



The Second Annual Camden Conference: The Influence of the News Media in Shaping Foreign Policy

In 1989, when the second Camden Conference focused on “The Influence of the News Media in Shaping Foreign Policy”, radio, mainstream television, newspapers and news magazines comprised “news media.” Cable television was in its infancy. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, email photos and videos and wiki-leaks did not exist. Journalism was a profession; citizen journalists were not even in anyone’s mind.

The conference focused on newspaper and TV news. Panels of government officials and journalists considered questions of responsibility and ethics in regard to both the media and the government sources that supplied much of the information the media sought. Today, in light of the changes in how news is generated and how it is received, one might ask whether the questions the conference raised and the answers it offered are still meaningful.

There was no argument among the speakers that the media influence foreign affairs, principally through their influence on public opinion but also through direct influence on politicians’ thinking. Dennis Driscoll, professor of international law and politics and teacher of media coverage of international affairs at Harvard, summed it up: “In the United States ... public opinion—more so than in any other Western Country—has a great role to play in the making of foreign policy. ... it is very important that the Administration has a public which is prepared, at the very least, to tolerate if not support a policy.”

Accepting that the public must be informed in order to support policy, speakers agreed that the public often is poorly informed and is not interested in being better informed. The responsibility of the press to educate was addressed by several speakers. David Anable, of The Christian Science Monitor, noted that “to preset information is a responsibility; not a luxury. ... people do not wish to be informed. The public would much rather not know the uncomfortable facts that the press sometimes has to present.”

Seymour Topping, of the New York Times, expanded on the concept of responsibility by reminding the audience that journalists often see themselves as the fourth branch of government. “both the partner of government and a detractor” and they see their responsibility as “an obligation to investigate and indict, in the public forum, when the other three branches of the government... fail in their duties. “.

TV, because of its structure, sees its responsibility somewhat differently. TV, which tells its stories primarily through images that appeal to emotion more than thought, simplifies, exaggerates, and freezes moments in history, without perspective. It must create the interest. The print press is left to provide context that takes longer to lay out and is more difficult for the audience to absorb.

Although the concept of objective journalism is a relatively young one, the consensus was that the print media endeavors to be objective, however difficult, and that there is a real attempt to separate reporting from editorial content,

Stephen Rosenfeld of the Washington Post reminded the audience that “editorials can change the political context in which an issue is being discussed and decided. In the development of our democracy since World War II and especially since Vietnam, the official class has had to yield some of its previously less questioned authority to a newly-demanding public. He reiterated that the media are, finally, the instrument of that public demand. At the end of the day, it is the Job of editor to select what people need to know and make them want to know it.”

Speaking for the government, Fred Hoffman, of the Defense Department, addressed the issue of press responsibility by raising two concerns; first that the press had moved beyond skepticism to cynicism, assuming a government statement is a lie until proven otherwise, and second that reports have a “deplorable lack of background.”- He argued that TV journalists as worrying less about the public’s right to know than about beating others to the story.

A major discussion revolved around ethical behavior-- the role of the journalist as an agent of free expression vs. the role as a citizen to protect his or her country and fellow citizens. There was agreement among speakers that journalists have the responsibility to protect national security, but less agreement about how to determine what national security is in a given situation and the level to which it is threatened. Journalists attacked the government for hiding the truth under the cover of national security. Government speakers agreed that there is often “over classification.”, whether innocent or intentional. Beyond national security, the audience questioned whether there are other ethical issues the media confront when determining what information is “off limits.” David Anable raised two areas of concern—the question of humanity (do you stick a camera and microphone in the face of a grieving individual?) and the question of privacy. (do you print a confession or picture sent by terrorists?)

Television presents ethical issues different in some ways from the issues facing print journalists. US national security is not threatened by paying kids to throw stones so you get your film, but is it ethical to make the stone throwing the basis of a story. The question, for press and for television, remains who defines and establishes criteria for “ethical”?

Bernard Kalb summed up much that was said in his charges to government and to the media: To the government, “Be more forthcoming. You can disclose a great deal more than you are now doing without in any way jeopardizing the future of the Republic.” To the press “even more aggressiveness ... more continuity ... Do not mistake raising your voice for investigative reporting.”

The questions remain, still seeking answers.

~ Judith K. Stein, December 2011

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