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Television and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Iran Hostage Crisis

by James F. Larson

A number of general propositions about TV and foreign policy provide the backdrop against which U.S. television network news coverage of Iran between 1972 and 1981--and especially the hostage crisis--can be interpreted.

Iran is both a compelling case study and a major landmark in our understanding of the structural relationship between television news and U.S. foreign policy. One focal point of such a study is the 444-day crisis involving U.S. hostages in Teheran, beginning with their seizure on November 4, 1979.

The Iran hostage crisis was quintessentially visual in nature. It evokes visual memories of angry crowds outside the U.S. embassy in Teheran, armed "students" who overran the embassy and seized hostages, the bearded Ayatollah Khomeini surrounded by followers, clergy visits to the hostages at Easter and Christmas, and charred bodies of U.S. servicemen left in the desert after an abortive rescue mission. Additional imagery emanated from the United States: repeated briefings by State Department press spokesman Hodding Carter, comments from the White House by President Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, the statements and activities of hostage wives and families, ABC'S creation and promotion of an evening news special called "America Held hostage" and, not least, Walter Cronkite's weeknight newscast reminders of the duration of the hostages' captivity.

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Reflecting on its visual character, Lang and Lang (24) called the hostage crisis an occasion in which the televised event, regardless of how authentic or revealing of the real thing, became shared experience: "The reality that lives on is the reality etched in the memories of the millions who watched rather than the few who were actually there." (p. 213).

Lloyd Cutler (12), who served in the Carter White House during the Iran crisis, argues that the large, immediate reach of television is an important factor in its influence on the timing and substance of foreign policy decisions. As communication researchers have long known, that reach increases greatly in times of crisis. In a nationwide Roper survey conducted in early 1980, 77 percent of the respondents indicated they had been getting most of their news "about the crisis regarding the U.S. hostages being held in Iran" from television, compared with only 26 percent¹ who cited newspapers as the major source (36). In similar Roper surveys conducted during noncrisis circumstances, about 65 percent of the public indicate that they get most of their news about what's going on in the world today" from television, compared to approximately 47 percent who cite newspapers (31).

The Iran experience stretched and challenged past conceptions about the news media and foreign policy, stimulating a public debate over acceptable norms for both television and government in a novel situation. Out of the controversy grew a consensus among scholars, government officials, and journalists that the Iran hostage crisis was a watershed event deserving special scrutiny.

This study explores what the Iran experience either modifies or confirms about our knowledge of the relationship between television and U.S. foreign policy.

Its focus on that relationship in a single nation is primarily a limitation of the research design and should not obscure the international or transnational import of any findings. The global scope of changes in both television and foreign policy is ever more widely acknowledged by policy-makers, media professionals, and scholars.

In this study the Iran case is used to evaluate a set of nine propositions about television and U.S. foreign policy. These propositions are developed through a selective review of the existing literature on media and foreign policy and organized according to some key concepts in that literature. These propositions will then be applied to content data on newscasts between 1972 and 1981.

Any attempt to generate propositions about television and foreign policy based on the existing scholarly literature encounters several

109

¹ The percentages sum to more than 100 because the Roper surveys allowed multiple responses to this question.

difficulties. First, most of that literature (4, 10, 32) was written before satellite, video, electronics, and transportation technologies brought televised international news to its present state. Current circumstances undermine the 1960s conventional wisdom that the elite printed press is more important than television as a factor in foreign policy.

A second and related difficulty is that political scientists have characteristically conceptualized the foreign policy process as if the mass media, along with elections and organized interest groups, were intervening variables between domestic social forces and foreign policy decisions (32). The steady transnationalization of communication industries blurs the distinction between domestic and international phenomena and renders such a conceptual approach difficult if not impossible to apply.

A third problem is that research on news media has tended to focus on the process and organization of news gathering (7, 16, 19) or the international flow of news without relating it explicitly to the foreign policy process. Efforts such as those of Davison (13), who addressed the role of news media in international negotiation, are the exception rather than the rule.

Finally, as Rosenau (32) noted, the literature contains relatively few works that consider nongovernmental variables, including the media, "and estimate how their interaction shapes the contents and conduct of foreign policy" (p. 3). One of those few, of course, is Almond's *The American People and Foreign Policy* (4). Cohen's *The Press and Foreign Policy* (10) remains the major work that focuses exclusively on the structural relationship of the press, including broadcast media, to the foreign policy process.

The following review and discussion is organized around the three major roles Cohen (10) identified for the press in the foreign policy process: those of observer, participant, and catalyst. Although not mutually exclusive, they circumscribe the structural relationship of media to foreign policy and provide a framework for some general propositions against which the particulars of the Iran case may be interpreted.

Broadly conceptualized, the observer role of the press (including television) encompasses journalists' training, their role conceptions, and all aspects of both news gathering and news presentation techniques.

From the early 1970s television's role as an observer of international affairs and its importance relative to major news agencies and elite newspapers increased markedly (25). A central change was the increased ease with which live or nearly instantaneous visual reports could be gathered and transmitted via satellite from many parts of the world.

Greater international exchange of visual news through a variety of arrangements, including organizations such as Visnews and UPITN, allows the U.S. networks access to more "second source" video. It also means that what is broadcast in one country can be quickly disseminated through television in many other nations. People in the United States and around the world now expect to see timely visual reporting on a wide range of international affairs, from wars, hostage crises, assassinations, military coups, and natural disasters to summit meetings, and negotiations on a wide range of topics by both government officials and nongovernmental representatives. The above changes can be summarized in the following general proposition.

1. *The technology and organizational structures for gathering and disseminating international television news are inherently transnational in nature.*

One result of television's ubiquitous presence and, according to Eban (15), one of the most powerful, far-reaching transformations in the modern diplomatic system is "the collapse of reticence and privacy in negotiation" (p. 345). The modern negotiator must transact business simultaneously with a counterpart and with public opinion at home and in other nations. This suggests the second proposition regarding television's observer role.

2. *The presence of television news makes private or secret negotiations between governments more difficult.*

During the fall of 1986, unfolding revelations about the Iran-contra arms again underscored this proposition. While international affairs coverage by television and other media did not prevent the Reagan administration from establishing secret contacts and selling arms to Iran, it dramatically increased the risks of such a strategy. Once details of the initiative became public, the glare of publicity, especially through television news, not only brought it to a halt but also damaged U.S. foreign policy toward a number of specific nations along with its more global efforts in public diplomacy.

On the other hand, the experience of recent years also suggests that the absence of pictures, frequently due to government restrictions, can influence television's performance as an observer of international affairs.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Falklands-Malvinas war between Britain and Argentina, the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada, and domestic developments in South Africa are all examples of events made more difficult to cover because of government restrictions on the presence or use of television cameras.

The general importance of "film value" in television news, along with its relationship to the structure of television news broadcasts and competition for audience share, was examined in detail by Epstein in 1974 (16). Since then, technological changes have greatly eased the gathering, transmission, and international exchange of visual news, providing governments do not interfere. For television, unlike print media, a third proposition requires continued examination.

3. Access to appropriate pictures heavily influences current television news gathering practices.

Of course, the availability of timely and appropriate video material is only one of several factors affecting whether a network might choose to cover any particular story. Another is the news value of the particular issue or event. Cohen (11) called attention to the need for good data on media coverage across a range of foreign and domestic issues, with special attention to the systemic relationship of the media and foreign policy making during times of crisis.

Studies of international all-air content on network television have repeatedly observed the phenomenon of "saturation coverage" of events (2, 17, 25). Saturation coverage occurs when a news event, often a crisis, fills all or most of the available broadcast time, pushing other events temporarily from public view. As Adams and Heyl correctly note (3, p. 7), the saturation effect exposes the inadequacy of frequent analogies comparing television news to the newspaper front page. Even at the height of a crisis, a front page is likely to have proportionately more noncrisis news set in the available space than a television broadcast would have within the available time.

The same content studies that show periodic saturation coverage of certain nations or events also document frequent periods when there is an absence of television news coverage, particularly from smaller and developing nations (1, 2, 25). They support the fourth proposition:

4. *Television news provides episodic accounts, often focusing saturation coverage on a "big story" and resulting, over the long run in an ahistorical account.*

The media are participants in foreign policy through policy-makers' contributions to the press and their use of televised information.

The roles of the media as either participants or catalysts in foreign policy can be analyzed using the conceptual approach articulated by Almond (4). He abandoned the democratic myth that the American people as a whole influence foreign policy by recognizing that there are sharp gradations of interest and competence in foreign policy. How one uses information from the media, including television, is largely a function of one's position vis-a-vis the overall policy-making structure (10, p. 5). Almond (4) suggested that the public could be thought of as a pyramid-shaped structure including, from bottom to top, (a) the general public, (b) an attentive public that is informed about foreign policy problems and forms the audience for discussions among elites, (c) the policy and opinion elites, and (d) within the elites, the official policy leadership, including executives, legislators, and civil servants.

Within this structure, media participate in foreign policy in two general ways. The first is through policy-makers' contributions to the press. Formal press conferences, briefings, and background papers are the most important routine channels upon which Washington reporters depend, with the White House and the presidential press conference thought to hold a special priority (21, 34). However, some observers suggest that Congress and the media, principally television, have decreased presidential influence and contributed to a breakdown of national consensus in foreign policy (14). Others have argued that, in foreign policy, elites tend most often to agree on goals and only occasionally disagree on tactics (28, p. 215). Kern, Levering, and Levering (23) examined five categories of "claimants for public attention" including foreign sources, domestic politicians, interest groups, the general public, and sources within the press, to see whether the presidency or the press was dominant in several crisis situations during the Kennedy administration. They concluded that domestic politicians were generally the president's principal rivals in the public dialogue.

While the relative influence of the president versus Congress or other entities may be shifting, television clearly provides the major public forum for the ongoing elite dialogue on foreign policy. In political terms,

television's considerable advantages over newspapers include a far larger and more immediate reach (12), the impact and intimacy of moving visual images, and its relatively larger proportion of international news (8). The predominance of official government sources in the elite dialogue conveyed by television suggests the fifth proposition.

5. Television network news usually follows or reinforces U.S. government policy.

The second way in which television participates in foreign policy is through the use of televised information by policy-makers. Only in the past decade or so have policy-makers become so highly attuned to the medium of television (12, 20). They now follow television closely, in addition to such elite press as the New York Times and the Washington Post, for at least two reasons.

First, for some types of events television may provide information more quickly or completely than other available media. For example, during the first 48 hours of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985, CBS News had access to more information than the U.S. government. "A State Department official reacted with horrified disbelief when told by CBS News that the hijackers had separated and removed hostages with Jewish-sounding names" (22, p. 171).

Second, officials above a certain level must attend to television in order to participate in the day-to-day dialogue that it conveys. Alexander Haig reported that in his experiences as White House Chief of Staff,

Deputy National Security Advisor, Commander of NATO, and Secretary of State, his first order of business each day was to review what the U.S.

television networks had broadcast the previous evening (20). In some cases, television facilitates direct conversations between or among high-level governmental officials from two or more nations. When this happens, an important part of television's transnational character is apparent, leading to a sixth proposition.

6. Television news sometimes participates in foreign policy by serving as a direct channel of communication between government officials or policy elites in one nation and those in others.

The international contact among government and nongovernment policy elites made possible through satellite television is a continuation of the generally noted propensity of international news media to focus disproportionately on elite nations and individuals (18, 25).

A lack of attention to non-elites lends support to James Reston's argument for a new definition of news, "with more attention to the causes rather than merely the effects of international strife" (30). To the extent that fundamental political, social, or economic changes in other nations involve broad segments of the non-elite public, the seventh proposition is often relevant:

7. Policy problems may be created or exacerbated by lack of media attention to basic processes official and cultural change in developing nations.

The third general role of media in foreign policy is that of catalyst, which refers to the manner in which public use of television and other media for international affairs information characteristically influences both television coverage and foreign policy.

From a policy perspective, the question of how public opinion influences foreign policy is really a matter of how government officials perceive that opinion. Even in the pretelevision era, as Boulding (9) suggested, those who decide and determine policies of nations respond not to the "objective" facts of the situation but rather to their "image" of the situation. In Boulding's conceptualization, images are overall cognitive, affective and evaluative structures that are essentially historical.

That extend both backward and forward in time and are is, they continually changing.

Today the technologies of television convey maps and alter images more quickly and more vividly than the print media and radio were able to do. Timely visual reports from distant locations create an impression or perception of decreased distance in a manner that cannot be approximated by radio or the print media. This characteristic also pertains to television's observer role, because it is intrinsic to the technology through which international news is presented, and to the participant role, because government officials are presumably affected as is the mass public. Clearly, the question of television's role as a catalyst in foreign policy must come to grips with the influence of the instantaneous or timely television image.

One widely noted aspect of television's moving image is its emotive character and ability to convey intimacy. Therefore, we might hypothesize that it has a greater capability to alter the affective or evaluative components of images than do the print media. For example, footage of starving children in Ethiopia, first broadcast to U.S. audiences in 1984, is widely credited with galvanizing public opinion. This characteristic of television suggests the eighth proposition.

8. Television's power to convey emotions and a sense of intimacy can be a factor in foreign policy.

On the cognitive level, there are indications that television coverage, along with that of other media, can assist in changing crucial public perceptions of reality that may be necessary for the support of foreign policy. Adams and Heyl (3) noted the dramatic change in U.S. public opinion toward Egypt and its president Anwar Sadat during the late 1970s. Both the direction and the intensity of public opinion changed,

paralleling network television coverage over the same time period. In addition to the emotive or affective influence in television's portrayal of Sadat himself, the U.S. audience was being exposed to more new information about a country and its leader, suggesting the ninth proposition.

9. Television can change public perceptions about foreign affairs, particularly when it conveys new visual information and when such information is repeatedly presented over a long period of time.

The nine propositions presented above are tentative probes toward understanding rather than stringent theory-based hypotheses. Within the framework of television's general roles as observer, participant, and catalyst in foreign policy, they provide points of reference for interpreting the Iran experience from 1972 through 1981.

To examine these nine propositions, content data are analyzed from a ten-year time span that provides more historical perspective than the hostage period alone. The data come principally from the Television News Index and Abstracts, published as a guide to the videotaped early evening news broadcasts contained in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. Here I supplement my earlier sample (25) by collecting data on all Iran stories during periods of light coverage, such as 1972 through 1977, and by systematically sampling stories during periods of heavy coverage, as in 1980. Data were collected for an alternate network's news telecast on every fourth evening. This procedure assumes a high degree of similarity in the amount and nature of coverage on the three networks and provides a large sample of data representing ABC, CBS, and NBC in equal proportions.

Television's relationship to U.S. foreign policy toward Iran may be examined according to five major phases in network news coverage of that nation: Iran before the revolution (January 1972-October 1977), demystification of the Shah and the revolution (November 1977-January 1979), Iran drops from view (February 1979-October 1979), the hostage crisis itself (November 1979-January 1981), and the immediate after-math of the hostage captivity (February 1981-December 1981). These periods are bounded by major events of the time, summarized in Figure 1, and each encompasses certain predominant themes of television news Coverage.

Television news from Iran before the revolution is characterized by an emphasis on U.S. arms and Iranian oil.

The following description of television coverage of Iran before the revolution is based on a period of nearly six years. It starts with initial publication of the television News Index and Abstracts in January 1972 and ends with October 1977, when Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, the Shah

Figure 1: Major phases of Iran coverage on network television early evening news. 1972-1981

Time period	Main themes	Dominant format
January 1972- October 1977	U .S. arms sales Oil and OPEC	Anchor reports (48%)
November 1977- January 1979	Anti-shah protests Iran politics	Foreign video reports (57%)
February 1979- October 1979	Location and health of Shah Politics and executions in Iran	Anchor reports (64%)
November 1979- January 1981	Iran-U.S. government communication; The Shah; Hostage families; Clergy visits to hostages; United Nations commission actions' Iraq-Iran war; Abortive rescue attempt; 1980 presidential election; Hostage return	Domestic video reports (50%)
February 1981-December 1981	Bani-sadr dismissal by Khomeini and exile to France; Follow-up stories on hostages	All three formats used

of Iran, visited the United States² The visit marked the start of intensified television coverage, leading to the overthrow of the Shah in January 1979.

Content analyses of weeknight news broadcasts from 1972 through 1977 confirm the paucity of television coverage of Iran before the revolution, a period when the Vietnam war and the 1973 Middle East war received some saturation coverage. Table 1 shows that Iran appeared in only about one percent of all international news items from 1972 through 1977. Data compiled by Adams and Heyl (3) on total seconds of air time devoted to Iran show a roughly corresponding pattern, even though they used a more restrictive operational definition and procedures for coding news as involving Iran.

Despite the relative lack of attention to Iran during this period of almost six years, three aspects of the coverage define television's role as an observer. First, there was heavy reliance on the wire services for news from Iran. A count of all stories broadcast by the three networks from 1972 through October 1977 shows that 48 percent were anchor reports (without film or video and read or voiced by an anchor correspondent). Second, only one-quarter of all stories involving Iran were

117

² The Vanderbilt Television News Archive began taping evening network newscasts in 1968. While indexes and abstracts are available for this earlier period, widespread distribution of the printed publication did not begin until January 1972.

Table 1 : Amount of coverage of Iran on network television early evening news, 1972-1981

	Minutes per week on the "average" network	Iran stories as a percent of all international news
	n	%
1972	.8	1.2
1973	.6	1.2
1974	1.2	1.1
1975	.8	.7
1976	.9	1.1
1977	1.1	.6
1978	2.7	1.6
1979	20.0	26.3
1980	26.6	32.0
1981	7.0	8.8
N (stories)	433	7054

foreign video reports, originating with overseas correspondents and containing filmed or videotaped visuals. However, fewer than half of these, or only ten percent of all reports involving Iran, originated from that nation itself. The others were filed from such locations as OPEC meetings in Austria, Algiers, and Vienna or a meeting between the Shah of Iran and Henry Kissinger in Zurich. Finally, there were two dominant and interrelated themes in network coverage of Iran from 1972 through October 1977--oil and arms sales. Taken together, well over half of reporting on Iran dealt with these two topics.

In its role as a participant in foreign policy, network television covered the activities of government. As usual, state visits, presidential travel, and activities of the secretary of state all received coverage.

President Nixon visited Iran in May 1972, the Shah visited the United States in July 1973 and May 1975, Henry Kissinger met the Shah in Zurich in February 1975, Secretary of State Vance met the Shah in Iran in May 1977, and Empress Farah visited the United States in July of that year. For the most part, coverage of such events followed the norm of coverage of diplomatic activity with an ally in an important area of the world.

Network coverage also contained hints but no sustained attention to events indicating that all was not well within Iran. For example, there were bombings at the Shah memorial and United States Information Service during President Nixon's May 1972 visit to Iran, attributed by at least one network to Marxist guerrilla's. In 1975, U.S. Air Force personnel and a U.S. embassy employee were killed in Iran, with the former action attributed to an "anti-shah" group. On August 1, 1976, a 40-second CBS anchor report commented on prescient concerns by members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that arms sales

could lead to the presence of 60,000 Americans in Iran by the 1980s and that they could wind up as hostages. In November 1976, CBS carried a report on Iranian students demonstrating outside the French consulate in Houston. However, all of these reports on bombings, killings, potential danger to Americans in Iran and demonstrations by Iranians in the United States received minuscule attention when compared to network coverage of oil and arms.

Both the amount of coverage given to Iran during the 1972-1978 period and the nature of such coverage suggest that television news predominantly reflected the activities of the White House, State Department, and other U.S. policy officials during this period. Mowlana and colleagues (26) examined all content of the *Middle East Journal Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy* from 1970 through the summer of 1978 to see whether foreign policy experts had noted signs of internal instability in Iran that might not have been picked up by the media. Their analysis showed that few if any of the experts writing for these journals detected the massive grass roots anti-shah sentiment building in Iran. However, Mowlana notes that the "most serious misunderstandings of the Iranian situation in terms of their effect on public opinion were promulgated by the media. The communication media rarely strayed from the administration's official line, in either their perceptions or coverage of the Iranian political upheaval" (26).

Finally, the characterization of television and other news media as storytellers (6) sheds additional light on network television performance during the months from January 1972 through October 1977. An exchange on the ABC News "Nightline" broadcast of July 3, 1980, makes the point. The entire program focused on television coverage of the Iran crisis, and one of Ted Koppel's guests was Ben Brown, television critic for the Detroit News.

Koppel asked Brown, "How do you think the role of the American journalist, particularly the role of the American television journalist, could have been improved?" Brown replied: Well think it's important to step outside of the immediate time frame and just stop pretending that Iran happened yesterday. There is-it's an ongoing story. We've been involved, as a country--our country has been involved oil Iran since the Eisenhower administration There's a whole body of history, and diplomatic history and military history, the history of the CIA involvement. All that exists, and that's available to reporters. it's not secret information. We have to stop pretending that Iran sort of sprung on us out of nowhere. We should be able to tap history more, as reporters, as opposed to just reacting to the melodrama of the moment (27).

The problem to which Brown alluded had begun long before the hostage crisis itself.

Network television in the early 1970s portrayed a story that depicted Iran as a strong ally and supplier of oil, needing support

principally in the form of U.S. arms. Although the Shah may have had his internal problems, their depth was never apparent and hence the storyline did not lead adequately into the events that followed. For U.S. television audiences trying to understand why Iranian students would be demonstrating in the United States and "terrorists" killing Americans in Iran, there was relatively little context or background. That circumstance began to change in November 1977.

For sheer public reach and political impact, the Shah's November visit to the White House might be described as a turning point in network coverage of his government .

While state visits are a common occurrence at the White House, often with ceremonies on the South Lawn, this visit produced a politically devastating visual scene. Tear gas used to quell demonstrations outside the White House floated across the South Lawn as President Carter was greeting the Shah. A nationwide television audience witnessed the president and the Shah, not to mention assembled dignitaries and the press, dealing as best they could with the effects of tear gas.

The effect on subsequent television coverage of the event was dramatic in tone if not in quantity. From that point on, the Shah himself and the activities of Savak (the Iranian secret police) and the military became a more dominant theme in network coverage of Iran. While the Shah continued to receive some "favorable" coverage consonant with his past characterization as a staunch friend and ally of the United States, the U.S. visit marked the clear beginning of a gradual change in network coverage that showed some flaws in the man and the nature of his regime. Still, there was no dramatic increase in the amount of coverage of Iran on the network nightly news broadcasts during most of this fifteen-week period. As evidence, Table 1 shows that Iran was involved in only 1.6 percent of all international news stories broadcast during 1978.

On the last day of December 1977, President Carter visited Iran as part of an overseas trip to Europe and the Middle East. Following this New Year's Eve visit, network coverage of Iran during February centered on Carter's nomination of G. William Miller as Federal Reserve Chairman. Miller's company, Textron, had extensive dealings with Iran.

During the next five months, March through July, the networks relied heavily on the news agencies for low-level reporting from Iran, including some news of anti-shah riots and news of oil prices and OPEC.

In August and September of 1978, Chinese leader Hua Kuo Feng visited Iran, and antigovernment violence also escalated. In response, all three networks dispatched their own correspondents to Iran. This move not only changed the observer role of television in the foreign policy

process from that time on but also made television a more active participant in the events that transpired.

During the last half of 1978, well over half of all reporting originated with network correspondents in Iran. The dominant theme during this period was antigovernment marches, strikes, and protests, leading inexorably toward the downfall of the Shah early in 1979. In late 1978, demonstrators in the city of Qum called for the establishment of a new government led by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. For a brief period of several months, beginning in November 1978, the networks reported from Paris on Khomeini's activities and served as a channel linking him with Iran and the rest of the world.

During January 1979, after the Shah left Iran, television served as a channel for messages between Khomeini and the shaky government of Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar.

Prior to the fall of the Shah, the U.S. government publicly expressed confidence that the Iranian army would be able to control the situation indefinitely and, as already noted, neither the government nor the media had gauged the depth of the revolution then underway in Iran. As it happened, the Ayatollah Khomeini made a triumphant return to Iran within a month of the Shah's departure, and Bakhtiar promptly resigned.

The truly striking aspect of network coverage concerning Iran during the seven months preceding the hostage seizure is its low level and low priority.

Upon his departure from Iran, the Shah himself and his health condition became one center of network television attention. The other focus of attention during February and March became the interpretation to U.S. television audiences of the new and largely unforeseen political situation in Iran, especially its implications for the United States. Topics covered during February and March included loss of U.S. military equipment in Iran; contingency plans to evacuate Americans from Iran; the impact of the Iran situation on OPEC and rising oil prices; an attack on the U.S. embassy in which a Marine sergeant was captured and returned; pro-shah soldiers continuing to fight; the Ayatollah Khomeini's inability to control revolutionaries; secret trials and firing squads; and Iran's censorship of U.S. television reporting.

During the next seven months, April through October coverage of Iran dropped to a very low level. The "average" network carried 92 stories on Iran with a total duration of 57 minutes over this span of 196 days. However, 78 percent of these stories were anchor reports, indicating a lack of visual coverage and heavy reliance on the news agencies and other possible sources. The reporting centered on continuing executions in Iran and clashes between Moslems and leftists or between the government and the Kurds in Mahabad. Direct visual reporting from

Iran was limited to a handful of reports on the state of that country's oil industry, and other foreign video reporting centered on the Shah in Mexico. This period could aptly be called the calm before the storm in television coverage of Iran. For all practical purposes, there was an eight-month hiatus in direct network television coverage of news from Iran, right up to the cataclysmic event that marked the beginning of a sustained period of intensive coverage of that country: the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Teheran and seizure of embassy personnel as hostages during the first week of November 1979.

In summary, network television's role as an observer of events in Iran declined noticeably during the nine months between the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and the seizure of U.S. hostages. As a consequence, its role as a participant in foreign policy was also greatly diminished during this period of time. Its reporting on actions of U.S. policy-makers was minimal, as were its contributions to those policy-makers.

The actual seizure of U.S. hostages and their 444-day period of captivity sustained high levels of network news attention, accounting for approximately three-quarters of all news stories from Iran during the entire 1972-1981 decade.

As shown in Table 1, Iran accounted for 26.3 percent of all international news broadcast by the networks in 1979 and 32 percent, or nearly a third, of such news during 1980. As an alternative measure, Table 1 shows the average length of time devoted to Iran stories by a network. In 1980, for example, each network averaged close to 27 minutes, or more than an entire nightly news broadcast each week devoted to Iran.

Although quantified differently, the findings in Table 1 correspond to those of Adams and Heyl (3) and support their conclusion that "only Vietnam, Watergate, and presidential campaigns were in the same league with the hostage story in terms of heavy, long-term coverage" (p.29).

During the captivity of the hostages, 49.5 percent of all network stories on Iran were domestic video reports, principally by correspondents in Washington, D.C., with some originating from the United Nations and other U.S. locations. Only 14.4 percent of all stories were anchor reports, which is largely indicative of active network coverage throughout the hostage ordeal. The remaining 36.1 percent of stories were visual reports originating in Iran and other nations.

In addition to the usual heavy attention to the White House and State Department, several other factors, evident in the themes and foci of network coverage, account for the high proportion of domestic video reports. They include coverage of the Shah while he was still in the United States, the 1980 presidential election campaign, activities of the

United Nations and its secretary-general, and attention to the families of the hostages. A variety of events and themes characterized network coverage during the period of hostage captivity. However, attempts at diplomatic communication between Iran and the United States accounted for the bulk of coverage. Taken together, statements by the White House, State Department, and the Ayatollah Khomeini or representatives of clergy in Iran, along with more general reports concerning U.S. or Iranian government policies, accounted for 47.4 percent of all stories broadcast during the period of captivity. Based on analysis of the eight months from November 1979 through June 1980, Altheide (5) found that Hodding Carter appeared most frequently to explain the U.S. position, followed by President Carter, Jody Powell, and Cyrus Vance. In Iran Sadegh Ghotbzadeh was most frequently interviewed by the networks, followed by the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Ayatollah Behesti, in that order.

In addition to the main theme of actual or attempted public communication between the two governments, other motifs included continued coverage of hostage families in the United States, stories on the Shah, visits to the hostages by clergy and others, U.N. debate and actions on Iran, armed conflict between Iraq and Iran, the abortive rescue attempt of April 24, 1980, the 1980 presidential election campaign, and stories describing the return of the hostages. All or most of these themes have been reported in prior research (5, 26, 35). The purpose here is to comment on the major themes that relate to the problem of television and foreign policy.

The hostage seizure on November 4, 1979, thrust U.S. television into uncharted territory by greatly expanding its role as a participant and potential catalyst in the foreign policy process.

Communication between the U.S. and Iranian governments. Television news became a principal channel of communication between the two governments. Salinger (33) provides a fascinating account of the efforts by the two governments to establish some direct, nonpublic contact regarding the hostage situation.

Both governments very quickly expressed concern and some frustration with the performance of television (3). Within a week of the hostage seizure, White House press spokesman Jody Powell had met with representatives of the three television networks to request restraint in coverage of the Iran situation. The meeting coincided with NBC'S airing of an interview with one of the hostages, Marine Corporal William Gallegos. Because of certain conditions agreed to by NBC and the 3 In a study of government press offices, Hess (21) noted that the State Department briefing room became famous during the Iran hostage crisis.

Iranian captors in Teheran, the Gallegos interview sparked a public debate among the television networks and public officials concerning the role and responsibility of the network news medium.

On November 18, the Iranian government took out a full-page advertisement in the New York Times in order to print the 3,500-word text of a one-hour Iranian television address delivered by the Ayatollah Khomeini. In the speech, the Ayatollah had rejected the plea of a papal representative in Iran for the release of the U.S. hostages. A message at the top of the advertisement read: "Ayatollah Khomeini's statement has been only briefly and very selectively referred to by the media. Therefore, we print his message here for his intended audience, the people of the United States of America."

U.S. government representatives were also displeased with television reporting of Khomeini's statement but for different reasons. In the December 11 New York Times, Hodding Carter, speaking personally and "off the record" expressed his view that television interviews might well have "rhetorically boxed the revolutionary leader into a corner on the subject of possible trials of the hostages held in Teheran." Pressed by interviewers, the Ayatollah had indicated that the hostages definitely would go on trial. Those interviews, Carter said, put into concrete what could have been dismissed as muttering behind closed walls." In the same article, Carter's views were disputed by the chief executives of all three television networks, Iranian displeasure with the reporting of U.S. television networks also took other forms. Quint (29) reports that in early 1980 all three networks were first deprived of satellite facilities and then, on January 14, ordered out of the country with other U.S. reporters and photographers. However, Iran permitted them to return in early March. As noted by Adams and Heyl (3), accessibility was a major factor in the television news appeal of the Iranian drama.

Transnational considerations. Mowlana (26) noted the crucial role of transnational communication media in the Iran hostage crisis. In the spring of 1980, as part of his sanctions package against Iran, President Carter proposed an interruption in Iranian use of communication satellites through the INTELSAT system. Within a short time, the president's proposal was quietly shelved over concerns about using a commercial satellite for political purposes. In effect, the U.S. government acknowledged the overriding importance of INTELSAT as a transnational corporate entity.

Coverage of the Shah. As indicated, coverage of the Shah was a continuing motif during the period of hostage captivity. Reports covered such topics as his medical condition, his move from the United States to Panama, the subsequent move to Egypt at the invitation of President Sadat, and finally his death and state funeral in Egypt during July 1980.

While the U.S. government continued to profess friendship for the Shah and contended that his return to Iran was irrelevant to the hostage

situation, reports on him were now but a small element in the larger context of coverage focusing far more heavily on Iranian officials, the hostages' captors, and other opponents of the Shah. In that context, the removal of the Shah as the center of coverage and primary spokesperson for the government continued. Altheide's (5) contention that the Shah received, on the whole, "favorable" coverage during this period is questionable and is accurate only in terms of a very limited focus on coverage of official U.S. government statements and activities of the Shah per se.

The hostages' families and early releases. All three networks made intel-views with wives, mothers, or other relatives of the hostages part of the story within a day or two of the embassy seizure. This strong element of human drama, having been injected at the very beginning of the story; would be difficult to ignore later. The story of human separation was reinforced by the early release of some black and women hostages and the later release of hostage Richard Queen, who suffered from an illness. Their reunion with families and friends tapped undisclosed television's power to convey emotion and intimacy.

Network attention to the human drama of the hostages' situation, coinciding with the presidential election of 1980, accented the domestic side of this particular international news story. Destler, Gelb and Lake (14) stress the increased importance of domestic political concerns in the foreign policy arena, especially given the predictable frequency and lengthy media attention to U.S. presidential elections. In the case of Iran, they note that

The Case of the Iran Hostage Crisis

Jimmy Carter certainly inflated the hostage issue and milked it for partisan gain, using the Rose Garden for cover against Teddy Kennedy. But even if he had behaved more responsibly, it is anything but clear that he could have kept things in proportion when the networks brought chanting demonstrators to us nightly and Walter Cronkite began counting the days. (14, p. 153).

Analysis of the content of network coverage shows clearly that no political candidate made it a major issue, either before the nominating conventions or starting the actual campaign. Instead, the issue was tacit and pervasive, recognized by all the candidates and brought home in a powerful way by network television's attention to the human impact of the Iran crisis within the United States.

Following saturation coverage of the return of the hostages on the day of President Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, levels of coverage began to drop.

As shown in Table 1 coverage of Iran during 1981 accounted for only 8.8 percent of all international news, compared with 32 percent the

preceding year. Furthermore, two-thirds of the coverage accorded Iran was concentrated during the first six months of 1981. By the last quarter of 1981, attention to Iran had come full circle, falling to the low levels shown in the 1972-1977 period.

Following the return of the hostages, coverage of Iran consisted of anchor reports, domestic video reports, and reports from correspondents overseas (but not in Iran). Occasionally there would be a visual report from Iran but by a correspondent from another nation.

Major themes of coverage during February and March of 1981 included homecoming celebrations for the hostages, court challenges to the settlement reached by the governments of Iran and the United States, and congressional investigation of how the government had handled the hostage crisis. In addition, there were several short reports of a developing rift between Iranian President Bani-sadr and the fundamentalist clergy, including Prime Minister Ali Rajai. During June, July, and August, this conflict became the major network news story on Iran, occupying more time than any other topic during the last nine months of 1981. In early June, the Ayatollah Khomeini publicly criticized Bani-sadr and dismissed him as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. By June 22, he had dismissed Bani-sadr as president, some of the former president's supporters were being executed, and Bani-sadr had gone into hiding. Near the end of July, he had escaped to exile in France.

During the remainder of 1981, the sporadic network television reporting on Iran dealt mostly with terrorist acts or the internal governmental or political situation.

The Iran example is only one case, but an especially important one, in the relationship between television and foreign policy.

By examining a full decade, this study is partly responsive to Cohen's (11) call for studies of media behavior on a variety of issue areas. The issues dominating U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and the media role in that policy process shifted dramatically in several phases between 1972 and 1981.

The contribution of the Iran case to an overall understanding of the television-foreign policy relationship may be summarized by recounting the evidence it provides for each of the general propositions stated at the outset.

1. *The technology and organizational structures for gathering and disseminating international television news are inherently transnational in nature.* The Iran case illustrated the transnational character of television news as well as any event to that date. Iranian and U.S.

leaders, as well as other groups in both nations, repeatedly used television to address public audiences, often across national boundaries.

The U.S. government's decision not to seek interruption of satellite communication to and from Iran as part of a package of sanctions underscores this characteristic.

2. *The presence of television news makes private or secret negotiations between governments more difficult.* During the several weeks immediately following seizure of the hostages, television was a preferred medium for communication between governments in Iran and the United States. Given U.S. uncertainty about the locus of power and leadership control in Iran and probable Iranian suspicions concerning U.S. behavior in any secret negotiations, the initial preference for a public exchange through television is understandable. However, both governments eventually expressed public frustration with television coverage, and this sense of frustration is probably the best indication of support for this proposition.

3. *Access to appropriate pictures heavily influences current television news gathering practices.* The presence or absence of network correspondents in Iran directly affected the amount if not the nature of coverage. During most of the prolonged crisis, access to U.S. television was a major goal of the militants who held the hostages and of the Iranian government. As noted by Adams and Heyl (3), provision of such access bolstered the story's visibility on television news.

During other phases of the 1972-1981 decade, U.S. television correspondents were not present in Iran of their own accord. Most notable were the seven months, April through October 1979, directly preceding the hostage seizure, characterized by television's heavy reliance on wire service reports and an almost total lack of visual news from Iran. During this period the networks themselves had determined that no appropriate (conflictual or telegenic) pictures were accessible. Television is a greater force in foreign policy when there is direct and immediate visual coverage than it is during those periods of reliance on wire service or other nonvisual reporting.

4. *Television news provides episodic accounts, often focusing saturation coverage on a "big story" and resulting, over the long run, in an ahistorical account.* Television coverage of Iran in the early 1970s, along with most print media coverage, ignored a body of history from the 1950s and 1960s that might have helped place the current developments in context. Instead, three-quarters of all coverage in a decade came during the 444 days of the hostage crisis, and a great deal of that consisted of saturation coverage of selected episodes. Little attention was devoted to the causes and precedents of the hostage crisis.

5. *Television network news usually follows or reinforces U.S. government policy.* In the case of Iran, television shared this propensity with most of the print media, especially prior to the revolution, when the major policy concerns of OPEC oil prices and U.S. arms sales, along with travel by the President or the Shah, accounted for much of the low-level

coverage. During this initial period, the networks showed little deviation from the official U.S. government stance. Although in late 1977 the networks began to examine charges against the Shah and his government, such reporting was well within the purview of the broad Carter administration emphasis on human rights. The basic pattern of government-press cooperation continued through the hostage crisis itself, with approximately half of all coverage reporting various attempts at diplomatic communication between Iran and the United States. Even the public debate over "television diplomacy" produced little evidence to show that the medium or its representatives had an adverse effect on U.S. policy goals.

6. *Television news sometimes participates in foreign policy by serving as a direct channel of communication between government officials or policy elites in one nation and those in others.* At least as early as 1978, television served as a channel to convey the Ayatollah Khomeini's activities and ideas from Paris to Iran and the rest of the world. For a short period during November 1979, both Iran and the United States used television as a direct means of communication while representatives of both nations were groping to establish informal, more secretive channels. On other occasions during the 444-day hostage crisis, television was an important channel for messages from one government to another.

7. *Policy problems may be created or exacerbated by lack of media attention to basic processes of social and cultural change in developing nations.* In this respect, Iran was a particular instance of the more general problem of world communication imbalance between developed and developing nations. Both policy-makers and television journalists appear to have missed a major part of the story leading up to the hostage crisis. In the case of Iran, the lack of an appropriate long-term policy by the U.S. government and the absence of serious attention by network television news to underlying processes of cultural, religious, and economic change went hand in hand.

8. *Television's power to convey emotions and a sense of intimacy can be a factor in foreign policy.* Network television attention to hostage families in the United States, visits or interviews with the hostages in Iran, and the return of the hostages constituted major ongoing themes of coverage during the crisis. Such attention provides a gripping story line of human drama. The visual coverage of hostages and their families helped to sustain audience interest in the crisis and simultaneously created a climate or set of pressures within which the president and other U.S. officials conducted foreign policy.

9. *Television can change public perceptions about foreign affairs, particularly when it conveys new visual information and when such information is repeatedly presented over a long period of time.* In that role, network television helped to change the image of the Shah for the

U.S. public beginning in 1977 and 1978 through increased reporting on the Shah himself and the activities of Savak and the military. Televised scenes of the Shah's White House visit in November 1977, with the accompanying demonstrations and tear gas, provided a supportive context.

Although the above propositions concerning television and foreign policy may be far from exhaustive or conclusive, they underscore the increasing importance of the problem. Television news can participate in foreign policy as well as simply observe it. In the case of dramatic events, television can actually serve as a catalyst to foreign policy initiatives. These roles of television news have implications for, first, the manner in which scholars conceptualize the relationship of news media to foreign policy; second, policies and practices of television news organizations; and third, the conduct of foreign policy and international diplomacy. Analysis of certain critical events can help to illuminate each of these areas. To date, Iran is an exemplary case in point.

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