

The Vietnam War through the eyes of the news anchors

The visibility of the roots of the CNN effect in American evening news shows during the Vietnam War



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Abstract

This thesis looks at the visibility of the roots of the CNN effect in the reporting on the Vietnam War on the evening news shows *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* on NBC and the CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. It also pays attention to interaction between the foreign policy of American politicians and television news. The Vietnam War was the first war of which footage was broadcast on television. For the first time the American public was exposed to explicit moving images of the war that was eventually lost, which led scholars to believe that television media could have an influence on its viewers and consequently on foreign policy. The CNN effect theory was only developed after the Vietnam War, but the roots of the effect could have already been visible during the Vietnam War.

The literature used in this research is composed of several books and studies on the CNN effect and the Vietnam War. The key article that is used in this research is “Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention” by Steven Livingston. He divides the CNN effect into three components, which form the guiding lines of this thesis. These components are: media as an accelerant, media as an impediment and media as an agenda setting agency.

This study shows that the roots of the CNN effect are only marginally visible on *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. The most important reasons for this were the lack of technology to transmit footage and the guerrilla style of warfare. The only effect in which the roots of the CNN effect are more clearly visible is the role of the media as agenda setting agency. Because close to one-fourth of all news items on the evening news shows were about the Vietnam War, the American public became more aware of the situation in Vietnam. Consequently, it made the attention of politicians for the war grow. This research contributes to a better understanding of what components contribute to the existence of the CNN effect and the development of television news during the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Vietnam War, CNN effect, CBS, NBC, *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*, *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite*



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Introduction

“If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.” These words were allegedly spoken by President Lyndon B. Johnson after CBS Evening News anchorman Walter Cronkite had closed a broadcast of the program *Report from Vietnam: Who, Where, What, When, Why?* with an editorial statement on the chances of the United States winning the Vietnam War. In the program, Cronkite stated that American troops were mired in stalemate and that the only rational way out would be to negotiate with the Vietcong (Cronkite CBS, 27 February 1968). Johnson’s words may very well be apocryphal, but Cronkite certainly was, at the time of the Vietnam War, one of the most trusted figures in America, which makes it likely that his statements had an impact on his audience (Alan, Lane 117). Therefore the importance of this statement lies not in whether President Johnson actually said it, but more about the possible influence a television broadcast could have on the American audience.

There were two main television channels that broadcast evening news shows in the 1960’s and 1970’s. One of these channels was CBS, with Walter Cronkite as its main news anchor. He presented *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* from 1962 until his retirement in 1981. There was an ongoing ratings battle with the other main channel, NBC. At NBC, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were the anchormen of the evening news, *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. This program was on air from 1956 until 1970.

Receiving the news through the television was a novelty for most Americans at the time. They were used to reading the news in the newspapers and listening to the radio. As television became a more prominent feature in the American living room, more and more Americans watched the evening news on one of the two main channels. This has let scholars to believe that the television news broadcasts had the power to greatly influence their viewers. David Culbert, for example, shows that the pictures of an assassination of a Vietcong terrorist at the start of the Tet Offensive, which were shown on television on the 1st of February 1968, had the potential to change or affect viewers’ responses to the war (Culbert 419). Michael Mandelbaum, however, argues against this by stating that even though Americans watched a lot of television, this does not automatically mean they absorbed the information as well as they would when reading the newspaper (Culbert 161-162).

The influence of television is an especially interesting question in the time of the Vietnam War. This war was the first to be televised. The Civil War in America had been the first war to be photographed. The American public was therefore quite used to war photography by the time of the Vietnam War. With the rise of television the American audience was faced with moving images of a war for the first time. It was also the first time that American politicians had to deal with a heightened commitment from the press in the conflict area. According to Wyatt, President Kennedy was the first president to understand the rising influence of television and the different abilities it had (Wyatt 270). Kennedy, however, was president in the early stages of the war. Therefore the interaction between President Johnson and President Nixon and the press is of more relevance in the development of the Vietnam War.

Wyatt has observed that the main characteristic of television news and the media in general during the Vietnam War was ethnocentrism (Wyatt 267). Wyatt describes this ethnocentrism as “the tendency of news organizations to focus on stories featuring the members of their ‘home’ societies as one of the ‘enduring factors of the news’” (Wyatt 267). For the American media this meant that news was only worthy of publication or broadcast when Americans were involved. During the Kennedy administration only a limited number of Americans was involved in the conflict in Vietnam, which made it less interesting for the media. As more American soldiers were sent to Vietnam and casualties increased, the attention from the public and the media for this war also increased (Neuman 174-175).

Both a reason for and effect of this ethnocentrism was the limited number of journalists outside of the United States. In the 1960's, there were only a few American news bureaus overseas and the number in Asia was especially low. The effect of this underrepresentation was that the media had to rely on information from government officials. Initially President Kennedy had decided to stonewall the press, by denying them access to official information. This steered journalist to unreliable sources. President Johnson therefore shifted the approach to a new policy, known as Operation Maximum Candor (Wyatt 267-268).

Operation Maximum Candor was adopted to make the press dependent on the government for information concerning the war. This way, the Johnson administration believed, the government would be able to shape the news. The operation was based on a relationship between the press and the government with limited restrictions as to what information was available and where the press was allowed to go. The press was allowed

access to a greater volume of information and were assisted getting out to the field. The restricted information, as identified by Wyatt, usually encompassed:

1. future plans, operations, or strikes;
2. rules of engagement;
3. amounts of ordnance and fuel on hand in combat units;
4. exact numbers and types or identification of casualties suffered by friendly units;
5. during an operation, unit designations and troop movements, tactical deployments, name of operation, and size of friendly force involved, until officially released by MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam];
6. intelligence unit activities; and
7. air operations against North Vietnam (Wyatt 279).

Both the low number of journalists and Operation Maximum Candor limited the press in adding editorial content to their news coverage. Another factor that contributed to this effect was that the news organizations had become profitable businesses that had to keep the viewpoints of their stakeholders in mind. Television producers therefore mostly chose not to report on the war negatively in order not to lose viewers (Mandelbaum 160-161).

In the years after the Vietnam War, as television developed further, scholars devised a theory which connected television media and government policy and foreign policy: the CNN effect theory. The model was first put forward in the 1990's, years after the Vietnam War, and was focused on television broadcasts that were technically more developed than the ones during the war. After the Cold War ended, the television channels such as CNN were more focused on using real-time communication to broadcast national and international news. Technology had also improved, which made it possible to broadcast news reports faster than in the years of the Vietnam War (Robinson 2).

On the one hand the CNN effect theory goes into detail about the effect the influence of the press had on foreign policy, and on the other hand what influence the foreign policy had on the press. After the Cold War, the media expanded their ability to influence American diplomacy and foreign policy, which was later labeled the CNN effect. There are two key factors that enabled this role for the media. First, the end of the Cold War took away the focus point of American foreign policy. Second, developments in technology made it possible to broadcast live from anywhere in the world. Both factors created a vacuum for the media

where they could pinpoint certain crises in their broadcast to put them on the American foreign policy agenda (Livingston 1).

Even though the CNN effect theory is a model in political science and media studies that was developed only after the Vietnam War, its principles could be traced back to *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* on CBS and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* on NBC. The question that remains and that will guide this research is: how are the roots of the CNN effect visible in the reporting on the Vietnam War in the news shows *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* on NBC and the CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite* on the one hand, and the politicians and their foreign policy on the other hand during the Vietnam War?

The literature used in this research is composed of several books and articles that are related to the CNN effect theory, foreign policy and the development of television news during the Vietnam War. The key article that is used in this research is “Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention” by Steven Livingston. In this article Livingston divides the CNN effect theory into three effects: media as an accelerant, media as an impediment, and media as a policy agenda setting agent. With the help of these three effects, he reviews eight types of military interventions and the role the media could have in these interventions.

I unfortunately have not been able to use recordings of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* as these are not available to me as primary sources in the Netherlands. However, Oscar Patterson has examined both shows in his article “An Analysis of Television Coverage of the Vietnam War” and Thomas M. McNulty has examined the CBS news shows and documentaries in his article “Vietnam Specials: Policy and Content.” There are also parts of episodes of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* available on YouTube. These studies and short clips give a good impression of the structure and content of the news, and of the news selection process.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will further explore the CNN effect and compare and contrast the views of scholars on this theory. I will also explain the methodology that will guide this thesis. In the second, third and fourth chapter I will explain the visibility of the roots of the CNN effect in *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* with the help of literature on the CNN effect theory, foreign policy, and television during the Vietnam War.

The visibility of the roots of the CNN effect in *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* is explained by looking at the Vietnam War as a whole and at a single event in the war: the Tet Offensive. This event is used throughout this thesis

because it was a turning point in the war and it received a lot of attention from the American government. Additionally, the Tet Offensive took place in 1968, when television technology had already developed much further than at the start of the Vietnam War. By this time the journalists and American government also had a more structured system of gathering and giving out information, which makes it easier to study their patterns and reactions. Thus, the Tet Offensive will be a recurrent theme in this thesis.

1. The CNN effect: theory and methodology

1.1 Theory

To be able to apply and detect the CNN effect theory, it is necessary to understand and know more about the origins of CNN and the theory. The Cable News Network, also known as CNN, is an American television channel which was founded in 1980 and is owned by Time Warner. CNN was the first television channel to broadcast news twenty-four hours a day.

The CNN effect theory knows many definitions and key elements. Pierce Robinson explains the CNN effect as “the ability of real-time communications technology, via the news media, to provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national events” (Robinson 2). For Monroe Price the CNN effect is more about balancing diplomacy and public diplomacy (Price 197). Steven Livingston describes it as a “vacuum left by the end of the Cold War [which] has been filled by a foreign policy of media-specified crisis management” (Livingston 1). Scholars agreed that the focus of the CNN effect theory is on live television and its influence on foreign policy.

Pierce Robinson names real-time communications technology as one of the key elements of the CNN effect. New satellite television technology, introduced in the late 1970’s, was first intended to reach remote cable television headends. However, it also made it possible for channels to reach all parts of the United States and other countries, and to broadcast live from remote locations. CNN specifically used this to its advantage, since it began to broadcast all over the world after 1985 through the channel CNN International (Neuman 13-25).

The diplomacy and public diplomacy that Price emphasizes as key elements of the CNN effect theory are intertwined with the development of this real-time communications technology. In the light of foreign policy, diplomacy is the interaction between officials of different countries. This means that officials, for example ambassadors, discuss foreign policy issues in meetings, over the phone, in letters etc. With the development of real-time television

it became possible to bypass a government and directly reach audiences. Through this so-called public diplomacy, officials were able to avoid autocratic gatekeepers and conduct their diplomacy live on television. This made the diplomatic process faster, but also less controllable. Information provided on television could not be reversed, while during ‘normal’ diplomacy information could first be reviewed and altered before it reached the audience (Price 197-198).

Public diplomacy also had implications for the president of the United States, and leaders of other countries. Together with the United States Information Agency (USIA), the presidents of the United States had to inform the public about the government’s decisions (Cull 34-35). However, with the rise of live-television, the president sometimes received more information from the television news about ongoing foreign affairs, than from his USIA officials (Price 197-198). Nicholas J. Cull states: “The true victors of the First Gulf War were Ted Turner and CNN, and USIA’s paymasters on Capitol Hill now wondered why they needed to provide a parallel service.” Writing reports about events simply could not compete with a live broadcast of those same events.

Another key element of the CNN effect theory, which is highlighted by James Hoge, is that it is more often visible when humanitarian issues are at hand, than when actual security issues are at hand (qtd. in Livingston 2). Humanitarian issues usually provide for more images or clips that increase the emotional impact of the narrative on the viewers. Therefore this approach can undermine the usually more positive narrative of the government officials.

There are many examples of the CNN effect in relation to humanitarian crises. An early example is the Civil War in Somalia that started in 1992. After broadcasting pictures of starving Somali children on television, President Bush decided to send military personnel over. However, when a year later pictures of a dead American soldier in Somalia were broadcast, President Clinton decided to bring the American soldiers back (Price, 198). Similar interventions have happened in for example Sarajevo and Lebanon because of broadcasts on television, but none of those have reached their initial goal (Krauthammer par. 14).

1.2 The academic debate



The existence of the CNN effect has been accepted by scholars, journalists and policy-makers, even though there is still quite some debate about its proper definition (Livingston 1). Ever since the term CNN effect first appeared during the Gulf War in 1991, many symposia have been held and books and articles have been written on this subject. However, there is no consensus about its definition, impact on foreign policy making and contribution to international relations (Gilboa 326-327). In what follows I sketch the ongoing discussion among scholars, journalists and policy-makers.

To research the validity of the CNN effect, scholars have employed different methods and focused on different conflicts. Royce J. Ammon developed a model to examine when real-time global news television can affect policy. He distinguishes five categories that are necessary to be able to affect policy:

1. The issue has to be specific
2. The events must be rapidly unfolding
3. There must be a leadership vacuum
4. Global television must have access to the unfolding events and be able to operate without restrictions
5. The situation must become highly visible to a wide viewing audience (Ammon 91-96).

Gilboa dismisses this model because he discerns other conditions that were vital during the genocide in Rwanda. Even though the five conditions of Ammon were present in this conflict, the news coverage did not affect the policy. Both Robinson's and Livingston's models are valued higher by Gilboa because they are more developed and less flawed. He does, however, remark that both studies need further testing through case studies (Gilboa335).

The general consensus among scholars such as Jakobsen and Mueller about the impact of CNN is that the news channel has placed crises on the agenda, but that the decision to intervene "was ultimately determined by the perceived chances of success" (qtd. in Gilboa 334). The government is unlikely to quickly interfere in a conflict that is likely to cause a lot of casualties, even if there is pressure from the media (Gilboa 334). Carey disagrees with Jakobsen and Mueller because he argues that the interventions in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo

were fueled by mass media and public opinion (qtd. in Gilboa 334). Scholars therefore do share a common ground in arguing that the media have some influence on the government, but the scope of this influence is still the subject of debate.

The CNN effect debate among journalists can seem less refined than it does among scholars. There is a lot of arguing back and forth between journalists on opposite sides of the debate, often without solid argumentation. However, there are also journalists who have conducted research on the CNN effect and have published scholarly articles. Their conclusions are yet again very different. Nik Gowing, for example, acknowledges that CNN coverage drew attention to crises, but he does not go as far as to say that it affected public opinion and foreign policy. Michael O'Neill takes this further and argues that real-time television revolutionized the way in which countries are governed (Gilboa 333). On the other side of the spectrum Johanna Neuman argues that media technology "has not in the end, changed the fundamentals of political leadership and international governance" (Neuman 16).

Lastly there is a debate between policy makers, who are on the whole less divided on the issue than scholars and journalists are. Senior policy makers have often addressed the CNN effect in official statements. They tend not to deny its existence. Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger has even emphasized the importance of the CNN effect: "The public hears of an event now in real time, before the State Department has had time to think about it. Consequently, we find ourselves reacting before we have had time to think. This is now the way we determine foreign policy - its driven more by the daily events reported on TV than it used to be" (qtd. in Gilboa 329). Other officials, including President Clinton, have acknowledged the validity of the CNN effect, but emphasize that there are more important factors that influence the foreign policy (Gilboa 330).

The disagreements between scholars, journalists and policy makers, and the large number of studies that have been done on the subject make the CNN effect theory complex. New developments in media technology, such as the development of internet, can also bring new dimensions to the CNN effect theory. Therefore, a clear methodology is necessary to guide this research.

1.3 Methodology



As was illustrated above, the CNN effect theory is interpreted differently by different scholars. Therefore the focus in this thesis is on one interpretation of the theory. I have chosen Steven Livingston's interpretation in his article "Clarifying the CNN effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention." This article is referenced by most scholars who write about the CNN effect, and its structure makes it applicable to the research on television news during the Vietnam War.

In contrast to other scholars, Livingston puts the focus of his article on the types of effects that the media have on different forms of foreign policy. He states that "we must develop, in other words, a greater appreciation for the possibility that different foreign policy objectives will present different types and levels of sensitivity to different types of media" (1). To be able to differentiate these different foreign policy objectives and different types of media effects he has developed three distinct CNN effects: media as an accelerant, media as an impediment, and media as a policy agenda setting agency (2). Other scholars, for example Monroe and Robinson, do not differentiate between different forms of the CNN effect, but rather portray the CNN effect theory as a single effect.

The notion that the CNN effect can make media an accelerant focuses on the potential ability of real-time media to shorten response time for decision-making. CNN broke the daily news cycle by broadcasting non-stop, which had several consequences for policy makers. One of those consequences was that the process of foreign policy bureaucracy was sped up because broadcasts on CNN requested immediate reactions or responses. This meant that there was no time for the State Department to make a report about the crisis. Because of this lack of preparation time, the CNN effect disadvantaged government officials (Livingston 2-3).

However, as an accelerant, the media sometimes also proved beneficial for government officials. The fast pace of news broadcasting might have given the officials less time to prepare, but it did also give them the opportunity to respond immediately to news and somewhat manage public opinion. Real-time communications technology gave them the opportunity to reach the living rooms of people in parts of the world that were otherwise difficult to get information from the American government to, for example the Middle East and Europe. Therefore, CNN provided a platform for the American government to conduct

diplomacy faster and manage expectations of the citizens, as well as speed up the daily news cycle.

The notion that the CNN effect can make media an impediment consists of two types of media-related policy impediments: media as an emotional inhibitor, or as a threat to operational security. The media can take the role of emotional inhibitor of policy by broadcasting pictures or clips that trigger strong emotions with its viewers. In the early years after the Cold War, the American government tried to keep the “unsanitized presentation of the carnage of battle”, as Livingston calls it (Livingston 4), off the television by only allowing journalist pools into the conflict areas. These pools consisted of a small group of journalists who were only allowed to go where the government and military told them they could go. Nowadays, American journalists are present in almost every country, which makes a pool system not feasible anymore (Livingston 4).

The suspected impact of this emotional inhibiting has lowered over the years. As former Secretary of State Colin Powell explains, the American people are prepared to look at clips or pictures of gruesome events “as long as they believe it’s for a solid purpose and for a cause that is understandable and for a cause that has something to do with an interest of ours” (qtd. in Livingston 5). Through clearly articulated policy, the public has to have the feeling that the gruesome events have to be endured to be able to reach a goal. Scholars, such as political scientist W. Lance Bennett, claim that government officials more often succeed in maintaining a clear policy and goal because the media often refrains from policy framing and issue emphasis (Livingston 5).

The potential impact of the media being a threat to operational security is much bigger than its role as an emotional inhibitor. With the developments of real-time technology television channels can be live on television within seconds from all over the world. These broadcasts can contain images from ongoing warfare, which can for example provide crucial information about locations or strategies to the enemy. As such, there is no opportunity for government officials to step in and withhold information (Livingston 5-6).

The last component of the CNN effect theory as described by Livingston is the role of the media as policy-agenda setting agency. This component focuses on the ability of the media to influence the foreign policy agenda of the United States. This is not to say that television news creates issues, but it merely rearranges the priorities of the government officials. Some issues that are not a priority can become a crisis when they when the media pays attention to it. The crisis then moves up the priority ladder. Humanitarian issues

centering on other countries, which are not necessarily a priority of the United States, specifically can move up in importance with the help of media attention (Livingston 6-7).

In the next chapters of this thesis, Livingston's model will be applied to the news shows *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* to see if the roots of the CNN effect were already visible during the Vietnam War.


2. The media as an accelerant

As was highlighted in the previous chapter, Livingston identified the role of the media as an accelerant as an effect of the development of CNN. New satellite technology made it possible to have immediate access to footage that was shot in all parts of the world. This immediate access gave CNN the ability to broadcast live news twenty-four hours a day. On the one hand this new fast paced media environment gave the government officials less time to prepare official statements and reports. On the other hand it also contributes to the ability of government officials to reach audiences immediately, without interferences of diplomacy.

Therefore, this start of a new technological era for the media has made it logical to think that this effect was not visible before the founding of CNN. In fact, there are examples from the Cold War Era and the Vietnam War era that confirm this statement. One of those examples is the reporting on the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was one of the most tense moments during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, after the government of the United States found out that the Soviet Union placed missiles on Cuba. The missiles were discovered on the 14th of October 1962 by an American spy plane. However, it was not until the 22nd of October 1962 that President Kennedy informed the public about the crisis. He used this time period to meet with his advisors and set up a proposal to resolve the crisis. This diplomacy was all conducted in secret, without knowledge of the media or the public. The slow media environment was one of the reasons why President Kennedy was able to keep the Cuban Missile Crisis quiet.

Despite the example that shows that the government officials dealt the cards to the media during the Cold War era, there are also examples of the development of a more sophisticated and faster media process during this era. This chapter will go into detail on how the role of the media as an accelerant is slightly visible during the Vietnam War by looking at the media throughout the Vietnam War, and by zooming in on one event: the Tet Offensive. This event is often labeled as the turning point in the Vietnam War and generated a lot of media attention (Culbert 434-435, Pach 30).

2.1 The media as an accelerant: Vietnam War



In September of 1963, the CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite* expanded its airtime from a fifteen to a thirty minutes show. NBC's *Huntley-Brinkley Report* followed CBS's example exactly a week later. The reasons for extending the news were not based on being able to broadcast more content; they were purely financial. The news shows were extremely profitable for CBS and NBC, as they were also distributed to affiliated stations around the country. As a consequence, the television channels required extra journalists and reporters, both in America and in other parts of the world, such as Vietnam (Mandelbaum 159-160).

The increase of manpower did not necessarily mean better and faster coverage of the Vietnam War. Most images that were shot, were of American soldiers engaged in combat or other military activities. There was hardly any footage of Vietnamese soldiers and citizens because producers of the news did not find this important. (Wyatt 267, Mandelbaum 160). Transmitting the footage directly via satellite from Vietnam to America was possible but still very expensive, which meant that taped footage had to be transported by plane. As this took a couple of days, the news programs were not able to combine a breaking story with matching footage. The images were therefore usually just used as a background to other stories (Mandelbaum 160).

Besides the difficulties of getting a story to America fast enough to make it relevant, there were other factors that kept the news from having an accelerating effect. The heads of NBC, CBS, and other television channels, and the producers of the news shows often refrained from adding editorial content or supplying a framework to the news items. At CBS, editorializing was even prohibited for correspondents (McNulty 176). The network was that afraid to lose viewers. Because television was relatively new, CBS and NBC did not yet have a loyal group of viewers as much as newspapers had to be able to make such editorial statements. Additionally, news networks sometimes received comments from government officials that voiced their displeasure with the network's commentaries about the war (Mandelbaum 160-161).

All this put the government officials in a position of power. Government officials both in Vietnam and in America had ready access to broadcast time, which gave them the ability to respond immediately to news content (Mandelbaum 160). The slow media process also gave

them the opportunity to prepare these reactions. Additionally, television did not only help the government to explain certain situations, it also provided a platform for government officials to reach a bigger audience in America to explain its policy too.

In general, *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* were not able to become an accelerating factor similar to the way CNN would decades later. The price of the necessary technology just withheld the media from having such an effect. Government officials were, however, able to benefit from this slow media environment because they can still react fast to the news, which they are prepared for. Therefore, during the Vietnam War, the accelerating effect only applies to diplomacy of government officials, but not to the government decision making process.

2.2 The media as an accelerant: the Tet Offensive



As was illustrated above, television news did not have an accelerating effect during the Vietnam War, if one reviews this war as one period in history. But there are several events during the Vietnam War that received much greater coverage in the news and in television documentaries than the general battle and casualties reports. Examples of these events are the Senate Hearings on Vietnam in 1966, The Tet Offensive in 1968, and the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 (McNulty 175). Patterson calls these “the few highly dramatic events that occurred during a very long ten years” (403). I will examine the accelerating effect of the media during the Tet Offensive.

The Tet Offensive was an organized attack from the Vietcong on the South Vietnamese and American army, which started during the Vietnamese ‘Tet’ New Year on the 30th of January 1968. This attack surprised the American army, which caused a temporary loss of several areas. However, the American army eventually overcame their initial surprise and managed to turn the situation around (Culbert 420-421).

The reporters in Vietnam had difficulty filming the attacks because they mostly happened at night when there was not enough light to film. Also, the guerrilla nature of the attacks meant that the reporters had to rely on the military to bring them to a battle location. Consequently, the news shows did not have much footage of actual battles to broadcast on television on the 1st of February, when they first reported about the Tet Offensive. Culbert confirms this “fighting is mostly discussed in voice-over accompanying stories with pictures of jungle grass. As an alternative, network anchors read wire service bulletins from a New York studio with no visual material whatsoever” (Culbert 421).

The only footage of the Tet Offensive that made it to America in time to be broadcast on the CBS and NBC evening news on the 1st of February 1968 was the picture of an execution of a Vietcong sympathizer on a busy intersection in Saigon. The execution was carried out by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who was the chief of the South Vietnamese Police Force. The event was also filmed and broadcast on the 2nd of February 1968 (Culbert 421-422).

The evening news shows were not alone in paying attention to the Tet Offensive; it was also the primary subject in other shows and documentaries. CBS devoted a one hour-long

special to the impact and implications of Tet Offensive on the 31st of January 1968. In the following two months another four documentaries were broadcast on CBS, among which was the documentary *Report from Vietnam: Who, Where, What, When, Why?* made by Walter Cronkite in Vietnam (McNulty 178).

The first news reports and documentaries about the Tet Offensive were broadcast very quickly after the initial attack, which makes an accelerating effect likely. However, President Johnson waited until the 31st of March 1968 to make an official televised statement about the Tet Offensive, the progress in the Vietnam War and his presidency. In this speech Johnson introduced an initiative to start peace talks with the Vietcong and stop bombing of North Vietnam. This decision was made after deliberation with military officials, who actually wanted more manpower to Vietnam, and with his advisers. The polling result showed that an increasing number of Americans did not agree with the way Johnson was handling the war. Cronkite's conclusion in his documentary about the Tet Offensive in Vietnam also was that this war could not be won. Johnson therefore decided to change his warfare policy and to not pursue another term of presidency (Culbert 432-433).

The question that arises here is whether the news reports and documentaries about the Tet Offensive accelerated Johnson's response and policy making process. The coverage of the Tet Offensive did not accelerate the response of the government, as Johnson and his government officials took quite some time to make and announce their decision and were already deliberating peace talks before the Tet Offensive. However, the fast reaction of the press and the big amount of coverage did contribute to reactions of the public and lowering public approval of the war strategy, which influenced Johnson's advisers to advise disengagement from the Vietnam War as a preferred policy (Culbert 433). The Tet Offensive coverage did have somewhat of an accelerating effect on the policy making process.

3. The media as an impediment


The second CNN effect that Livingston distinguishes is the role of media as an impediment. The media can act as an emotional inhibitor of policy and as a threat to operational security. Following the American victory in the Persian Gulf War, President Bush Sr. said “By God, we’ve finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all” (qtd. in Livingston 4). Livingston describes this Vietnam syndrome as a concern that the media have the power to influence public opinion as well as support for American military missions with its coverage (Livingston 4). CNN later proved during several humanitarian crises, for example in Somalia, that the Vietnam syndrome had not been ‘kicked once and for all’ by capitalizing on the emotional feelings of the audience with images and footage with an emotional appeal as discussed above.

A factor likely to have contributed to the existence of the second CNN effect during the Vietnam War is the introduction of color television. In 1968 American television turned to color. NBC was the first channel to broadcast entirely in color, CBS broadcast most of its programs in color (Culbert 420). The images of fighting and the battle fields in color gave a more dramatic impression of the war. Additionally, images in color could pose more of an operational security threat because battle scenes might have been more easily recognizable.

Both because of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome and color television it seems likely that the media also had an emotionally inhibiting effect during the Vietnam War, but there are also factors that potentially refute this effect. In one example, as already was illustrated in chapter one, the footage that was shot in Vietnam usually did not get to America fast enough to be broadcast along with the story (Culbert 421).

In this chapter the role of the media as an emotional inhibitor and as a threat to operational security will be discussed throughout the Vietnam War, and also with a focus on the Tet Offensive. The choice to focus on the Tet Offensive has been made because of its pivotal role in the Vietnam War, as well as the fact that it generated many images and a lot of footage of combat situations in Vietnam.

3.1 The media as an emotional inhibitor



On the one hand it is easy to think that the evening news shows on television did not have an emotional effect on their viewers because the slow news gathering process points us in this direction. As was illustrated in the previous chapter, the news items were often broadcast without a matching video or editorial content (Mandelbaum 160). The news shows were also not filled with “pictures of American troops dead and dying and killing” (Patterson III 397). These broadcasts therefore merely consisted of talking heads; the presenters stated the facts, without the support of images or videos (Culbert 421). On the other hand there are many arguments that do prove that the evening news shows most definitely had an emotional effect on their viewers.

Even though the guerilla style war strategy of the Vietcong posed practical difficulties on shooting material in Vietnam, the producers of *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* did encourage their correspondents in Vietnam to capture as much footage of combat as possible. The main motive for this, as Mandelbaum explains, is that “combat scenes tended to be more dramatic, more exciting, and therefore - and this was the primary consideration - more likely to attract viewers than other kinds of coverage.” Therefore, the goal of the producers was to attract viewers with material that emotionally touched the audience.

However, Patterson has shown in his analysis that in the years 1968 until 1972 only an average of 4,2 percent of the Vietnam-related stories that were broadcasts on CBS every year included film or photographs of combat. The percentage for film or photographs of dead and wounded was on average 3,1 percent. At NBC these numbers were even lower, respectively 2,9 and 1,8 percent (Patterson III 402). These numbers show that dramatic footage that could have had an emotional impact on viewers, such as combat scenes or dead or wounded soldiers, were rare.

The fact that there was little material available actually made the footage that was broadcast more dramatic, though. The American public was not yet used to moving images of a war, so any footage from Vietnam could have had an impact on the American viewers. Additionally, the footage and stories often did not match up and lacked editorial context, which could have led to misinterpretation of the events that were depicted (Culbert 436).

Another factor that led to a higher impact of the footage from Vietnam on the American audience was the way the government reported about the Vietnam War, specifically during the Johnson administration. The American government reported very positive about the war. Neuman states that “it was not so much the pictures of bloodshed, it was the fact that the pictures did not match the optimistic chatter coming from the administration that doomed LBJ’s policy” (Neuman 177). Americans were told by their government that they were winning the war, but the Tet Offensive showed the American audience that the enemy still had the power to fight back. Therefore, it was more of a surprise for the American public to see events such as the Tet Offensive on television in which the Vietcong seemed a strong enemy, while the government gave them more positive information.

Even if television news shows were able to have an effect on the emotions of their viewers with the limited footage that was available, it does not immediately mean that this influenced the American government to change its policy. The government relied on positive public opinion as support for their foreign policy. In times of war, individuals are more likely to update their attitudes towards a war if they are confronted with news that conflicts with their expectations, also called surprise events (Geldi 88). Therefore, for the evening news to have an effect on public opinion and consequently on foreign policy, CBS and NBC had to broadcast events that were surprising and went against the expectations of the public.

One of the pictures and videos that was able to influence public opinion and consequently foreign policy was the picture of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a Vietcong sympathizer during the Tet Offensive. Gallop polls show that in January 1968, 47 percent of the American public disapproved of the way Johnson was handling the war. After the Tet Offensive, in March 1968, the disapproval ratings had increased to 63 percent. These numbers led to Johnson’s change in his warfare policy. This proves that pictures and videos from the Tet Offensive did have an emotionally inhibiting effect as it is described by Livingston.

However, the Tet Offensive was one of the few events that actually had an emotional effect on the viewers and consequently was able to influence policy. Overall, television only had little effect as an emotional inhibitor because the news shows were not always able to change public opinion and with that foreign policy, despite the fact that they did on occasion have an emotional effect on its viewers. There are only a few situations in which the evening news shows did succeed in influencing the emotions of viewers, changing public opinion and foreign policy.

3.2 The media as a threat to operational security



The media can also act as an impediment by threatening operational security. By giving information about certain sensitive operations on the television news, the pursuit of the desired policy and operations can be hindered. One example of this was the CNN live report on an artillery fight between an American Airborne Division and the Iraqis. This was, however, on a location that had to be kept a secret from Iraqi intelligence. By broadcasting this on CNN, which at the moment was broadcasting live in 105 capital cities, the American mission was in danger. The Iraqis did not take note of this, but it does show that television has a lot of power when it comes to sensitive information (Livingston 5).

Whether or not *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* had the ability to threat operational security by for example showing images of secret locations, or giving information about secret operations, is difficult to determine. It was not always clear at the time, but also not in hindsight, what could have been a threat to operational security because this information stayed a secret or was only disclosed after an operation was finished. Journalists therefore could unintentionally disclose secret information without knowing themselves that it was to be kept secret (Livingston 5)

It does seem very unlikely that the evening news shows on CBS and NBC ever disclosed secret information about the Vietnam War that caused a threat to operational security because it was difficult for correspondents and journalists to get this information at the time. There were only a small number of journalists present in Vietnam and they also had to adhere to the rules and limitations of Operation Maximum Candor. The journalist therefore relied heavily on information from the government, which made disclosure of secret information very unlikely (Wyatt 279).

Another factor that makes it very unlikely that CBS and NBC ever disclosed secret information about the Vietnam War that caused a threat to operational security is the technical situation at the time. CBS and NBC were not broadcasting outside of the United States. The Vietcong could therefore not watch American television, which made the exposure of secret information unlikely.

Lastly, the low number of news reports and the lack of live broadcast from Vietnam also lowered the ability of the evening news shows to have a threatening effect. The CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite* was first only broadcast on weekdays for fifteen minutes.

In 1963 the program was expanded to thirty minutes and in 1966 CBS also started to broadcast the evening news on the weekends. The NBC *Huntley-Brinkley Report* also expanded to thirty minutes in 1963, but did not broadcast on the weekends (Mandelbaum 159-160). The amount of evening news coverage on television was therefore very low during the Vietnam War. This meant that breaking news could often not immediately be broadcast. Additionally, breaking news could also not be accompanied by footage from Vietnam because live connections were not yet technically possible.

All these factors make it very unlikely that *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* were able to act as an impediment of secret operations. The American government had a good system in place that kept the journalists away from future plans and secret operations, and the technology was not yet developed in ways that the news reports were able to threaten operational security.

4. The media as agenda setting agency

The last component of the CNN effect theory that Livingston distinguishes is the notion that the media can act as an agenda setting agency. This encompasses the ability of the media to put certain issues or conflicts on the political agenda by paying a lot of attention to them on television. CNN for example, in cooperation with other media, put a spotlight on the humanitarian crises in Somalia in 1992. This pushed the American government to get more involved in this conflict. Two years later, the media put this issue on the agenda again by showing pictures of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu (Livingston 4-7). These pictures provided President Clinton with an excuse to pull out of a mission that he did not start, but which his actions had certainly complicated (Neuman 230)

In the case of the Vietnam War the issue was already very important for the American government as the United States itself was involved in the conflict. However, as the media began to cover the Vietnam War more often, the percentage of the U.S. public who thought of the Vietnam War as the most important problem at the time rose to over fifty percent (Dearing, Rogers 65). This meant that American politicians had to prioritize the Vietnam War over other important issues in the 1960's, such as race relations, campus unrest, urban riots, and inflation (McCombs 22).

Besides the attention for the Vietnam War in general, this chapter also reviews how single events during the Vietnam War were highlighted by the media and caused the Vietnam War to become an even greater priority for American politicians.

4.1 The media as agenda setting agency: Vietnam War



To make an issue a priority to the public and consequently to the American government, there needs to be similarity in the amount of media coverage throughout all media. This means that a single newspaper or a single evening news show on television does not have the ability to make an issue a priority. The power to prioritize an event lies in the fact that the media convey the same sense of consensus that the issue is important (Dearing, Rogers 62).

Therefore, the CBS *Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* on NBC did not have the power to put an issue on the political agenda by themselves. They needed support from other media, such as newspapers, to convey the importance of the issue together.

Repetition is another important aspect of putting an issue on the agenda (Dearing, Rogers 62). In the statistics of CBS and NBC it is clearly visible that these channels used repetition to put the focus on the Vietnam War. In the years 1968 until 1973, 24.5 percent of the news stories on CBS were Vietnam-related. On NBC, during the same time span, 22 percent were Vietnam-related stories. This means that almost a fourth of all news stories were about the Vietnam War (Patterson III 401-402).

This news coverage, however, did not always impress the public because hardly any of these stories were accompanied by visuals from the battle scenes, dead or wounded soldiers. Items such as the weekly body count were part of the reporting of the Vietnam War on television, but they were mostly not accompanied by visuals. Reports like these became common fare in the media's coverage of the war, which makes it more likely that the repetition lessened the impact of the news (Patterson III 401-402).

Additionally, the coverage of the Vietnam War did not have much editorial content and it also did not take an oppositional role. This is also important in answering the question whether or not television can be an agenda setting agency because more opinionated coverage is also more likely to influence the public and consequently the foreign policy (Hallin 19).

The coverage of the Vietnam War did become more critical after the Tet Offensive (Hallin 19). This resulted from a disparity between positive messages from the administration about winning the war and the more negative messages from the news shows about the Tet Offensive. The journalists tried to give a neutral record of events, which went against the

reports of the government. Therefore it was easy to portray the media as opinionated and trying to influence its viewers, while they were actually trying to portray the events as close to reality as possible (Hallin 20)

President Johnson did believe in the agenda setting abilities of the media and blamed them for using these to force him out of the office after the Tet Offensive. During the beginning of his presidency, Johnson was driven by his domestic program the Great Society and other domestic issues on his agenda. Because Johnson did not want his domestic agenda to be sidetracked, he “tried to fight a war on the battlefield without waging it on the home front” (Neuman 174). He tried to pay as little attention to the Vietnam War as possible and was also not willing to put political capital in selling the war to the public. This way he paved the way for the media to pay extra attention to the Vietnam War and consequently place it higher on the political agenda.

From this could be concluded that *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* did put the Vietnam War higher on the political agenda. It must be noted, though, that it has not been a sole effort from television news shows because all media have to get involved to be able to have an agenda setting effect. Even though the television shows did put a spotlight on the Vietnam War, they could not turn this spotlight into a magnifying glass because of the lack of footage and editorial content.

4.2 The media as agenda setting agency: specific issues



The television news shows succeeded in keeping the Vietnam War on the agenda of American politicians, while they were also able to highlight single events during the Vietnam War. These events received more exposure because they were usually very emotionally charged. Television channels used these events to make news specials which were broadcast as an addition to the evening news in which the events were also shortly explained. The main goal of these news specials was to better inform the audience about the Vietnam War and the foreign policy of the American government. However, the other main incentive to make news specials was purely financial (McNulty 175-176).

In 1965, CBS News President Fred Friendly decided that CBS should examine the growing involvement of the United States in Vietnam in more detail. The channel started producing and broadcasting documentaries about the Vietnam War or American foreign policy related to the war. The first documentaries that came out were mostly filled with government officials or military personnel who explained what was happening in Vietnam and why. At times, these even films looked like recruiting films, instead of giving a neutral explanation of events. McNulty calls these reports “programs which were little more than podiums for interest groups that appeared at network expense” (McNulty 180). One example of a biased documentary was *Air War in the North* from 1967 which supported the style of American air warfare. CBS later felt embarrassed about this documentary because it lacked any critical content (McNulty 178).

However, there were also CBS documentaries that were more critical and focused on giving greater coverage to emotionally charged events that were already visible on the news. Examples of events that were highlighted in these documentaries are the unfolding of Operation Rolling Thunder, the Tet Offensive, and the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine. By putting the focus on highly visible events in these documentaries, CBS raised the visibility even more and with that prioritized these events for politicians (McNulty 175).

NBC did not make many documentaries that specifically zoomed in on current issues during the Vietnam War. The network did have weekly programs such as *Vietnam Weekly Review* and *Meet the Press* that paid additional attention, besides the coverage on the evening

news, to current events in Vietnam and American foreign policy (“Vietnam on Film and Television: Documentaries in the Library of Congress”).

The event that generated media attention and consequently put the Vietnam War higher on the political agenda was the Tet Offensive. This event generated more footage than other events and the films and pictures were also more vivid. As illustrated in the previous chapters, the reporting about the Tet Offensive is a good example of both the emotional and the accelerating effects of the CNN effect theory. The combination of both effects make the Tet Offensive also a perfect example of the agenda setting effect because the dramatic characteristics of the footage triggered strong reactions from the public, which in return forced the Johnson administration to put this issue high on the political agenda and to take action faster.



Conclusion

This study was set out to explore whether the roots of the CNN effect are visible in television news during the Vietnam War. The focus has been specifically on NBC's *The Huntley Brinkley Report* and on CBS's *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. Additionally, the impact that the CNN effect had on American politicians have been reviewed. The three CNN effects that are defined by Livingston have formed the theoretical framework of this research.

The first of these three CNN effects is the ability of the media to act as an accelerant in political decision-making. In order to be able to accelerate the political decision-making process, fast reporting of events is needed. This requires satellite technology to broadcast live from locations abroad or transmit clips to the studio quickly. This technology was not yet fully available during the Vietnam War. This means that *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* did not have the ability to accelerate the decision-making process. The evening news channels did, however, give the politicians the ability to respond faster to current events by providing them with airtime if they wanted it.

The roots of the second CNN effect, media as an impediment to policy, are already slightly visible during the Vietnam War. In this effect the media can have two roles; as an emotional inhibitor and as a threat to operational security. Because of the lack of footage from Vietnam, the American evening news shows had difficulties influencing the emotions of their viewers. On certain occasions, such as the Tet Offensive, the television shows were able to influence the emotions of their viewers, but that did not always mean that this changed public opinion and consequently foreign policy. The same is true for the role of the media as a threat to operational security. There was not enough footage from Vietnam that could reach the studio in time to pose as a possible threat and, on top of that, the television evening news shows did not have the international reach so the Vietnamese could not easily pick up on sensitive information.

The roots of the last CNN effect, media as an agenda setting agency, manifest itself most clearly out of all the different forms of the CNN effect during the Vietnam War. Of course the Vietnam War was already high on the political agenda, but because *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* devoted a lot of their air time to the conflict, the war was prioritized even more. CBS and NBC also contributed to this by

airing documentaries and shows about certain events in the Vietnam War, which again put an extra spotlight on the war.

Overall it can be concluded that the roots of the CNN effect are only marginally visible in *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. The most important reasons that caused the television news shows to not have a clear accelerating, impeding and agenda setting effect on American foreign policy are the lack of technology to transmit footage quickly to the studio and the guerrilla style warfare which made it difficult to get interesting footage from Vietnam. CNN is able to use better technology to broadcast live from remote locations, which makes the footage more interesting and therefore have a greater effect on American policy.

For further research, it would be interesting to examine the editorial content and used footage in *The Evening News with Walter Cronkite* and *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* to learn more about the abilities of these shows to influence their audience and American foreign policy.



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