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War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War, by Matthew Baum and Tim J. Groeling, Princeton University press, 2010, 330pp., ISBN 9780691138596.

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The book engages with the question of how the American public formulates its opinions about US foreign military interventions abroad. It develops the argument that media, for motives related to the interests of the journalistic profession, systematically distort the information they provide to the public. This has an impact on the level of public support that the Administration can expect and, consequently, on the actual foreign policy-making.

The book is a tour de force of political science theory and empirical quantitative approaches to examining the relationship between public, policy-makers, and media. The beginning of the book contains a review of the literature that leads to the formulation of fifteen hypotheses (Chapter 2) that the study sets off to test. Chapter three investigates the 'rallying 'round the flag' phenomenon and concludes that it is the result not only of the political debate, but also of: '(1) one's own partisan affiliation, (2) the partisan affiliation of the elite debaters selected to appear in the media, (3) the costliness of the messages communicated to the public, and (4) journalists' decisions to cover or ignore particular speakers and messages' (p. 75). Chapter 4 investigates the content of *NBC*, *ABC*, *CBS* political Sunday morning shows in addition to survey data and experiments to 'determine how the speaker, message, and media outlet influence the persuasiveness of these several types of messages' in the eyes of the public (p. 92). Chapter 5 presents an experimental examination (student sample) of the effects of party cues on public opinion in relation to national security and war. In Chapters 6 and 7 the authors examine what they call the 'elasticity of reality'—the opportunity for political actors to shape the framing of a situation to the eyes of both the media and the public before reality "asserts itself" (p. 34)—in relation to selected events of the 2003 Iraq War. Through Chapter 8 they investigate the way in which a changing media environment—particularly the development of a polarized blogosphere—affects political discourse about foreign policy. Chapter 9 closes with the discussion of the implications of the study for presidential leadership.

As for all books, the arguments presented in this work have the potential to generate completely different readings and reactions. Not surprisingly, they will be shaped by where each reader stands in terms of both research and methodological interests, as well as the tradition of one's own respective discipline. In this case, it is important to point these differences out because the work engages with a broad topic that calls into question what we know about a range of processes that are normally dealt with by different fields of study: political decision-making, media reporting of conflict, the sociology of journalism, public opinion, media effects, and the problem of how to legitimately investigate and measure all of these phenomena. Without detracting from the depth and sophistication of the content, the assessments from the perspective of some fields of study might be less flattering than others.

If you happen to be an American political scientist researching about public opinion, coming from a background of political science and mass communication theory—if you have produced any good research you have most likely been referenced, considering the impressive scope of the literature review—who has been (heavily) trained in quantitative methodologies, you cannot but praise this book. It will give you insights into the way the

previously neglected aspects of news production and the sociology of journalism affect the selection of what constitutes news and the way events are framed. Especially the “quant geeks” will be delighted by the analytical rigour and the sheer amount of datasets (spanning numerous surveys, experiments, content analyses, poll data) that are triangulated to provide evidence for the explanatory model presented. As the authors put it:

‘rather than relying on any single test, we undertake a range of empirical investigations, employing a variety of data sources and modelling techniques to build as strong a suggestive case for our theory as possible, given the limitation of each individual data source. Our hope is that, viewed in conjunction, our various tests will add up considerably more than the sum of their parts. In other words, we believe the weight of combined evidence makes a more persuasive case for the theory than would be possible based on one, or even several, of our empirical investigations’ (p. 188).

If you are familiar with journalism studies, however, you will be less impressed about the originality of the claims about the importance of considering news values to explain why and how foreign policy stories get covered. You will find, instead, that the considerations about the journalistic sense of newsworthiness do not go far enough. They neither extend to the way news values are related to editorial and organizational norms, which do change across news outlets, nor to journalists’ newsgathering practices, particularly their routines and logistics. The main argument in the book is also based on the assumption of a gap between the media and the public in which the media can exert a one-way influence on the public. From the point of view of a journalism researcher, instead, there is a constant interaction between journalists and audiences that feeds into the journalists’ awareness of what the target public for each respective media outlet expects. Especially in relation to aspect of newsgathering practices, what is interpreted in the book as a confirmation of the ‘elasticity of reality’ in relation to the reporting of events related to the Iraq War (pp. 159-162)—the fact that politicians enjoy a time window in which media tends to report ‘official’ accounts before developing their own negative frames—could more effectively be explained by the initial difficulties of gathering news in a conflict zone.

A reader with a background in communication and media studies, especially from the Eastern side of the Atlantic, could object to the way in which both the public and the media are being respectively homogenized for analytical purposes. The qualifying statements accurately provided by the authors, in this perspective, do not help establishing the boundaries of validity of the explanatory model presented. On the contrary, they would be picked as significant weaknesses in the arguments presented. For example, when talking about the effects of mass media portrayal of foreign conflicts on public opinion, Baum and Groeling rightly point out (in a footnote) that ‘the media are not the only route through which such information can flow’ (n. 2, p. 187). People might get information from social contacts and, in the authors’ words, ‘Americans gain at least some independent information about the costs and benefits of a conflict through their daily lives’ (ibid.). This issue, however, from a communication studies perspective, is not at all an exception. Media messages, as the authors realize, are not just received by atomized individuals, as old-fashioned propaganda or ‘silver bullet’ models of communication would suggest. Despite this, their methodology is largely built on this assumption.

If in any way connected to cultural studies, the hypothetical reader would further regard the assumptions about the public’s media consumption and the interpretation of media texts as rather mechanistic, perhaps overly simplistic, and a bit outdated in the perspective of current studies about media effects. A quote from Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) well illustrates the problem: ‘[t]he presumption of mass exposure to relatively uniform political content, which has underpinned each of the three paradigms of political effect—agenda setting, the spiral of silence, and the cultivation hypothesis—can no longer be taken for granted’ (p. 232). While the authors, again, show their awareness of the issue by *mentioning* it, their methodological choices appear to take little consideration of the variety of sources members of the public

must simultaneously consume in relation to current foreign policy. These sources are not either “mainstream media” or ‘new media,’ as reflected in the focuses of the analysis, but most likely a combination of the two, in addition to the elaboration of contents of both outlets through exchanges with other social actors and individual interpretations based on a myriad of personal background factors.

The very notion that “reality can assert itself,” or indeed the idea that there are ‘objective indicators of reality’ (p. 40), would also appear highly questionable in contrast to the prevailing view in cultural studies in which reality cannot exist outside social actors’ constructions of it. In this perspective, what the authors interpret as ‘reality asserting itself’ over a frame created by political rhetoric would not be but an alternative interpretation of events suggested by non-Administration sources which, for processes the authors help to explain, becomes widely shared and prevalent in society.

This category of reader would question the lack of attention in the analysis for the qualitative nuances in both public opinion and coverage. Indeed, the idea of wiping out details and differences to the extent of aggregating ‘the results of over 200 different polling questions from 15 different polling organizations’ (p. 165), even using the most careful statistical processing—[t]he aggregated series uses LOESS (that is, locally weighted polynomial regression) smoothing with a bandwidth of .05 to account for variation across survey wording and organizations’ (n. 12, p. 165)—would make little analytical sense. The same could be said for conducting a longitudinal study (Chapter 3) of 42 crises between 1979 and 2003 (so much for taking the radically different media environment of the post Cold-War period into account).

Overall this is an ambitious book that delivers an insightful, broader, and more sophisticated explanation of the relationship between the public, media, and policy makers than those one could come across in (mostly) American political science literature. Having said that, it is not particularly accessible—beyond its most discursive sections at the beginning and end of the book, at the beginning and end of each chapter—to a wider audience than those who strictly conduct research in those areas.

While the work does certainly justice to the intellectual effort of the authors and amount of research they have clearly put into it, it does not perhaps do fully justice to the nature of the topic. The title, in fact, promises “War Stories” and the examination of the public views of conflict. This is a topic that, indeed, is soaked in powerful emotions from every single angle one can look at it—from the political rhetoric, to the reporting of war, to the very wording of the placards held by demonstrators in the streets: national pride; moral dilemmas; controversy about the very meaning of democracy; feelings of hatred, revenge, hope; strong verbal exchanges and violence; invocations of principles, timeless rights, and values. After having read over 300 pages, a non-academic reader would be left with the feeling that most of the contents are “drier” than they need to be. The very interesting, but also isolated, anecdotes about media coverage or politicians’ exchanges are literally buried in the statistics. One finishes reading the book wondering whether the descriptions of those many tables could have just been about any topic. While the book is a technically perfect job and provides more than enough stimulation for the brain, even an academic reader would have perhaps liked to see more of those passions that motivate scholars to study politics in the first place.

