the selected legal descriptors, the frequency between August 21 and September 17, the percentage of total mentions that appear in this time window, and the difference from the percent of total coverage.

Legal descriptors appear 11.13% more frequently between August 21 and September 17, which represents 69.57% of the total coverage. This finding suggests that the legal framing had a stronger presence than both the empathy (-14.68%) and critical framing (-23.91%) used to predict the CNN effect. The higher frequency of the legal descriptors supports the hypothesis that in this case, the media focused primarily on the legal aspects of intervention rather than the normative and humanitarian aspects.

Table 5. Total legal descriptor frequencies compared with percent of coverage from August 21, 2013 to September 17, 2013.

<i>Legal descriptors</i>	Total frequency	Aug. 21 – Sep. 17	Percentage of total mentions	Difference from percent of coverage (69.57%)
Red line	900	620	68.89	-0.68
Precedent	68	65	95.59	26.01
Authorization	664	608	91.57	21.99
International law	146	131	89.73	20.15
United Nations	2175	1473	67.62	-1.85
War crime	21	18	85.71	16.14
International community	337	226	67.06	-2.51
			Average difference:	11.13

4. Argument: The Role of the CNN Effect in the Syrian Crisis

The use of chemical weapons against a civilian population should have been the necessary catalyst for the CNN effect to reemerge in the twenty-first century. The analysis presented above suggests that the CNN effect had no influence in the decision not to intervene. The CNN effect theory was born out of a more liberal humanitarian policy tradition, and the conditions under which it thrived no longer exist in the modern political context. This section will attempt to explain why the media did not have the influence that may have been expected.

4.1. Should the CNN effect have been present?

The initial premise of this paper was to argue that the CNN effect should have been present in the decision-making process. An attack on a large civilian population or a humanitarian crisis affecting large numbers of people and attracting a high amount of media coverage has prompted the influences of the CNN effect in the past. The precedents set by these events would argue that the CNN effect should have been present in the Syrian case.

The CNN effect theory was originally applied to humanitarian crises with large numbers of civilians at risk. This theory was first used to explain why the United States was so motivated to intervene in Somalia when it did, once 1.5 million people were at risk of starvation, rather than preemptively to prevent the 300,000 deaths that had already occurred.⁵ Robinson’s original study in which his Policy-Media Interaction Model is developed examines the U.S. response to the war in Bosnia, specifically to the fall of UN “safe area” Srebrenica and the massacre of its approximately 8,000 inhabitants in 1995.⁶ In Syria, the situation was no different. Between March 2011, when the fighting began, and August 2013, when the debate over intervention began, over 40,000 of the total 110,000 casualties were civilians.⁷ Between the casualties and the growing refugee crisis that resulted from the war, more than enough persons were affected for this case to become a candidate for the CNN effect, and an event such as a chemical attack on a civilian population could have been the necessary media catalyst.

Any humanitarian or refugee crisis that is able to attract a sufficient amount of media attention can become a potential candidate to observe the CNN effect. Between August 21, 2013, when footage of chemical weapons attacks reached the international media and the end of the data collection period on September 17, 2013, 131 news articles were published in the front sections of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, which gives an average of approximately eight articles per day. The high volume of media coverage combined with a large civilian population at risk of attack creates the same ideal conditions that Robinson used to define the CNN effect, which makes the crisis in Syria a robust case to test the relevance of this theory in a modern context.

A parallel to the crisis in Syria may be the policy response to protect Iraqi Kurdistan from Saddam Hussein in 1990. This is an example of a people who were victims of a chemical attack launched by a dictator to bolster his position of power. Many people had fled the area, which created a refugee crisis on the Turkish border. Between March 26, 1990 and April 15, 1990, the *New York Times* published over six articles a day, and the *Washington Post* published almost four articles per day regarding the situation in Kurdistan.⁸ The Policy-Media Interaction Model states that when the

policy line is set, the CNN effect is unlikely to occur, however the Bush administration changed its response to initiate a forcible humanitarian intervention. The factor that prompted the United States into choosing intervention was Turkey, which already had its own Kurdish problem, and did not want an influx of Kurdish refugees from Iraq flowing over its borders. The United States got involved to maintain its relationship with Turkey, as well as to prevent the crisis from growing direr for the Kurdish people. In Syria, the situation is similar – a vulnerable population is at risk from a hostile dictatorship, yet involvement would jeopardize the United States’ relationships with Turkey and Russia, and risk drawing Israel and Iran into a bigger, more volatile crisis. This similarity begs the question of whether larger geopolitical interests may be at play, which might have a greater influence than the impact of the media on the decisions of policymakers.

4.2. Explaining the absence of the CNN effect

I argue that the media coverage in the Syrian case, while significant in volume, did not present the crisis with the correct framing necessary for the CNN effect to occur. The analysis presented in previous sections suggests that the media agenda has shifted from a humanitarian focus to a focus on the legal justification for intervention.

One argument as to why the debate over legal justification for intervention was more prevalent is that the Obama administration did not provide a strong legal justification for intervention. The problem was not that the legal framework to authorize intervention did not exist. Instead, it was that the Obama administration poorly presented its position and justification to the public. Had the administration justified its actions within the legal framework, it is possible that the legal discourse within the media would not have been as prevalent.

The debated intervention against Assad had the same legal framework as the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s and the intervention in Libya in 2011. Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD 25), passed under President Clinton, outlines the role that peace operations play in U.S. foreign policy and puts humanitarian crises in the spotlight as a threat to national security.⁹ Several legal precedents have been established to justify interventions and authorizations of force, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized all member states “to take all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians from the imminent threat of attack by their own government.¹⁰ If a resolution regarding the situation in Syria had passed through the UN Security Council, it is likely that it would have followed the previous resolution and given authority to states to act however they saw fit as long as it complied with their domestic laws.

The lack of support from the UN shifted the discourse to whether the United States could act unilaterally, and whether President Obama could legally authorize action without support from Congress. Under the War Powers Resolution, the president can deploy troops for up to 60 days without congressional approval, as long as Congress is notified of his actions. As long as the president reports his actions to congress in a manner consistent with the War Powers Resolution, he may deploy troops anywhere he wishes as long as they are not in immediate danger.¹¹ This was the legal justification in domestic law that allowed President Obama to send U.S. forces into Libya in 2011, and would have been sufficient for him to intervene in Syria and launch the debated air strike against the Assad regime in 2013.

Because President Obama’s decision to include Congress in the decision whether to retaliate against the Assad regime was unprecedented and controversial, the debate in the media shifted from whether the United States should intervene to whether it could. This action eliminated the applicability of the CNN effect theory. The country was in a state of political dissensus, but instead of debating whether to intervene at all, Congress was now debating whether to intervene unilaterally and militarily or diplomatically in coordination with other nations to neutralize Assad’s chemical weapons arsenal. Instead of framing the situation in Syria as a humanitarian crisis, the media framed it instead as a violation of international law, which shaped all possible policy responses.

5. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper argues that the CNN effect was not a factor in the decision not to intervene in Syria. This case does not fit into Robinson’s model, and instead it shows that policy decisions are influenced by more than just an empathetic framing of suffering and a divided policy line. Had the data supported the model of empathetic framing and political dissensus, the conditions would have been ideal for the CNN effect to occur, and this case would then provide fodder for an interesting discussion on why the CNN effect did not occur despite the presence of ideal conditions. From the analysis of the media coverage of a true humanitarian disaster, it can be seen that the focus of the media has shifted away from covering the event to instead covering the political discourse behind the response. In

this shifted media environment, the CNN effect theory has no grounds to explain why political decisions are made, and has thus lost the influence that it once may have held in explaining past humanitarian interventions.

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8. Endnote

1. Dissensus is the term used by Robinson in his original model, and it was included in this paper to maintain consistency. Further explanation is given in his book *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy, and Intervention* (2002) and the adaptation used in this analysis is discussed at length in the forthcoming extended version of this research.