

Media Influence: Public Policy and Public Opinion

by David Paletz, Professor of Political Science

Duke University

A Speech to "Symposium II" at Nichols College, MA

[edited by Lee McGaan, Symposium Moderator]

Robert Fisher's Introduction: David Paletz, our presenter this evening, is first among his peers on this topic, no question of it. There isn't anyone you could ask in the country in the discipline of political science that doesn't agree he is in the first rank. David Paletz is Professor of Political Science at Duke University where he has been since 1967, having taken his Bachelor's, Masters and Ph.D. at UCLA. One is struck not only by his extraordinary record of publication but also by his record of service to Duke University. The other thing we see is a variety of undergraduate teaching awards, awards for excellence in teaching. There is that combination we have in David Paletz of teacher, as scholar, and of service to his own academic community. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you the author of Media Power Politics, Dr. David Paletz from Duke University.

DR. PALETZ'S REMARKS:

One of the things that strikes me whenever I read newspapers or watch television (which I do all the time as an excuse for research) is that the media is a strange Alice-in-Wonderland World. It is not the same as the reality that I experience. Let me give you two examples. Some years ago I went to the Durham City Council and I sat down there watching the city council. It was Wonderful! Just wonderful! Two of the members were drunk; another one spent most of his time chewing on a huge wad of gum; half of them came in late; some of them didn't come in at all. They spent the first two hours of a three hour session on procedural points, not debating something but debating whether they should debate something. The following day I picked up my local paper, which is The Durham Morning Herald, and read the coverage of this meeting. The story was not at all like the meeting I saw. The story said, "Last night, the Durham City Council decided . . ." listing three or four decisions. Strange! There was hardly any relationship to my experience. Why? Because the events were condensed. They were summarized. They were given a rationality and a coherence that they didn't have to the ordinary observer. In other words, the councilmen were shown as if they were acting purely rationally. I was fascinated by this difference between the reality I experienced and the press report.

About a year later I was involved with the Democratic National Convention, not politically but for scholarly purposes. I interviewed all the delegates from North Carolina and some other people who were there asking them a series of questions about their experiences at the convention. They felt they had been very effective and efficient and had done a lot of good things. They had written a platform and nominated a candidate. But then they said, "When we came back all our friends made fun of us. They said it was a convention of kooks. . .that it was all confusion, chaos, and all sorts of bad things. Your convention was full of conflict and disorder...no one seemed to know what they were doing." I was intrigued by this and so I spent five days looking at video tapes of the entire convention as shown on NBC and CBS...a lot of video tape! Not surprisingly the delegates believed that TV people had deliberately distorted what happened. That was not true at all. There was no deliberate intent to do that. Yet what I found was that the nature of television, the way it went about covering the convention, resulted in viewers receiving a different impression than that experienced by the delegates themselves. The question that concerned me was why that happened and I think I have some explanations.

One of the things reporters do at conventions is to make a drama out of the event. Rather than have a long interview with one person, television will show, in rapid succession, an interview with a candidate's supporter, then an interview with the leader of his opposing forces, and then an interview with the a different candidate's supporters. By the way they present the material and juxtaposition events, you get a sense of conflict and disagreement which is not at the time apparent to the people in the hall.

Another feature of the press coverage at conventions which leads to a difference between what appears on television and what is experienced by those in attendance is the interviewing technique of reporters. When I met the President of Nichols College he said, "Good evening. How are you? Did you have a nice trip?" Reporters in conventions don't act that way. They don't have enough time to act that way. When they interview delegates they begin with very different kinds of questions. I'll give you two examples from Catherine Mackin, my favorite reporter in 1972. When she interviewed the then-governor of Missouri, the first thing she said was, "You haven't thought much of McGovern in the past, what do you think now?" Later when she was talking with somebody else the first thing she said was, "Why do you think the Democrats are so divided?" This style of questioning was really striking! Reporters almost always begin with statements of that sort. Controversial? Pretentious? Obnoxious? In any case the person interviewed is invariably on the defensive. It's almost as if they were being asked the proverbial "Have you stopped beating your wife" question. That is another reason why the convention portrayed on television is different from the one the delegates experienced.

A fourth reason why television coverage presents an "unreal" picture of conventions has to do with access. Lots of things the delegates really enjoyed doing were simply not shown on television because reporters and anchormen found these things uninterested, or not provocative, or not controversial, or not dramatic, or because they couldn't show it for technical reasons. The delegates got a great deal of satisfaction in actually making up their minds, not just on whom they would vote for, but on platform issues. They read the material and they thought. But television does not show people thinking; it cannot show people thinking. The mental efforts of those at the convention are inaccessible to television. So a lot of the things the delegates did which gave them enormous satisfaction were irrelevant and unseen on television.

The final feature of television coverage of conventions that influences and alters the impressions of the viewers is visual technique. It is very important and very crucial to the nature of television coverage. When you or I talk to someone at a convention, we will spend 15 or 20 minutes exploring a number of subjects. That is not what happens on television. On television you notice the visual image switching, going from one person to another to another. No one gets more than 30 or 40 seconds. Even when just one person is speaking the camera angle can change. All of this gives the viewer at home a sense of motion, even turmoil. All the scenes are very brief scenes. I am not saying that television technicians and editors and producers deliberately attempt to make the convention seem more exciting, but the effect of the way the camera is used, the constant switching, gives an impression of motion, confusion, and flux that doesn't exist in the hall.

In terms of the visual image one other thing is very striking. WAY up above the tumultuous confusion on the floor there is the anchorman, smiling down, godlike. Walter Cronkite. David Brinkley. John Chancellor. They are above it all. They seem to be looking down and saying, "Look at this confusion. Chaos! We, will make sense out of it." Yet surely half of the time they don't understand what is going on and a third of the time they get it wrong. But they are positioned so that you read the confusion. That demeans the delegates and trivializes the process BUT it elevates the network. I am not saying that "media reality" is wrong but that it is different. Different from that of the delegates at a convention and different from the observer at the city council. In some ways it is an "Alice in Wonderland" difference.

I began by asking why this difference in realities appears and so far I have described some reasons that have to do with the techniques and cannons of conventional journalism. Any journalist who wrote a story purely chronologically, describing who said what first, second, third, would violate the conventions of journalism. The journalist is required to synthesize and condense. That is the meaning of the city council story. In television news the very techniques of production create an image that must be different from that of the people on the scene. That is the essence of the convention story. But there are other explanations as well.

Those features of news reporting mentioned above indicate some influences of form on impressions created by the news. However, the "mental structure" of journalism also influences the content of the news. Reporters bring to any story attitudes, knowledge, and understandings

which have a significant influence on the stories they produce. These attitudes, understandings, and knowledge must be recognized and included in any explanation of how the media create their special reality. [The sentences and phrases in bold are wholly my invention and not an edited version of what Paletz said. I included these sentences because it seemed to me that the following section needed a label to distinguish it from the ideas mentioned earlier and to give it an introduction. ed.]

First of all, television reporters and anchormen describe events with a theme in mind. They use this theme to approach the events of the convention or any other newsworthy event. The theme may be true; it may be false; but the theme structures events for the newsmen. This theme is reflected in the questions the reporters and anchormen ask, who they interview, and how they characterize the significance of the story. Themes are very tricky to discuss so let me provide an example.

When it is rating time for the news stations, they will go out and cover something sexy, like a massage parlor. They will send a reporter or television van out to the massage parlor and this will be the story. The theme always is "illicit behavior." And so the story will focus on illegal sexual exchanges, drug use, organized crime, and perhaps venereal disease -treated delicately. They'll interview the local police chief who will talk about this "terrible problem." They will interview several masseuses who will be asked, "Tell us about drug use. Do you accept money for sexual favors?" That doesn't seem unusual and it isn't. But if you let your imagination run wild, this story could be approached in a quite different way, a really different way. Massage parlors could be reported in terms of good health, sexual satisfaction or the climate. They could be covered from the point of view of burdensome governmental regulations. Massage parlors cannot operate efficiently because they have to fulfill health and other requirements. They could be cited as successful examples of private enterprise. They could be praised on the grounds that they provide career opportunities for high school dropouts. All of this could be done, but it isn't.

This simple example reveals that reporters, in fact, have a stock of "frames" or "themes" that they apply to events no matter where or when they occur. I would argue that this stock of "themes" is very limited. They form a hopelessly narrow range of explanations: Bureaucrats are incompetent, lazy; Congress is disorganized, argumentative; California is crazy and politicians that come from there, despite some exceptions, are crazy too; England is bizarre...they have kings and queens and princes. All of these themes and explanations are based on cultural assumptions, values and beliefs that are so pervasive and widely accepted that we don't even think about them. The key point here is that news is ambiguous and often protean. That is, any happening can be reported in a multitude of different ways. In simple terms --to edit is to interpret, --to speak is to define, --to communicate is to structure reality. Whenever you see a story or read it, you ought to think about how could it have been presented differently.

There are other **aspects of "mental structure" which influence news** content that I want to refer to briefly. A second factor is the journalist's definition of what is news. Editors and reporters think, not in terms of what is truly significant, but almost solely in terms of what is news. And significance and news are not identical. What are some of the definitions of news. [see McGaan's class notes on this] Drama! "Paletz speaks at Nichols College." No one cares. But, "Auditorium explodes while Paletz speaks." That's a headline. Conflict is important too. Think about threats and reassurance. If someone threatens to blow up the auditorium that would be news.

It was one my my cultural heroes, Richard Nixon, who said, "For the press, progress is not news. Trouble is news." (And if there were ever anyone who is qualified to make that statement it is Richard Nixon.) However, like many of Nixon's observations it is only partially the truth. Threats are news but so is reassurance. For example, a cat is up a tree. That is bad and threatening for the cat. But along comes the fire department. They go up the tree and save the cat. That is reassuring for us and for the cat. There are, of course, cultural differences in this sort of story. The "cat up a tree" story has a different version in England where I grew up. In England it goes like this. A cat is up a tree--the fire department comes along! and gets it down--the old lady who owns the cat is grateful and asks the firemen to come in for tea and scones. This is wonderfully reassuring. They eat their scones and drink their tea and leave. They get into the truck and begin to drive away but, unfortunately, the cat has gone under the wheel. The cat is demolished. That is an English version. Quite different. In spite of the humor here it should be clear that events are usually ignored, neglected, or misrepresented if they do not meet the journalist's criteria of what is news.

A third factor which effects the content of the news is knowledge. My favorite country is Australia. But can you remember the last time you heard about Australia on the news? A friend of mine did a study on Australia-in-the-news. From some archives he got every story on the American networks about Australia for ten years and this is what he found. 1) Australia is often confused with Austria. 2) There was at least one story on the Australian prime minister with a photograph# of somebody else. 3) Occasionally the prime minister was called a premier and the premier was called a president. 4) The name of Sydney, Australia's largest city, was misspelled 50 percent of the time, and 5) of course, quite often the map of Australia is printed upside-down. Clearly knowledge influences news content.

There is one more factor that causes news content to be what it is and perhaps it is the most important. That factor is the source of news content. Other people in this symposium have talked about the influence of sources on news stories but it is important to realize that news sources are primarily elite figures: presidents, legislators, judges, and other public officials at all levels of government. The vast majority of news stories use information from these elites. In the massage parlor example you find interviews with the police chief. In fact, it's hard to find a crime story which features an interview with the criminal, even an "I didn't do it." or "I've been wrongly accused." or "I did it and it was a great job." Often there isn't even an interview with the victim.

There are a whole series of techniques which public figures use to shape the news. Michael Robinson has described those techniques elsewhere so I won't repeat that here except to remind you that public officials; presidents, legislators, judges, or public information officers of universities and colleges, all know that what appears about them in the media is important and so they do their best to influence it. They promote, not necessarily the public's interest, but their own self-interest.

All of what I have talked about so far concerns news and public affairs coverage which attempts to capture reality. I have argued that it is a "different" reality that is captured. But that is just part of media content. And if we are going to understand media influence on public opinion we must look at the rest of the content in the media. A lot of what you read in newspapers and see on television, is "entertainment." Entertainment is the antithesis of reality. Especially reality TV.

Clearly the world of television is dramatically different from what most of us experience. Television entertainment seems to be predominantly populated by people who are unlike anyone I know, who do things that, in real life, we are incapable of achieving. Television is full of alluring women. I know many wonderful women but not all of them are alluring. Television is full of resolute and united families even though most of them have only one parent. In contrast to real life, which I find messy and confusing, in television entertainment there are clear plots, definite heroes and villains, and always a

resolution. Whenever the program ends, it has an ending and doesn't leave you with ambiguity, confusion or uncertainty. In contrast to my own life, television inhabitants do not wait in traffic or in ticket lines or in restaurant lines; their cars don't break down; they always have convenient parking spaces. In my life I never find a parking space right by the door and I always wait in restaurant lines. My life is full of confusion and equivocal situations. On television motivations are transparent; in my life I don't even understand my own. Truth is fathomable on television. I don't even know what truth is. Villains are evil on television. I long for evil villains in real life but, whenever I find them, they have some redeeming quality. Television heroes are virtuous but seldom in real life.

People, processes, and things rarely work as smoothly as they do on television. Although it would be impossible to find definitive evidence for this, it appears to me that a lot of people seek in politics and politicians qualities they discover in television entertainment. People begin to ask themselves why it is that things are not resolved in real life as they are on the small screen? For example, studies of doctors on television show there are two kinds of problems that doctors face on television. One is medical problems. The other set of problems are emotional/psychological problems. About 50% of the medical problems are resolved happily -- the people are cured. However, all of the emotional problems are resolved. I think that viewers contrast, unfavorably, the ineffectiveness of politicians with the effectiveness they see on TV. What does all of this have to do with public opinion? Perhaps a great deal. But let me offer a caveat before answering that question. It is very difficult to document the correct causal relationships in accounting for public opinion. The causes of public opinion itself, regardless of the media, are very complicated. In any audience people have opinions of different kinds and each type is affected differently by television. Furthermore, opinions tend to be fickle and contradictory. One certainty about people is that they hold contradictory opinions. For example, it's common for people to favor cutting down on government spending but not for health and education and welfare or virtually anything else -- so where do you cut?

In spite of these complexities I'm going to describe some of the effects of the media on public opinion as I perceive them. First and most obviously is the effect called stabilization. That is, the content of the media stabilizes opinion. The media reinforce what people already believe. Although this is not measurable, it is important and certainly relates to what I said about themes and frames. The themes and frames that are imposed upon stories are the very things that people believe already: bureaucrats are incompetent, congress is a mess, etc. The media reinforce or stabilize these views.

Second, there is what is known in the jargon of political scientists as agenda setting. (In fact, I don't like that term and would rather it was called "priority setting.") The stories stressed by the mass media tend to provide the issues many Americans come to think of as important. It is not clear, however, that these stories which take precedence in people's minds, are actually the stories of most interest to people. They are, in fact, the stories of most interest to reporters and people in government. It seems to me that people are concerned about inadequate education, or the high cost of automobiles, or teenage drinking, or where to go on the next vacation if they have one, or how to get a job if there is one, or preserving the social security system as it is. Journalists don't ignore these subjects but, if you look at the content of television and newspapers, what you find are reports on Afghanistan, Lebanon, American hostages in Iran, the comings and going of celebrities.

Over 45% of all television polls and 31% of all New York Times polls dealt with the presidency or elections. Another 15% of the polls dealt with appraisals of political parties and ratings of institutions and public officials and celebrities in general. These issues become important because of the emphasis placed on them. In effect, people are told, "That's what is important." We have an average of one poll every three days. Three hundred and eighty polls appeared on the pages of the Times over a three-year period. And what were these polls about? They were about the presidency, a subject of intimate(?) importance to everybody, including assessments and evaluations of the incumbent president's job performance and that of the members of his family. In fact, 22% of every poll was about his family. Incredible!

One fascinating thing is that the media affect public opinion by telling people what public opinion is. I did a study on the reporting of polls in The New York Times during the three years, 1973, '75, and '77 (I selected those years because there were no general elections). The data were revealing. In fact, The New York Times describes what the public is interested in almost exclusively defined by what is found in public opinion polls. But the public is not necessarily interested in those things - those are merely the questions of interest to the people that are polling for newspapers. Thus, the media do seem to influence "priority setting." [The material in the paragraphs above on polling was hard to hear and somewhat confusing. I may not have represented the statistics and conclusions correctly. ed.]

Sometimes the relationship between polls and "real" public opinion can be even more misleading and this is the third effect. **[I call this effect the "discovery effect." ed.]** Another study we did noted that newspapers gave the impression the country had become more conservative in the late 70's. Regardless of whether you are conservative or liberal, if you actually look at the poll data that is not shown in the press this impression becomes very problematical. It's true that on issues such as the death penalty and a stronger defense people were expressing somewhat more conservative views. But on a whole range of other issues such as support for government intervention in the economy, race relations, premarital sex, abortion, etc., the public was more liberal than it had been. They were not overwhelmingly more liberal but in comparison to the past they were more liberal. However, the public's impression was that the country was more conservative because the media presented them as more conservative.

The reason for this anomaly, as I noted earlier, is that public attitudes often are ambiguous. People have feelings on both sides of issues. People are for cutting government spending but they are also for increases in a wide variety of social programs. If they are not forced to choose between alternatives, people will respond according to the question. In the late 70's the public was asked about taxes, responded with opposition, and appeared to be more conservative. This contrasted with the 60s when people were asked about social programs, responded favorably, and appeared more liberal.

Well, if time permitted I could discuss some of the possible ways by which news may actually change opinion. I certainly could provide more examples to illustrate how, in fact, news creates its own special reality. But surely it is apparent that what we see on TV and read in the newspapers is not at all a literal representation of experience as it happens. As I said in the beginning, the media gives us a sort of "Alice-in-Wonderland" sort of view on the world. Perhaps now you can see through the looking glass a bit more clearly.