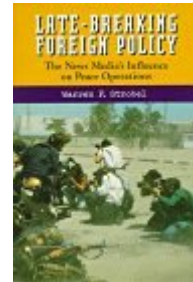


H-Net Reviews

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Warren P. Strobel. *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997. xiii + 275 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-878379-68-9.

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The CNN Effect

Television brings us instant and graphic pictures of tragedies around the world. We see people dying of hunger. We see people slaughtering their neighbors. And naturally, we want to respond. The power of pictures causes us to act in ways we otherwise might not. So we send in the troops to keep the peace. That, at least, is the theory, which is sometimes called “the CNN effect.” Our officials, we are told, have lost control of foreign policy to the media. If television decides to focus on these tragedies, we seem to have no choice but to respond. And if we later see pictures of American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, our leaders are similarly forced to pull out the same troops television forced us to put in.

In his important and interesting book, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy*, Warren Strobel explores this phenomenon, and finds it to be more myth than reality. By looking closely at four different peace-keeping operations, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Rwanda, and the decisions to intervene and/or pull out once involved (the push and the pull, as Strobel calls it), Strobel demonstrates, quite convincingly, that our policy-makers have not lost control of the foreign policy process. Television may be there. But sometimes it is responding to our leaders more than they are responding to it. The public may see these pictures, but that does not always lead to a major push to act. In the end, the decisions are, he shows, largely a function of strategic decisions made by our leaders. Television may magnify the audience or the action, but it does not cause us to act one way or the other.

But to say that television is not the cause of these decisions is not to say that television is not important or influential. In fact, in many ways the case studies which Strobel examines read like lessons in how important and influential television actually is. Television is everywhere. The decisions may not be “caused” by television, but every decision seems to be made with a conscious awareness of how it will appear on television. Our policy-makers may not be controlled by television, but they are abundantly aware of its presence. And, in fact, Strobel outlines a number of effects that television does have. It causes us to change tactics. That is, once we decide to act or not act, the particular response is often shaped to the imperatives of television. It causes us (and by that Strobel means both the public and those who make policy decisions) to focus more on the humanitarian aspects and less on the underlying political aspects of these situations. It leads to “telescoping,” shortening the time frame within which policymakers must act. And policy makers uniformly seem to be aware of needing to account for potential media reaction to whatever decision they ultimately make.

It is to Strobel’s credit that, in a book whose central thesis is that television is not as important as we sometimes think it is, he does not try to shy away from discussing the influence that he does see. Thus, while he “attempts to demonstrate that there is nothing inevitable about the news media’s ability, sometimes seemingly out of the blue, to alter plans and complicate policy” (p. 225), he closes with a series of recommendations concerning

how government officials need to act in order to maintain control of policy in our media-saturated environment which, he notes, can be ignored only at great peril. In fact, I would argue that if you took out the brief discussions interspersed in the book about how television was not ultimately responsible for what happened, the book could be seen as an argument for just how much television has changed the nature of foreign policy in general, and peace-keeping operations in particular. But I think that is more a matter of emphasis than difference. If you never believed the “CNN effect” was as strong as some people made it out to be, then Strobel’s finding that television does not have as much impact as some have argued is less striking than his documentation of television’s actual effects are. But if you did (or do) believe that television does control our decision-making process and that our officials act largely, if not completely, in response to that power, then Strobel’s careful debunking of this myth as it might apply to these various peace-keeping operations is powerful evidence you will need to confront.

In either case, students of foreign policy and of the media will profit from reading Strobel’s book. As he notes, the influence of the media on the foreign policy process is complex and variable depending upon the particular situation that arises. In cases like the early stages

of the famine in Somalia, for example, the media was responding to the government more than government was responding to the media, but in cases where elite consensus breaks down (or never existed), the independent impact of the media is much stronger. And Strobel’s analysis goes a long way in beginning to sort out what kinds of conditions, circumstances, or actions lead to more or less media influence. (I say begin to sort this out because, as Strobel himself notes, his exploration is limited to peace-keeping operations. Other “rules” may apply in other sorts of foreign policy operations.) So whether you read his book and say, “See.=20 The power of television is not as strong as some people say it is,” or “Wow. Look how much television effects the way foreign policy decisions are made,” there is much to learn in this study. Policymakers, media critics and analysts and citizens with an interest in foreign policy or the power of television can all benefit from this study. It is an interesting and useful book.

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