

## Cover Page

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Linsky, Martin. (1986). *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*. New York: Norton & Company.

### Reviewer

Jennifer Roffle, PA 715, San Francisco State University

### Abstract

The purpose of Martin Linsky's book *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking* is to show the impact that media has on public policy is real and important. Linsky examined how media influenced individual public officials, government institutions, and public policies at the national level. His book is written primarily from the perspective of the policymaker and their perceptions on how the media has affected the policy process. His research methodology was multi-faceted and included surveys, in-depth interviews, and case studies.

### **Part One summarizes the fundamental messages in Linsky's book.**

- Policymakers believe that media has an impact on federal policy
- Policymakers feel strongly that the media has the power to shape and frame political issues.
- Media speeds up the policymaking process and that negative press coverage has tendency to move the decision-making up the bureaucratic ladder
- Policymakers who are skilled at managing the media will make for better government.

### **Part Two assessed the generalizability of the messages and the context they fit into the class readings and the study of public policy itself.**

- The messages in *Impact* are generalizable to state and local government and public policy issues.
- Linsky's book supports the foundational principles in public policy that the process has two actors: institutional actors and noninstitutional actors,
- Linsky's findings corroborate what the current literature already says about that the power of the media and its ability to influence public policy is substantial.

### **Part Three is a personal critique of the book and its messages**

- Linsky's book has limitations and flaws. He relied too heavily on anecdotes and case studies to prove his point and no statistical analysis.
- Linsky's conclusion "having more policymakers skilled in managing media will make for better government" is dangerous because it encourages policymakers to manage the media at the expense of what might be considered good government. The message also ignores the obligations of the media to accurately inform the public of the government's public policies.

### Key Concepts

Government is defined as:

Senior policymakers who served in Washington for the last 2 decades (Institutional Players)

Media is defined as:

The media who covered Washington for the last 2 decades (Noninstitutional Actors)

## **Introduction**

This book review will be divided into three parts. Part One will summarize the fundamental messages of Linsky's book and critique the evidence he uses support to support his argument. Part Two will assess how generalizable are the messages in Linsky's book as well as provide the context for how the messages fit into class readings and the study of public policy itself. Lastly, and most importantly Part Three of this book review will present my personal critique of the book and its messages.

### **Part One: Summary**

Is the power of the media in public policy real or a myth? The purpose of Martin Linsky's book *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking* is to show the impact that media has on public policy is real and important. Linsky examined how media influenced individual public officials, government institutions, and public policies at the national level. Linsky purposively narrowed the scope of his book to focus on impact that the press has had in Washington. The book is also written primarily from the perspective of the policymaker and their perceptions on how the media has affected the policy process.

The research methodology utilized in *Impact* was multi-faceted and included surveys, in-depth interviews, and case studies. Senior federal policymakers who held positions in Washington D.C. from 1963 to 1983 were surveyed for the book. In-depth interviews were administered to 36 key individuals (policymakers and journalist) who were nominated by their peers for being skilled in policymaking and news coverage. Lastly, six case studies were conducted to illustrate how media impacted federal policy decisions over the last twenty years. The case studies included: the 1969 reorganization of the Postal Department, Vice President Spiro Agnew's resignation, President Jimmy Carter's decision to not deploy the neutron bomb, relocation of families from the polluted Love Canal area, President Reagan's

support of tax exemptions for Bob Jones University, and the 1984 suspension of Social Security disability reviews.

Linsky's *Impact* has several fundamental messages that help illustrate the influence that media has on public policy. First, policymakers believe that media has an impact on federal policy. Linsky supports this claim with the results from his surveys of prominent policymakers in Washington from the last twenty years. More than 96% of the senior federal policymakers surveyed believed that the press had an impact on federal law and more than half of them thought the impact was substantial (Linsky, 1986, p. 69). More importantly, these policymakers felt the press had the power to frame the political issue. Linsky validates this claim with his case studies. President Carter's decision in 1978 to not deploy the neutron bomb is an example of how the media successfully framed the issue and set the agenda. When an article in the Washington Post was published in June of 1977 that said the United States was working on production of a neutron bomb that was capable of killing people but leaving buildings standing, the Carter administration was forced to react to how the Post had framed the issue. The national security advisor for the Carter administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski "noted at the time that Carter believed if he had approved the neutron bomb, his administration would be stamped forever as the administration which introduced bombs that kills people but leaves buildings intact" (Linsky, 1986, p. 32). I think Linsky did an excellent job in proving his message that media is able to frame the issues in policymaking. Testimonies from senior policymakers found that officials in Washington "are engaged in a continuing struggle to control the view of reality that is presented to the American people" (Linsky, 1986, p. 32).

A second fundamental message from *Impact* is that the media speeds up the policymaking process. Linsky's case study of the Love Canal Relocation illustrates how the media sped up the policymaking process. In the 1970's the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was investigating problems of hazardous waste in the Love Canal. The EPA had planned on holding a Saturday press conference to release the results of their study and its plan of action. On Friday, the results were leaked to the press and instead of EPA officials being able to handle the situation in an orderly and systematic manner a media circus ensued. Linsky writes:

“it did not take long for the hysteria to manifest itself. The residents of Love Canal were fanning the flames, in part for the benefit of the attendant press...they even engaged in a little friendly hostage taking, holding two EPA officials for several hours” (Linsky, 1986, p. 77-78).

The national coverage of Love Canal fueled the nation's fear of toxic waste and helped set the stage for an escalation of demand to relocate the Love Canal families (Linsky, 1986, p. 77). The White House was not ready to make a decision on the Love Canal because they were still waiting for more assessment from EPA official on the situation, but it was too late. In order to assuage the media frenzy the White House felt they needed to move quickly with a decision. Four days after the official press conference Barbara Blum, the EPA Deputy Administrator reported to the press relocation plans for Love Canal residents. Once again Linsky's convincingly proves his point with anecdotal evidence that the actions of the press forces the policymaking process to speed up.

Another important message in *Impact* is that negative press coverage has tendency to move the decision-making up the bureaucratic ladder. In both case studies of the Love Canal Relocation and President Carter's decision to not deploy the neutron bomb the negative media coverage forced decision-making into the hands of higher officials. Enormous press coverage that portrayed each event in a extremely negative light caused the decision making

to be made by the White House instead of other officials. This conclusion was also supported with results from the surveys and in-depth interviews Linsky conducted. More than seventy five percent of senior policymakers who responded to the survey felt that positive press increased their chances of getting their policy goal met. Likewise more than seventy percent said negative coverage decreased their chances of getting their policy goals met. (Linsky, 1986, p. 114).

The big message that Linsky wants readers to conclude from his book is that in order to make good policies officials should “take into consideration the press and public relations aspects of their programs and decisions” (Linsky, 1986, p. 203). Linsky’s conclusion is not based actual evidence, but what he considers is the natural and logical conclusion that you draw from his book. Linsky writes:

Everything we have learned here thus drives us to the conclusion that policymakers will more successful at doing their jobs, if they do better in their relation to the press. To put it more provocatively, having more policymakers who are skilled at managing the media will make for better government. (Linsky, 1986, p. 203).

I think Linsky did an excellent job in showing that his message is accurate. All six case studies as well as his survey results and in-depth interviews helped illustrated the impact media has on policymaking in Washington. That said, I think encouraging policymakers to become more skilled in managing the media is a dangerous message and I will discuss my opinions in full-detailed in Part Two of the Book Report: Assessment

### **Part Two: Assessment**

The messages in *Impact* are generalizeable. Despite the fact that Linsky only focuses on policymaking and media in Washington the messages in his book also applies to state and local government and public policy issues. In my opinion the recall of Governor Gray Davis is a perfect example of how the media helped to frame and shape the political reality to

Californians. Governor Gray Davis received widespread negative media coverage for how he handled the state's 2000-2001 energy crisis. After his re-election the media continued to report negatively on his actions. Little coverage was given to the main culprit, Enron who was later shown to have purposively created blackouts. I think Governor Gray Davis' downfall was inevitable because the media circus that surrounded him fueled the public's desire to have him removed from office.

More importantly, the messages in Linsky's book fit nicely into the context of our class readings messages and the study of public policy itself. Linsky's book supports the foundational principles in public policy that the process has two actors: institutional actors and noninstitutional actors. In *Impact* Linsky defines the institutional actors as senior policymakers who served in Washington for the last twenty years. The noninstitutional actor Linsky defines as the media who covered Washington.

Furthermore, Linsky's findings corroborate what the current literature already says about that the power of the media. The ability of the media to influence public policy is substantial. In Iyengar and Kinder article "News That Matters" when they conducted controlled experiments in which they exposed people to edited material that intentionally drew their attention to focus on a particular problem. When asked about the material later the people ended up assigning the problem greater importance than they had done before the experiment. Moreover, the people assigned to control conditions assigned importance to different problem (Iyengar and Kinder, 296).

The class readings also support Linsky's main message and conclusion that "policymakers can't be good at their jobs without being good at dealing with the press" (Linsky, 1986, p. 222). In the article "News that Matter" the authors support Linsky conclusions. The authors write.

“Without exception, presidents in the television age have assiduously sought to control the criteria by which they are viewed and evaluated. From the careful staging of news conferences to the manufacturing of pseudoevents “making news” and “going public” has become an essential presidential activities” Iyengar and Kinder, 304).

In the end all of the fundamental messages Linsky’s provides in book are well supported in the context of class readings. He successfully proved that media has an Impact on public policies.

### **Part Three: Personal Critique**

I think that Martin Linsky’s book *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking* is a powerful and important book to the social sciences field. Linsky’ successfully illustrates the significant impact that media has on the policymaking process. His book reaffirmed my belief that the media is a powerful player in politics. Yet, his book has limitations and flaws with its dangerous message. I think Linsky relied too heavily on anecdotes and case studies to prove his points. He did not perform any statistical analysis of his data. He could have easily performed statistical test of significance on the data from his survey in order to generalize his findings to larger issues. I think the *Impact* was also limited because it only focused on policymaking at the national level and ignored the state and local process.

The biggest flaw with *Impact* is the dangerous message it draws. Linsky concludes that given the substantial impact that media has on policymaking that “having more policymakers skilled in managing media will make for better government” ”(Linsky, 1986, p. 203). I think this message is dangerous because it encourages policymakers to manage the media at the expense of what might be considered good public policies. The message also ignores the obligations of the media to accurately inform the public of the government’s public policies. “Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War” is important article because it illustrates the danger of what happens when policymakers manage the media and what

happens when the media is not critical of public policy. The study found that the overwhelmingly pro-war sentiment in the country led the press to “downplay the lack of evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda, the fact that WMD were not being found, and the word public opinion was critical of the war”(Kull, Ramsey, Lewis, 593). The media was reluctant to challenge the Bush administration on its public policies. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the incident in the *Washington Post*. After President Bush had made a statement that WMD had been found in Iraq the “*Washington Post* ran a front page headline saying Bush: We Found Banned Weapons”.

In conclusion I think Linsky’s *Impact* is an important book because it helps demonstrate the power the media has to influence policymakers and public policies. On the flipside it also exposes how policymakers can use their knowledge of the media power to manipulate the public and push their own agendas. That said, I feel that a relationship between policymakers and the media should parallel how our institutional structure of checks and balances. In other words, I think that good public policies will be created if both policymakers and the media have a friendly, but adversarial relationship. I think good things happen when there is conflict and debate.