Relationship Analysis among Media, Public Opinion and the Presidential Statements during George Bush's War on Drugs

Hyo-Seong Lee

School of Journalism and Information
CheongJu University, CheongJu, ChoongCheongBook-Do, Korea

Seung-Kwan Ryu*

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism
DongMyung University, Busan, Korea

ABSTRACT

This study tested a path model of agenda building examining the relationship among the media, the public and the presidential statements on the issue of drug abuse during the Bush administration's War on Drugs. The results showed that a dynamic and interactive relationship among aforementioned actors. First, the real-world conditions strongly increased both media coverage and presidential statements. Second, the news media and president influenced each other. Third, public concern, however, did not function as a significant factor in agenda-building process in this study. The result of this study indicates that Bush was not utterly a reactive or proactive president in terms of his relationship with the media. That is, news media and the president interacted regarding the drug issues; the relationship between President Bush and the media for drug issues was reciprocal.

Keywords*: Media, Public Opinion, George Bush, War on Drugs, Agenda Setting, Agenda Building*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

According to the 1985 survey of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 70.4 million Americans have used marijuana, cocaine, or other illicit drugs at least once during their lifetimes. With one in eight Americans estimated to be users of illicit drugs in 1985, it was apparent that drug use was a significant phenomenon in society at that time. In particular, cocaine related deaths became frequent in the early 1980s, and the number of addicts accelerated when crack became available in 1985 [1].

The drug problem caught the attention of public officials during the Reagan and Bush administration in the 1980s. In 1982, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) began to design the 'Just Say No' campaign, the objective of which was to present a drug-free life as a healthy norm for teenagers [2]. To counter increasing cocaine use among older teenagers and young adults, NIDA developed a multi-media program, 'Cocaine, The Big Lie,' which was implemented in two phases, the first in April 1986 and the second in spring 1988. Needham Harper Worldwide (NHW) produced 13 public service announcements for the first phase, which aired 1,500 to 2,500 times per month within 75 local television markets, according to the Broadcast Advertisers Report, Inc. [3].

In particular, President Reagan announced that drug abuse was one of the gravest problems facing internally the United States. Secretary of State, George Shultz lamented that indeed, in almost every American city, people face the drug problem in the streets and learn about it daily in the media. With the recognition of the drug epidemic, the public, the members of the Congress, and the Administration all took up arms to renew America's war on drugs, culminating in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act being passed by the Congress and signed by the President Reagan in late October 1986.

After George Bush was elected president in November 1988, he addressed the American public with a bag of crack cocaine in his hand. His speech started: "This is crack cocaine, … it was seized a few days ago in a park across the street from the White House… It could be easily have been heroine or PCP" [4].

President Bush officially began his "war on drugs" on September 5, 1989, when he gave the first prime time address of his presidency, in which he outlined the federal government's strategy for eradicating drug use. The plan called for $7.9 billion from Congress, a $2.2 billion increase from the previous budget" [5].

During the negotiation period with Congress, Bush held a "drug summit," created a White House Drug Advisory Council, and took his case to the public in personal meetings and to the

media" [6]. The Bush administration sought to wage its war by focusing primarily on demand in the United States -- attacking and arresting the drug user -- rather than focusing on prevention, education and treatment, or interdiction. At the same time, Congress had passed a law to establish an office to coordinate and intensify the federal drug efforts.

Along with the reality of drug problems and concerns from public officials of Reagan and Bush administration, the mass media dealt heavily with drug issues such as drug-caused tragedies, new illegal drugs, the social ramifications of a drug-dependent population, the pleas for reform from celebrities, and the information campaigns of public health agencies [7]. In the early 1980s, the drug issue accounted for about 1% of the total national coverage in the National Media Index of the Conference on Issues and Media, roughly equivalent to 10,000 inches of print coverage in major newspapers around the country or about 15 minutes of evening network news in a two-week period. The increase in the drug coverage among the national media during Reagan administration was accentuated in 1986 by the tragic death of Maryland basketball star Len Bias due to cocaine intoxication which occurred in the early summer of 1986 [8].

Drugs might represent a social problem that was dealt seriously by mass media, in terms of the amount of attention paid to the issue and the media awareness of what was happening in the 1980s. Some speculate the drug issue was driven by the media which lacked any objective evidence of an epidemic. Others speculate the drug issue relates to the concern and emphasis the president has given to the issue, as exemplified by Presidents Reagan's and Bush's wars on drugs [9].

Several past studies have indicated that the press has an agenda-setting influence for the issue of drug use. As discussed, Bush also demonstrated very strong will to eradicate drugs in America. In this vein, this study uses a path analysis to investigate the three-way relationship among the president, the media, and the public on the issue of drug abuse during the Bush administration. In doing so, this study investigates the relationships among the press, public opinion and the President Bush's War on Drugs through an agenda-building framework.

1.2 Background of the study: Bush's War on Drugs
Bush's war on drugs was based on former president Reagan's "war on drugs." Despite the efforts of the Reagan administration, drug usage did not stop. The biggest improvement was the reduction in casual drug use. But despite this improvement, 20 to 40 million people still used drugs, a problem that Bush would most certainly have to deal with.

Although Bush called for a complete stoppage of drug use, the rest of his administration set more reasonable goals: they were working towards a 10% decrease in casual drug use over the next two years, and a 50% reduction over the next ten years [10].

Bush and the head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, William J. Bennett tried to find a viable plan that would meet their primary goal: the end to casual drug use [11]. Bush and Bennett felt that the best way to get casual use to decline was to put the primary focus on demand in America, rather than putting the major focus on the supply from other nations [12].

Bush benefited from good economic conditions in the early stage of his presidency, compared to his predecessors [13]. However, the Persian Gulf War and the economy forced the drug issue off the agenda in the latter half of his presidency. For instance, in early 1990 federal surveys indicated that casual consumption of drugs was down, as were emergency room admissions and death rates from drug overdose [14]. In addition, drugs as a media agenda seemed to lose their appeal, as indicated by Fox Television's decision to drop a special presentation, 'City Under Siege', in April 1990. Public consideration of drugs as the most important problem fell to 25 percent in July [15]. The attention of the press, the president, and the public moved to issues of economics and the Gulf War [16].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The press may not be very successful in telling us what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling what to think about [17]. This ability of the mass media to structure audience cognition and to effect change among existing cognition has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication [18]. McCombs and Shaw explained more specifically the concept of agenda-setting as follows [19]. In choosing and displaying news, news people play an important part in shaping reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. That is the media may well determine the important issues or the importance of issues in reality.

Shortly after the McCombs and Shaw study on agenda setting, Funkhouser addressed this issue [20]. Funkhouser focused his study on the 1960s, an active decade in which many issues were prominent. To get his measure of public opinion about what issues were important, Funkhouser used Gallup polls in which people were asked about "the important problem facing America." He found a strong correspondence between public ranking of an issue as important and the amount of coverage given the issue by the media.

This result is very much in line with the agenda-setting hypothesis, although it leaves open the important question of causal direction (perhaps the interests of the public are setting the mass media agenda). Manheim has done some work on the conceptualizing of agendas that has potential to aid our understanding of the process of agenda setting [21]. Manheim proposed that agenda setting involves the interaction of three agendas -- the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. He pointed out the dynamic nature in the three dimensions of the agenda-setting process.

Meanwhile, the media agenda was considered the dependent variable in the process of agenda building [22]. It was Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang who explicitly researched agenda building, however [23]. They studied the relationship between the press and public opinion during the Watergate crisis, and found that the original notion of agenda setting needed to be expanded.

The Langs' concept of agenda building is more complicated than the original agenda-setting hypothesis. It suggests that the process of putting an issue on the public's agenda takes time and goes through several stages. It suggests that the way the mass media frame an issue and the code words they use to describe it can have an impact and that the role of well-known individuals commenting on the issue can be an important one.

According to Graber, agenda setting often leads to agenda building [24]. That is, the media set the public agenda when news stories rivet attention on a problem and make it seem important to many people. News media build the public agenda when they create a political climate that determines the likely thrust of public opinions. In many instances the media manipulate the political scene by creating a climate for political action. This makes them major contributors to agenda building, the process whereby news stories influence how people perceive and evaluate issues and policies.

When Lang and Lang proposed that traditional agenda-setting research be expanded to include the influence of political actors, they assumed a reciprocal agenda-building relationship would exist [25]. In other words, the press, the public, and public officials would influence one another, and vice versa. By the 1980s, a new phase of agenda-setting research transformed the news agenda from an independent variable to a dependent variable. Rephrasing the original research question, "Who sets the public agenda?" this new research asks, "Who set the news agenda?"

As discussed above, although agenda-setting theory began by studying the relationship between the mass media agenda and public agenda, its attention was expanded to agenda-setting effects, not only originating from mass media agenda on the public agenda, but also the effects of public agenda on the mass media agenda that is also conceived of as agenda-building.

The search for the contingent conditions limiting agenda setting established a theoretical goal that has prompted researchers to venture in many directions. The most fruitful examinations have examined not isolated properties of people, issues, or news contents, but rather the interaction of issues and individual situations [26].

One contingent condition is the nature of the issue. Issues can be arrayed along a continuum ranging from obtrusive to unobtrusive. Zucker distinguished the different agenda-setting effects between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues [27]. For example, he found that for the unobtrusive issues, heavy news media coverage preceded the rise of importance of an issue in the public opinion polls. For the obtrusive issues, however, heavy news media coverage did not precede the rise of importance to the public. Rather, the two seemed to increase together. He found that the more the public needs to rely on the media, rather than rely on personal experience. That is, the less obtrusive it is, the more the public agenda will resemble the press agenda. According to Zucker's definition, obtrusive issues are issues that the public experiences directly, like unemployment, and crime. Unobtrusive issues are the issues that the public may not experience as directly, like pollution, drug abuse, and the energy crisis.

On the other hand, scholars found that the more the media focused drugs issues from 1972 to 1986, the more the public viewed drugs as a serious problem [26]. They found that newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* had a particularly stronger agenda-setting effects than the three networks and the three news magazines combined.

Gonzenbach examined the triangular relationship of the press, the president and public opinion about the drug issue from 1985 to 1990 [29]. The result showed that public opinion immediately follows the press, though public opinion also drives the press agenda. Second, this study suggested that the president was following the public agenda, though the president also has strong immediate influence on public opinion. Also, the study suggested that the president follows the media, in addition to following public opinion.

Another contingent factor that could intervene in the three-way relationship is the effect of real-world conditions. Studies that have examined the influence of real-world conditions have produced conflicting results. For example, both Behr and Iyengar [30] and MacKuen [31] found that news coverage was significantly determined by actual conditions, whereas Funkhouser [32] earlier found stronger links between the media and public agenda than between real-world conditions and either the media agenda or the public agenda. However, Funkhouser [33] also suggested that although media coverage did not reflect to reality in general, media coverage did correspond real-world conditions for drugs.

More recently, several studies have examined media, public and policy agenda setting [34] and Wanta, Stephenson, and McCombs [35] investigated how U.S. presidents influence agendas of the media and citizens. However, the studies provided mixed results about the relationship. President Nixon apparently influenced subsequent press coverage through his State of the Union address, while President Carter appears to have been influenced by previous press coverage.

Some researchers have examined the relationship among the public, the media, and the president on the issue of drug abuse using the agenda building framework during the Nixon administration. They employed a path analysis model to find three-way relationship among the public, the media, and the president on the issue of drug abuse during the Nixon administration [36]. They found that a linear relationship with issues moving first, from real world to the media and the public, then from the media to the public, and finally from the public to the president.

On the other hand, Sharp suggested a "network" model of agenda setting, in which an issue arises not from a single, easily identifiable location inside or outside of government, but from interactions among actors from a variety of locations [37]. Actors in these different locations may be simultaneously responding to a dramatic focusing event, or they may have independently recognized the political opportunities for pursuing the drug issue at a particular time.

Based upon the review of the previous studies, this study addresses the following research questions:

1) What factor had the greatest influence on public concern about the drug abuse problem during the Bush Administration?: presidential emphasis, real-world cues, or media coverage?

2) Did Bush react more to media coverage or did the media react more to presidential statements?

3) To what degree did media coverage of the drug issue reflect real-world conditions of the extent of the drug problem in the United State?

4) To what degree did presidential emphasis about the drug issue reflect real-world conditions?

3. METHOD

First, to evaluate the Presidential approval rating, the Gallup Polls of presidential job performance conducted during the Bush Administration were employed. Results of four polls (February, May, August and November) were used in this study. For instance, approval rating when the poll was conducted during Feb 28 to March 2 was 63 percent, thereby this percent was coded for the corresponding period both twenty-eight days before and after the poll.

Second, this study examined the amount of space devoted to the drug issue as the presidential agenda. To measure the presidential agenda, the number of lines devoted to the drug issue in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* for the twenty-eight days before each of the twelve polls was investigated and the twenty-eight days after each poll was released were counted. Intercoder reliability was checked for six weeks of speeches (6.5% of the total). Intercoder reliability was 96.1 percent.

Third, for the measurement of the media agenda, the number of drug stories that appeared on the front pages of the four leading newspapers in the United States -- New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times -- concurrent with the presidential agenda were counted. Intercoder reliability was checked for 20 weeks (5% of the total) of coverage. Intercoder reliability was 77%. In this study, drug refers to drug use, drug abuse and drug addiction to illegal drugs as well as abuse of legal drugs including alcohol, cigarettes and over the counter medications. For example, a story about the FDA approving a new cancer drug was not counted as a drug story, but one about people using a legal drugs to get high was coded. More specifically, a story about a murder which simply mentions that the person used drugs was not coded, but one in which the focus is the person who was murdered during a drug deal was coded as a drug story.

Fourth, real-world conditions about the drug abuse were measured by the Drug Enforcement Administration's statistics on total drug arrests, which came from the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* 1997. Statistics of drug arrests were gathered on a yearly basis, whereas the Gallup Polls were conducted more frequently. For this reason, the yearly figures were repeated for each poll conducted during that year. For example, the total number of arrests were 25,374 (1989), 23,162 (1990), 23,287 (1991), and 24,737 (1992).

Six variables were included in the study: real-world cues, pre-poll media coverage, pre-poll presidential statements, public concern, post-poll media coverage, and post-poll presidential statements. The relationship among variables were examined through a path analysis. Path analysis is an analytic tool for testing causal models. Through its application it is possible to test whether a specific causal model is consistent with the pattern of the inter-correlations among the variables [38]. Several variables of this study are time ordered. That is, some variables are determined by the time periods in which they were measured.

As Lang and Lang argue, if agenda building is a cycle, then the three actors (press, president, and public) should interact with one another and with real-world cues as well. Figure 1 shows the path analysis model examined here. Hence, this agenda-building path model predicts that:

1) Real-world cues will lead to media coverage, public concern, and presidential emphasis. Real-world conditions are the first stage of the agenda-setting process. Thus, in this study, as drug arrests rise, media coverage of the drug issue will increase, public concern (approval rating evaluating the president's job performance including the drug policy) will increase, and presidential statements dealing with drugs will also increase. These are the first three paths examined in this path model.

2) Media coverage will lead to public concern. That is, as drug coverage increases, public concern with drugs will increase.

3) Media coverage will lead to presidential emphasis. The president may use the news media as a "reality check, "measuring the importance of certain issues such as drugs.

4) Presidential emphasis will lead to public concern. Besides the news media, the president may affect a source of the public's agenda. That is, as the president increases his emphasis of drugs in his public statements, public concern will increase.

5) Presidential emphasis will lead to media coverage. That is, as presidential statements on drugs increase, media coverage does. Agenda building might be a cycle of mutual reinforcement among the press, public, and public officials. In other words, while the news media may influence presidential statements of certain issues, the president, in turn, may influence the amount of coverage that issues receive through the amount of attention he devotes to the issues in his public statements.

6) Public concern will lead to presidential emphasis. As public concern with drug issues increases, presidential statements will rise.

7) Public concern will lead to media coverage. That is, as public concern with drugs increases, drug coverage will increase.
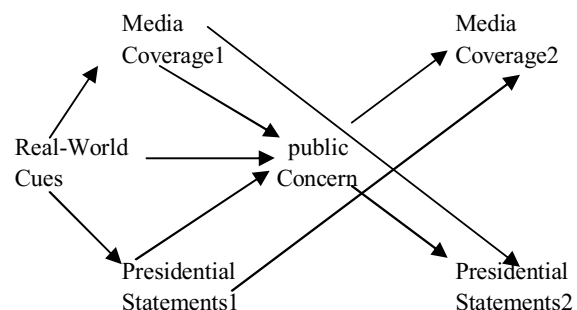

Fig. 1. Path Analysis Model

All of the above relationships are time ordered. Real-world cues precede media coverage, presidential emphasis, and public

concern. Pre-poll media coverage and pre-poll presidential statements precede public concern, post-poll media coverage and post-poll presidential statements. Public concern precedes post-poll media coverage and post-poll presidential statements.

4. RESULTS

The path analysis coefficients, which are equivalent to betas in regression analyses, are detailed in Figure 2. Nine paths showed significant coefficients.
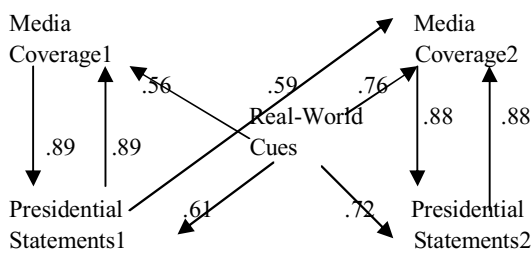

Fig. 2. Path Analysis Results

First, the path from media coverage1 to presidential statements1 was significant (beta=.89). Second, from presidential statements1 to media coverage1 was significant (beta=.89). These were the largest paths. Third, the path from real-world conditions to media coverage1 was significant (beta=.56). Fourth, the path from real-world conditions to presidential statements1 was significant (beta=.61). Fifth, the path from real-world conditions to media coverage2 was significant (beta=.76). Sixth, the path from real-world conditions to presidential statements2 was significant (beta=.72). Seventh, the path from media coverage2 to presidential statements2 was significant (beta=.88). Eighth, the path from presidential statements2 to media coverage2 was significant (beta=.88). Finally, the path from presidential statements1 to media coverage2 was also significant (beta=.59).

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study attempted to test a causal model of agenda-building by examining the relationships among the president, press, public, and real world through the drug issue during the Bush administration. The path model presented here shows a dynamic and interactive relationship among these actors:

First, the real-world conditions strongly increased both media coverage and presidential statements. Second, the news media and president influenced each other. In addition, the presidential statements before the public poll increased the media coverage after the poll. Third, public concern, however, did not function as a significant factor in agenda-building process in this study.

These findings suggest several interpretations regarding the relationship of the public concern with other factors. One explanation would be the job approval rating employed to

gauge the public concern did not work as a good indicator of concern about the drug issue. In this respect, this study did not find that the presidential approval rating was one variable that played a role in the three-way relationship among the president, press, and the public. Wanta notes that Nixon had his greatest influence during the early years when his popularity was high [40]. When his approval ratings bottomed out at 24 percent, he had little influence on the public and vice versa. Similarly, one study found that popular presidents had more influence on public opinion than unpopular presidents, although the study did not directly test the influence of presidential approval ratings on public opinion [41]. Also, the public concern about drug issues might not be strongly inter-correlated with the media and president as media coverage and presidential statements about drug use both declined in the latter half of the Bush administration, compared to the first half term due to the faltering domestic economic condition and the Persian Gulf War.

There might be another possibility that real-world conditions would not mirror the exact picture of the reality. In other words, drug-related arrests might fall behind in catching the truly clandestine drug users due to the lack of funds at the federal as well as local level.

At the very least, however, this study supports previous findings which suggest that the relationship between the president and the press is extremely complex [42] and an endless stream of variables could be at work at any one time [43].

In sum, viewing from the results of this study, it would be safe to say that Bush was not utterly a reactive or proactive president in terms of his relationship with the media. That means news media and the president interacted regarding the drug issues; the relationship between President Bush and the media for drug issues was reciprocal.

Further research might investigate other issues and presidents to determine if these results can be replicated. For instance, President Clinton and his campaign for NII (National Information Infrastructure) might show a stronger proactive president than was found here. In addition, situational factors such as the presidential leadership style that may enhance or inhibit influence in the relationships also need to be examined. Finally, the internal influences of the media such as the power structure or ownership of the media might be an important factor for this type of study. Future study might consider these factors important in examining the relationships.

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Lee, Hyo-Seong

He received the B.S. in Korean literature from KyungHee University, Korea in 1991, also received M.S. in journalism from University of Wisconsin, Whitewater and Ph.D. in Journalism from Southern IL University, U.S.A. in 1996 and 2002 respectively. Since then, he has been with the DongSeo University, Busan, and CheongJu University, CheongJu. His main research interests include journalism and political communications.

Ryu, Seung-Kwan

He received B.A. and M.A. from Hankuk Univ. of Foreign Studies, Korea in 1991 and 1995 respectively. He also received M.A. in journalism from University of Colorado, Boulder and Ph.D. in Journalism from Southern IL University, U.S.A. in 1997 and 2002 respectively. Since then, he has been with the Tongmyong University, Busan. His main research interests include broadcasting and new media industry and policy.