Stampedes and Stalemates – News Attention and Policy Momentum

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Abstract

Seemingly contradictory claims about the impact of news coverage on policy formation at least sometimes reflect actual differences in the media's role. Depending on political contingencies, media coverage sometimes propels policy action and at others inhibits it. This paper starts to explore conditions when both apply, when media coverage is encouraging a political stampede, and when it seems to be contributing to a policy stalemate.

Three types of interactions between news coverage and political forces seem associated with policy stalemates. In the first a large amount of publicity, often both prolonged and intense, makes the conflicts surrounding the issue more complicated, magnifying mutual veto forces, resulting in policy stasis. In the second the absence of news attention and so of public pressure, allows institutional immobilism to continue, even if there are substantial costs associated with it. In the third type, after previous adverse publicity, reflecting conflicts and difficulties, the subsequent political response is to avoid the area, as a political minefield. Three Australian cases illustrate each – a second airport for Sydney, Radio Australia's transmission, and pay television policy.

At other times all the voices in the media are arrayed in the same direction, with major parties outbidding each other to appear the more forceful and determined, reflecting a perceived consensus in public opinion. Again three Australian cases are used – law and order issues in New South Wales politics, the issue of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction in the build-up to the 2003 invasion, and the politics of counter-terrorism since 2001. This type of stampede seems especially associated with issues involving minority groups, social deviance or enemies of some kind.

Introduction

The impact of news on politics is many sided. The centrality of the news media changes many political relationships and processes. This is more basic than for example the influence of the content of news on the content of audience attitudes. Take for example the media and elections. While there is often attention to whether news coverage, especially biased news coverage, changes voting intentions – and this may of course be important to the outcome of a particular election – the more basic impact is on how election campaigning itself is carried out.

Similarly the demands of the news media impact upon political decision-making processes including policy making. It is amazing to think that as late as 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis, for some days the White House decision-making group met secretly to think about alternatives before anything became public. If decision-making had been made in the glare of the media spotlight, with media demands impacting on decision deadlines, then would the Kennedy presidency have generated the quarantine option they did?

While the centrality of the media has changed the political environment and policy-making processes, news coverage also impacts on particular policy making processes, and again at many levels. Again one type of impact is on public opinion, and on the appearance of public opinion. But equally publicity energises concerned groups, signals to them what their opponents are doing, gives them a sense of political possibilities and limits. Intense publicity brings pressure for a response by government.

While the news media can highlight a social problem and so help to bring policy movement, it is also a common strategy for those who want to sabotage a policy plan to leaks its details, in the hope that premature publicity will stifle a move, by mobilising opposition against it.

Moreover while there may be a widespread sentiment and pressure for change, neither positive news coverage nor public opinion supporting one side is a guarantee of success. Discontent with the status quo is often more widespread than embracing of a single direction of change, or fear about what change might bring. A skilful government wanting to resist change can adopt a range of strategies.

In 1999, for example, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, a monarchist, had to bow to the widespread pro-republican sentiment for Australia to renounce its formal ties to the British crown and have an Australian head of state. In the end a referendum defeated the proposition. This was due less to monarchist sentiment – polls suggested that only about one quarter of Australians supported retaining the constitutional link to the crown – than to the Prime Minister's skill in framing the alternatives. It was a classic case of divide and conquer. The pro-republican majority was split between those who wanted minimal constitutional change, with the government appointing the president, as is now done with the Governor-General, and those who wanted the president to be popularly elected. The latter was the majority, but the referendum didn't offer it as an alternative, thus allowing the monarchists to cast the model proposed as the 'politicians' republic', and many of those wanting

direct election choosing to vote No rather than vote for their less preferred republican model.

This paper begins to explore this variety of impacts by looking at two possible extremes, when the media's role seems to be to accelerate political action and when it seems to stifle it.

Stalemates

Three types of interactions between news coverage and political forces seem associated with policy stalemates. In the first a large amount of publicity, often both prolonged and intense, makes the conflicts surrounding the issue more complicated, magnifying mutual veto forces, resulting in policy stasis. In the second the absence of news attention and so public pressure allows institutional immobilism to continue, even if there are substantial costs associated with it. In the third type, after previous adverse publicity, reflecting conflicts and difficulties, the subsequent political response is to avoid the area, as a political minefield. Three Australian cases illustrate each – a second airport for Sydney, Radio Australia's transmission, and pay television policy.

1. Strong publicity intensifies mutual veto forces

Publicity about an intended move mobilises all those with an interest in it. The more complex and wide-ranging the change the more groups are likely to get involved. A good case study of how ambitious proposals for reform can generate widespread and diverse antagonist interests was the Clinton Administration's plans for health reform. Initially there seemed good prospects for change as many groups were critical of America's health care system, its comparative expense but its comparatively poor performance and inequities and insecurities. However as the controversies continued, key players found more reason to oppose it on one or other of its grounds, and despite a large amount of political capital being invested, the status quo largely remained.

This sort of stalemate is particularly likely when there is not an established, strong, coherent coalition able to realise its will. Support on some issues falls very much along established party lines, but others involve transverse cleavages, where support and opposition cuts across the political parties. These sorts of conflicts are more often unpredictable and may generate extra passions.

The case considered here involves a large infrastructure projects. These are always disruptive to local neighbourhoods, and the NIMBY (Not in my backyard) opposition is often potent and sometimes may be decisive. Moreover because they involve future projections and the uncertainties inherent in future use and also very large expenses there is great scope for opposition on several grounds.

The particular case chosen here involves construction of a new airport, perhaps the most disruptive of all infrastructure projects to the local neighbourhood.

The first official proposal saying that Sydney would need a second major airport was made in 1964. From the early 1970s, this idea attracted serious attention at high levels of government. The Whitlam Government recommended a site at Galston

north-west of Sydney, but suffered a great electoral backlash in the area, losing a by-election, and later ruling out the site. Local protest against a chosen site was a common pattern. After this and other backlashes, governments realised how difficult the issue was, and the state and federal governments often engaged in buck-passing, especially when they were controlled by different political parties. The areas affected by a proposed second airport sometimes lobbied for an expansion of the existing Kingsford Smith airport, close to the heart of Sydney in its southern suburbs. There were also disputes over projections of future air traffic, and also about the cost and speed of constructing a new airport. The other main option was to expand Kingsford Smith airport, especially by building a third runway. After a whole series of studies, and delays, and decisions, first deferred and later retracted, and as congestion coming into Sydney Airport became progressively worse, the Hawke Government in 1989 decided to go with the third runway option. This led to the resignation of a junior minister, Gary Punch, whose electorate was affected by airport noise. It also said a second airport would be built at Badgery's Creek, at this stage both major parties were publicly committed to this. As the third runway opened, there were several protests from Sydney suburban residents against the increased noise. The Howard Government after its election in 1996 eventually further expanded Kingsford Smith, with part of its aim being privatisation, and putting on indefinite hold any plans for a second Sydney airport. Meanwhile there were conflicts within the Labor Party based on locality, with those affected by airport noise lobbying for a second airport, and those in the region of any proposal lobbying for further expansion of Kingsford Smith.

2. Lack of attention allows continuing institutional immobilism

Almost half a century ago, EE Schattschneider pointed out that if a group is losing out internally they have an interest in changing the venue, in involving others. Conversely if a group is winning internally it wants to avoid publicity if that will involve others and perhaps change the political equations.

Many problems receive no media coverage, either because they are no considered sufficiently newsworthy, no group has an incentive or ability to publicise them, or they are not dramatised by any newsworthy events. Situations of decaying infrastructure, for example, may continue deteriorating without any news attention unless there is some disaster that dramatises the issue. Without any focusing event or developments triggering action the situation continues to reflect the internal power balance, whether that is the most rational or not. So this second type of stalemate occurs where the absence of publicity allows institutional immobilism to continue.

The case chosen here involves Radio Australia's transmission. Radio Australia is the international broadcaster of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the equivalent of the BBC World Service. It built up a very substantial audience in the Asia-Pacific region as a short-wave broadcaster. However in the 1980s its relative share of such audiences was starting to decline, as indeed was the whole audience for international short-wave radio. Radio Australia's share was declining largely because it had not kept pace with the amount invested in transmission by such large broadcasters as the BBC and Voice of America. The whole audience for short-wave was declining as other media with far superior sound quality (FM radio, CDs) became widespread in

Radio Australia's target regions, and as national television services offered a great range of channels (even if not always of news).

The lack of investment in new transmission passed with little attention domestically because Radio Australia had no audience at home. So it was hard to mobilise support for the large amount of funds involved, especially because during this period there was a small core of opponents against Radio Australia because of issues that had arisen with the Suharto regime because of the popularity of Radio Australia's Indonesian language service and the credibility of its news broadcasts.

If anything, at least as important as the lack of investment were the institutional arrangements regarding its transmission. As a perverse historical legacy, Radio Australia's transmitters were owned by the Department of Communications, and operated by Telecom, while the only group with a direct interest in the effectiveness of the broadcasts was Radio Australia. This was a recipe for irresponsibility and friction.

Moreover, the irrationality was compounded because of funding arrangements. Radio Australia received from the government a separate transmission budget which paid Telecom for operating the short-wave broadcasts. These operational funds were committed routinely each year, but any requests for capital investment were treated as extraordinary and hence almost impossible to attain. Moreover any other form of delivery, such as satellite delivery for domestic re-transmission, had to come directly from Radio Australia's budget, and so was competing with already over-stretched staffing and programming budgets.

This situation of gradually deteriorating effectiveness and institutional stasis continued for many years. It came to an end with other funding crises and institutional changes brought in by the Howard Government in 1996. When it instituted a review of the ABC and major funding cuts, Radio Australia became the intended sacrificial cow. After a vigorous public campaign it was saved, although its budget was cut severely and it lost around two thirds of its staff. Afterwards however it was able to explore new modes of transmission in control of its own budget for doing so.

3. Adverse publicity encourages political avoidance

Another type of example is when political figures learn that a particular issue is a political minefield, likely to cause damage to all who become involved. This may be because of the sharp conflicts or the intractable problems or the messiness and impossibility of solutions.

An interesting case of this is pay television policy in Australia. Essentially this falls into two contrasting periods – an early one of active policy making marked by farce and flux and huge political embarrassments, and a second one where the government remained determinedly passive in the face of what some might take as great policy challenges. In contrast to the first period, during the second the government despite its inaction suffered few political embarrassments, as the growth of monopoly was largely attributed to the inevitable working of market forces. In many ways it can be argued that more damage was done to the public interest in the second period. It is a

strong demonstration that unless dramatised by a disaster, sins of commission are usually much more damaging politically than sins of omission.

After the initial announcement in 1991 that pay TV would be introduced, the Labor Government went through five different policy positions in thirteen months, changing its position on such sensitive issues as the favoured mode of delivery, the rules about ownership, the number of channels, and who was eligible to have them, especially the role of the free to air networks and the ABC (Tiffen 1993, Minehan 1998, Westfield 2000). This was especially brought into sharp relief when there were high profile interventions and reversals by senior ministers, including the Prime Minister Paul Keating after the forced resignation of his Communications Minister Graham Richardson following a scandal.

In early 1993 the large players discovered that a new player was planning to develop microwave TV services in the capital cities. The government, flying in the face of repeated official statements to the contrary, suddenly instructed the Department of Transport and Communications to stop the tendering of microwave wavelengths. This was a huge embarrassment in the lead-up to the election.

There followed the farce of the auctioning of the satellite licences, perhaps the biggest public embarrassment of all, although not the most damaging in substance. This had a low entry fee, and several unknown companies put in cascading bids, which they let pass and then it passed down to their next bid. After Labor, against most expectations, won the 1993 election, there were embarrassing inquiries into its past practices.

The protracted and confused nature of the policy making which subsequently left a policy vacuum with key developments being decided solely by the ‘marketplace’ was also characteristic of the Australian politics of deregulation at this period. These early years were marked by enormous commercial failures and shifting business alliances (Minehan 1998, Westfield 2000), and a slow take-up rate by Australian consumers.

Having gone to such lengths to license the new satellite services, for which the licensees had paid very heavy fees, it was then faced by the two telecommunications companies (at the time Australia was limited to a duopoly), Telstra and Optus, engaging in a war to lay out cable in the most affluent suburbs of the major capital cities. Because their primary orientation was to make sure the other didn’t get any competitive advantage, although cabling only just over 20 per cent of homes, there was an 80 per cent overbuild.

As the new players disappeared, and the largest players – Murdoch, Packer and Telstra – gradually established an effective monopoly through their vehicle Foxtel, the early promises of diversity have all but disappeared. Critics can point to many ways in which lack of government action have aided and abetted the emergence of monopoly, but this created little political controversy.

Stampedes

On the other hand, various mutually reinforcing tendencies associated with news coverage typically magnify the growth of momentum towards a particular view. The

three case studies used here – one domestic, one international and the third incorporating both – all involve a sense of threat and of conflict towards minority or out-groups. Such conflicts are probably the most common ways in which these policy stampedes occur. However occasionally they revolve around some perceived opportunity, the promise of an economic El Dorado.

The political costs and benefits are skewed in one direction, perceptions of public opinion are in one direction, and news orientations and perhaps the nature of newsworthy events are all in the same direction.

1. Crime issues, law and order auctions, and moral panics

Crime unites the whole of the law-abiding community against the law-breaker. Politicians are always looking for issues that command majority support, the media are always looking for stories where all their audience unite behind them. It offers a form of cheap courage to both, so that they can express their outrage, take a principled stand knowing that it will benefit rather than hurt them. This leads to an easy inflation of the issue, and to all groups seeking to out-do each other in the same direction.

The suggestive but problematic term moral panics has been used in interactions between the media and politics in issues of social deviance. Originally coined by Stanley Cohen to analyse reactions to the mods versus rockers incidents in England in the 1960s, the concept has been deployed in a wide variety of settings since. Although usage of the term varies considerably, the defining features might include the following:

- Volatility of reaction. Social concern about the phenomenon emerges very rapidly. Media attention does not follow actual trends in the problem's incidence, but rather the social reaction follows its own peculiar dynamics affected by changing newsworthiness and the mobilisation of concerned groups.
- Moral absoluteness. The behaviour undergoes a moral passage (Gusfield 1963), where any ambiguities or compensating positive attractions are eliminated and it is seen as wholly negative. Newsworthiness and moral simplicity tend to go together.
- Causality in terms of sinister agents. In a moral panic, causation is typically ascribed to powerful, typically anonymous, evil agents, or in Cohen's phrase 'folk devils'. Institutional or environmental sources of the phenomenon are ignored.
- Disproportion in projecting prevalence. Typically in such behaviours there are few authoritative statistics. This vacuum is filled by self-interested projections. As attention to the problem grows, a stream of new details creates the impression of an epidemic.
- Alarmist predictions. Even more licence is available in forecasting future trends than in estimating current prevalence. The more frightening the forecast, the more newsworthy.
- The recital of urban myths. Incidents, usually with anonymous but stereotypically appropriate identities, are recited as fact, and widely believed, although the incident on which they are based lacks authentication.
- A self-propelling relationship between newsworthiness and vocal reaction. The public comments by authority figures and interest groups keep interest in the topic

current. They use the opportunity of prominent media coverage to press their views, and the presence of such comments further enhances the newsworthiness of related incidents (eg Fishman's (1979) account of crime waves in the news).

Analysts have found moral panics a suggestive term for analysing the surges in attention to social problems. It is a fruitful means for highlighting that social reaction follows its own logic, whose relation to the original problem must be treated as problematic and variable. There are occasions where there is political kudos and no penalty for inflating the dimensions of a problem, where judgements of newsworthiness and political expedience both push towards dramatisation and exaggeration, and where politically attuned official agencies find it expedient to cater to the public sense of alarm.

Nevertheless there are inherent problems with the concept of moral panic. Most notably it always carries a negative evaluation of the public and media reaction. It thus fits in with a common control strategy by which defensive groups seek to manage adverse media coverage, a weapon to deflate concern. For example, Horsfield found that, following the exposure of the issue of clergy sexual abuse in 1992, church leaders used a moral panic paradigm to defuse the revelations, to suppress the experiences of a significant minority of lay people who had so suffered, and to contain the challenge which the revelations posed for the church (1997, p.38).

Moreover the concept of moral panics poses awkward epistemological problems, especially to do with defining proportionality, with assessing what is an appropriate amount of alarm to express towards a problem. Application of the term will always be problematic and contentious, because it seems to undermine the seriousness of a problem. It is used most comfortably to describe social reactions which the analyst sees as irrational. The perceived problem is more imaginary than real, based upon fear of the new or different. It is used to describe – nearly always disapprovingly, sometimes sneeringly - the reactions of people who clearly belong to a different sub-culture than the analyst and his/her readers.

It is probably not a good term to describe mainstream law and order issues, which arise especially in state politics in Australia. Nevertheless it overlaps considerably with moral panics.

In New South Wales, law and order auctions probably first emerged around the time of the 1995 election, and have intensified since. In the lead-up to 1995, a Royal Commission had been investigating police corruption. As Labor took a strong stand against this, it had to show also that it was not anti-police. Moreover public dissatisfaction with the amount of crime was a fertile area for any opposition to explore. Moreover public attitudes often manifested the view that increasing punitiveness was the way to combat crime. This is certainly an attitude that tabloid newspapers and commercial talk radio programs push very vigorously. There is always some crime or outrage or cause celebre to be taken up.

The following several New South Wales elections – 1999 and 2003 – saw both parties escalating their appeals in this direction. There was some retreat in 2007. The Liberal Opposition took populism to another height, with their proposal that juries

rather than judges should decide sentences, but the proposal seemed to gain no public traction, as well as occasioning criticism from legal professionals.

2. Unstoppable momentum and Iraqi WMD

In mid 2001 there was no constituency in Australia or internationally outside the United States for any military action to overthrow Saddam Hussein. After the bombings of September 11 2001, the political atmosphere changed in fundamental respects. From the time of President Bush's 'axis of evil' State of the Union address in January 2002, American efforts to engineer a coalition of the willing to invade Iraq were very successful in the United States, Britain and Australia. The following year saw a series of escalating charges against Iraq especially involving Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction.

With the war it turned out that Saddam not only did not possess any WMD with which to attack his neighbours or the West, but also none with which to defend his own regime. Afterwards it was eventually established that essentially since the end of the Gulf War, Saddam had had no WMD capacity and had not been able to re-establish one.

How then did allied governments manage to conjure a sense of such overwhelming threat that a pre-emptive war – one not only against international law, but against all the traditions of these democracies – was made politically palatable?

In these fifteen months many charges were raised against Iraq. Official figures had the initiative in generating news. In addition, leaks and background briefings were used to reinforce official views. A great number of commentators were available to promote the same views, or even more hawkish ones.

This put all dissenters very much on the defensive. No opposition politician wanted to be seen as a dupe of Saddam. All were very wary about the great areas of ignorance and of the dictator's undoubted evil and established record of atrocities. This all made it possible that some evidence would be uncovered. The pattern of political risks and rewards made it far more fruitful to join the anti-Saddam bandwagon, as being caught in an error on the other side would have been politically fatal.

While few analysts predicted that Saddam's actual WMD would have been so close to zero, nevertheless the political stampede that allowed a sense of Saddam able to project a threat well beyond his own borders betrayed political and journalistic dynamics which were minimally disciplined by any contrary evidence or views.

3. Anti-terrorism measures

Because the essence of terrorism is to produce a psychological impact far greater than its physical impact, the relationship of contemporary international terrorism with the news media has often been called symbiotic, with publicity described as the oxygen on which terrorism lives. There is some truth in this proposition, but much less attention has been given to the news media's role in the problematic politics of counter-terrorism. Here the attraction of heroic narratives to both media and

governments – for their own different reasons - creates coincidences of interest. Powerful metaphors such as the war on terror encourage strategies which may be substantially ineffective, perhaps even counter-productive, while politically benefiting the governments adopting them.

The politics of terrorism has obviously entered a new era since September 11 2001. The lethality, global scope and ideological pretensions of the Islamic restorationist movement was something new, even though links between media coverage and terrorist strategies went back several decades.

Very acute issues of strategy in how to combat this new threat have arisen, but even in the face of unanimous horror at what has occurred the temptation of politicians to seek partisan advantage is ever-present. Few could forget Karl Rove's speech in 2005:

> Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 and the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers. In the wake of 9/11, conservatives believed it was time to unleash the might and power of the United States military against the Taliban; in the wake of 9/11, liberals believed it was time to submit a petition … Conservatives saw what happened to us on 9/11 and said "We will defeat our enemies". Liberals saw what happened to us and said "We must understand our enemies" (Dionne 2005a)

Differences over the nature of the war on terror parallel differences over the best strategies with which to combat the threat. On the one side stand those echoing Cicero's advice in imperial Rome, 'Let them hate as long as they fear'. Contemporary terrorism expert Ralph Peters thus puts the view that America 'must not waste an inordinate amount of effort trying to win unwinnable hearts and minds'. Rather America must not shrink from using its 'raw power' and that its 'responses to terrorist acts should make the world gasp' (Ramakrishna and Tan 2002, p.19). On the other hand are those who think that effective counter-measures are closer to a policing than to a military exercise, and that stopping future recruitment is as important as breaking existing networks.

The politics of counter-terrorism can not just be taken for granted. It is far from clear what the most effective policies will be in minimizing future threats from terrorism. In the public framing of responses to terrorist atrocities and the fears arising from them, the normal interplay of political interests and strategies and the media's own priorities of newsworthiness and susceptibility to the news generating actions of governments have their own dynamics. In turn, these mean – as in all areas of policy-making - that domestic political rewards to not always flow to the substantially optimal solutions.

For the first 101 years of its existence, the Federation of Australia managed to exist without anti-terrorist legislation. The first bills were introduced in March 2002, setting off a flurry of activity. In the five years between September 2001 and September 2006, the Commonwealth made '37 new laws directly dealing with counter-terrorism – an average of one new law every seven weeks … There has been

so much law over such a short time – much of it broadening and amending what was passed just months earlier – as to render the overall impact impenetrable for the interested citizen' (Lynch and Williams 2006, p.10). However in the last few years there has been a flurry of activity. Since March 2002, when the first bills were introduced into Federal Parliament, the Government has enacted 29 new terrorism laws, or a new law about every seven weeks (Williams 2006).

Most actions associated with terrorism are of course violent, and therefore anyway would constitute a crime. However it can be argued that there are valid reasons for having special legislation. In a federation such as Australia, the problem of terrorism requires a uniform national approach rather than variations between states. Moreover, even though conspiring to commit a violent crime is itself a crime, it could be argued that there should be more emphasis on prevention and deterrence in combating terrorism than with normal crimes. Finally while crime is typically committed by individuals or small gangs, terrorism is a highly organized activity, and so there should be scope for control measures to move against its organizational dimensions.

Nevertheless there are great political advantages for a government in dramatising its responses to terrorism and huge penalties for any opposition seen to be soft on terrorism.

In the contemporary democratic politics surrounding counter-terrorism, domestic political forces and the nature of media coverage favour the more muscular responses. The media are part of the constellation of forces that favour what Professor Hugh White (2005a) called the heroic narrative in responding to terrorism.

In sum, the skewing of political rewards and risks, the differential newsworthiness of different ways of framing an issue, the differential capacity of competing groups to generate news coverage, all can impact on the policy agenda, sometimes generating huge pressures towards action, while at other times the result is towards encouraging inaction.