The Media and Government Officials: Environmental Policy Communication

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Abstract -- The media play an important role in connecting citizens to government officials. Much of what citizens learn about environmental policy making and implementation is learned through media coverage of government actions. We have evidence to suggest that the media can influence citizens' perceptions of government, but we know less about the media's dependence on government. This paper is meant to extend our knowledge about media/government relations by studying media coverage of one environmental policy, Superfund, over a ten year period.

I. Introduction

When it comes to information about environmental crises or environmental risk, we know that citizens' knowledge is derived mainly from the media[1,2]. Whether it be about air pollution or oil spills or potential environmental hazards, citizens get information from the media. The media in turn get much of their information on environmental concerns from government (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency or state departments of environmental protection). The media also get information from members of industry and other parts of the private sector, but when it comes to environmental policy in particular, the major source of information is government. This paper is an attempt to extend our understanding about government/media/citizen relations in the area of environmental issues, with particular attention being given to the connections between public officials and the media.

Broadly speaking, government officials and citizens of democratic societies communicate in a variety of ways. They interact directly with each other by phone, mail, or even face-to-face. Voting is considered a form of communication: candidates' vote shares roughly correspond to the percentage of their constituents that share their same values, beliefs, or opinions. Public opinion polls communicate the concerns of citizens to government officials. Interest groups and lobbying groups communicate the wishes of their supporters to politicians. Even protests or other forms of political action can serve as a form of communication between citizens and government officials. Finally, the media, whether print, radio, or TV, can transmit information back and forth between government officials and citizens.

Political communication through the media is the most frequent form of communication from government officials to citizens [3]. This is partly due to the nature of our political system; representative democracy allows, and to a large extent requires, most citizens to leave political decisions to others (legislators, bureaucrats). This in turn allows citizens to focus their attention on their personal lives. When citizens seek political information, they can turn to the media for help. Citizens learn not only about national issues through the media, but also learn about state and local issues. When government "speaks," it usually speaks to the media as a proxy for the public. Yet we now know that the media go beyond simply transmitting information from government to the larger public; the media filter that information, focusing on some bits, ignoring others [3,4]. This is true of news coverage in all policy domains, including the coverage of environmental issues.

II. Disparate Literatures

Depending on which literature one turns to when asking about political communication on environmental issues, there are different sets of questions being asked. In particular, there are at least three literatures relevant to this area of inquiry. For example, among those interested in science and public policy, much of the research has focused on risk communication. Researchers have tried to answer how and in what ways experts communicate their understandings of environmental risk to the larger public [5]. Work has focused on the relationship between experts and the media and how citizens understand risk [5]. I should clarify that "experts" cannot simply be equated with public officials in this area of research; certainly some experts can be within government, but expertise is found in industry, interest groups, and academic settings as well. Particular attention has been given to the gap between how experts and laypeople understand risk [5]. Some policy analysts have suggested ways to bridge that gulf based on what they have learned in their empirical work [6,7]. At the present time the differences remain.

The relevant political science literature on political communication can be roughly separated into two branches of work. On the one hand, researchers have attempted to learn more about the ways in which the media influence public opinion. Borrowing from the research methodologies of social psychology, researchers have tried to measure the agenda-setting power of the media, the power to convince citizens to focus on some issues rather than others [8]. Researchers have also looked at how media coverage "prime" citizens to evaluate politicians or political events in particular ways [8]. This research has not tended to focus on environmental policy or environmental issues, but instead has focused on topics such as political campaigns and
elections. Political communication research in this branch has given us a clearer sense of the relationship between the media and citizens.

On the other hand, a few political science researchers have focused on general patterns of government/media relations, answering questions either about government influence on media content or the effects that media coverage has on public policy formation. This work, usually in the form of case studies, has given us reason to believe that overt manipulation of media content by government is highly unlikely in democratic countries [9,10,11,12]. This said, democratic governments seem to have more influence on the coverage of foreign policy than domestic policy [13,14]. Evidence suggests that democratic governments sometimes do have significant control of information, especially in times of war or other military conflicts [15]. The combination of a free press and multiple sources of information undermines government power more strongly on domestic issues [12]. At the same time, we know that the media make extensive use of official sources when reporting on all government activities, and this allows government to have some influence (albeit diffused) on media content [16,17]. We also now have reason to believe that media coverage of public policy issues can help shape further public policy, though the exact causal links are not entirely clear [10]. For example, the media coverage of the environmental crisis at Love Canal in the late 1970s affected the public policy on hazardous waste cleanup. We know this partly because EPA officials claim to have been affected by this media coverage [10]. Measuring the exact amount of influence remains elusive.

A third literature has focused on the more general communication between the media and the public on environmental issues. Research has focused on questions about media accuracy, biases, and patterns of reporting. Much of this work is focused on journalistic practices: the values, norms, and perspectives that arise from reporting the "news." General research has also been done on media content [1,2]. Do journalists report scientific information accurately? Do media biases toward sensationalism distort the coverage of environmental issues? Do reporters defer to expert opinion or do they challenge it? The more information we have about these questions, the better we can understand the difference between what public officials (or experts in general) say and what citizens read, hear, or see on TV.

Initial evidence on these questions about bias and accuracy suggest that journalists rely on expert sources and yet will consistently distort the information they gather from these sources. Journalists distort official information not because they desire to influence public perceptions, but because the norms and practices of news reporting help reinforce certain biases. For example, the media report on significant scientific findings, but will present information in ways that heighten the dramatic tone of a story [1]. The media will simplify what they have been told, making information both more accessible to a lay audience and increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation [1]. Finally, there is reason to believe that journalists consider official sources reliable, and therefore do not question the legitimacy of these sources [1].

III. Theory/Hypotheses

This paper is meant to connect the disparate literatures mentioned above in order to further our understanding of government/media relations on environmental issues. In particular, I want to use my empirical analyses to help answer the following interrelated questions:

When it comes to reporting on environmental policy making or policy implementation, are the media heavily dependent on official sources? Do non-governmental experts get equal footing with government experts? Do other viewpoints, such as those of local citizens, get equal coverage by the media? Are citizens' perspectives framed in terms of the policy process or simply as part of ongoing human interest stories?

Given the difference between the understanding of risks by experts and laypeople, does the media's dependency on official sources increase or decrease that gulf? Do the media's norms and practices of news coverage help to distort what gets transmitted from government officials to citizens? from citizens to government officials?

Broadly speaking, these two sets of questions are an attempt to learn more about media sources and to learn how the media present the information they are given. The desire is to both learn more about the coverage of environmental policy in particular, and also add to our general knowledge about media/government relations. Some of the research mentioned above has already started to answer these questions, but more needs to be learned to strengthen some of our initial conclusions.

Based on previous research, two hypotheses can be formulated:

1) The media will rely heavily on official sources when reporting on environmental policy (whether it be policy making or policy implementation). Under certain circumstances, non-official experts and local citizens will be media sources, but this will on average be much less frequent.

This hypothesis builds on previous work exploring media dependency on official sources [3,16,18]. Furthermore, it relies on the importance of expertise in the environmental policy arena [19]. Technical expertise is a crucial part of environmental policy making and implementation, and
therefore (government) experts are a logical source for information.

2) The media's reliance on official sources hurts risk communication by tapping into citizens' lack of trust in government's intentions. The media will help flame distrust by consistently reporting only the opinions of citizens who disagree with official actions or reports.

Let me be clear that I can only begin to prove the second hypothesis based on the evidence for this paper. The basis for my hypothesis grows out of the recent work of Bruce Williams and Albert Matheny, who argue that policy failure on environmental issues stems at least partly from a gap between citizens' perceptions of the government's interests and the government's perception of citizens' interests [7]. Since the media connect citizens and government much of the time, they play a significant role in influencing the quality of communication between the two. The second hypothesis also stems from the view that the media favor coverage that can be depicted as a struggle (e.g., the federal government versus local citizens) or dichotomy of views (e.g., safe versus hazardous materials) [5]. This journalistic norm has the ability to reinforce differences of opinion and is not conducive to the need for bridging the gulf. One implication of this hypothesis is that a possible improvement in risk communication can be fostered through the promotion of non-governmental media sources.

IV. Methods

This paper attempts to expand what we know about the relationship between government communication and media content by focusing on the media coverage of one issue, toxic waste cleanup, over a period of a decade (1985-1995) in one geographical area (the greater metropolitan area of Los Angeles, California). I restrict the study further by focusing on coverage of one federal program, Superfund, by one newspaper, the Los Angeles Times. I restrict the parameters in this way for both theoretical and practical considerations.

On the practical side, because this research is exploratory, some restrictions are necessary to keep the project manageable. In the ten-year period under study, there are over 1000 articles alone concerning toxic waste cleanup. I focus on newspaper coverage instead of television coverage due to both the easy availability of newspaper articles and because local television coverage of environmental issues is too sporadic for in-depth analyses. Expanding my parameters across a greater number of media outlets or over a greater geographical area will be helpful for further study, but at the present time would overwhelm my capabilities.

On the theoretical side, restricting the coverage to one environmental concern over a decade will allow me to better analyze the intensity of coverage over time. I will be able to determine if there have been cyclical effects or patterns of reporting that respond directly to government actions. Longitudinal data will give me the evidence I need to prove whether the media relies heavily on official sources. I will also be able to observe whether citizens' reactions to government actions are reported and what those reactions entail. Finally, I can begin to answer the question of whether risk communication might be improved by decreasing media's dependency on official sources.

Note: The Results, Discussion, and an expanded Methods section are currently being prepared and will be presented at the conference.

References


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