

Objectivity Under Fire:

Media Coverage of the 10th Anniversary of the Start of the Iraq War

Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

Framing is one of the three most important theories in academic studies of journalism and is related to the other two most prominent theories, agenda setting and priming (Entman, 2007.)

Framing theory considers the way that media select and present information to the public, at best partly for reasons of space constraints and practical considerations. Framing theory postulates that the news media strongly influence public's perceptions of events. By deciding how to present or frame "facts", the media helps set the tone for the overall public discourse.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007, 106) trace framing's theoretical roots to psychology and sociology, adding framing "is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences."

Entman (1993, 52) notes:

Framing essentially involves *selection and salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and / or treatment recommendation* for the item described.

But Entman (1993, 164) acknowledges that biases can be at work behind this selection and presentation:

Scholars can shed new light on bias by examining linkages among the three concepts that have received such intense scholarly scrutiny. We can define framing as the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation.

After showing how these three concepts--agenda setting, framing, and priming--fit together as tools of power, Entman (1993, 164) connects them to explicit definitions of news slant and the related but distinct phenomenon of bias. Properly defined and measured, slant and bias provide insight into how the media influence the distribution of power -- as Entman describes it: "who gets what, when, and how."

Capella and Jamison (1996, 71) also corroborate the subtle yet unmistakable influence framing can have on how the public views issues:

Studies that we have conducted over the past four years show that subtle changes in the way news stories are framed can affect consumers' responses, activating their cynicism when strategic or conflict-oriented frames are used. The studies directly implicate media framing of political news in activating, if not creating, cynicism about campaigns, policy, and governance and imply that cynicism about the news media may be an indirect consequence.

Dimitrova and Stromback (2008, 205) note that when the media and public or other parties are on the same page, the very fact that framing is even occurring may not be even noticed. "(F)raming is influenced by the national political context in which journalists operate. If there is agreement about an issue in the political environment, framing becomes invisible."

Certainly, the importance and centrality of framing has not escaped scholars. Pan and Kosicka (1993, 55) maintain framing theory heavily shapes the questions tackled by most studies today:

Much of the recent research in political communication deals with one or more of the following three questions. First, how do the news media "set the frame in which citizens discuss public events" (Tuchman, 1978, p. ix) and consequently "narrow the available political alternatives" (p. 156)? Second, how do politicians and advocacy groups actively "court" the media to polish their images and frame debates over public policies (see Hertsgaard, 1988; Pertschuk & Schaetzel, 1989)? Third, how do audiences process news information actively and construct meanings using their preexisting cognitive representations (e.g., Graber, 1988; Livingstone, 1990)?

Democratic Peace Theory

While an exhaustive discussion of ethics, politics, and war is beyond the scope of this paper, nonetheless, it would be fruitful and germane to consider the extent to which one powerful concept from political science, in particular--democratic peace theory--did or did not inform the coverage of Iraq War war anniversary. Democratic peace is a key theory for a deeper understanding of some of the basic political dynamics underlying the war, putting the relationship between democracies and dictatorships into a larger historical context.

Democratic Peace Theory is a notion that has gained wide acceptance among political scientists, and its acceptance seems to only get stronger with time, despite, or because of, the various challenges posed to it.

In brief, Democratic Peace Theory states that historically democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with each other--though democracies undeniably do fight--plenty--with non-democracies.

The study of international relations has produced few widely accepted generalizations. One of these, sometimes even asserted to be an empirical law (Levy 1988) is that democracies do not fight wars with one another. The empirical evidence for this is quite strong. (Buono de Mesquita, 1999, 791.)

Rummel (1994, 13) analyzed wars over a 175-year period in the 19th and 20th centuries, considering the type of government involved, and found strong empirical evidence for democratic peace. He found:

353 pairs of nations engaged in wars between 1816-1991

None was between two democracies

155 pairs involved a democracy and a non-democracy

198 involved two non-democracies fighting each other

The average length of war between states was 35 months, average battle deaths was 15,069

But it is also important to also state what democratic peace does not claim, since the theory is often misrepresented or misunderstood in the literature. Despite the general tendency for peace among democracies, democratic peace does NOT deny that democracies can and do have disagreements, even strong ones, nor does it maintain that they cannot have conflicting self-interest or agendas.

To repeat, democratic peace is literally the claim that democracies tend to not go to war with each other. Often this is stated with the qualification that MATURE democracies rarely, if ever, go to war with each other.

Not surprisingly, much rides on how one defines what is and isn't a democracy. And both proponents and opponents have sometimes been accused by various studies of defining democracy in such a way to stack the deck in their favor or explain away seemingly uncomfortable anomalies.

Critics of democratic peace have tried to point to perceived battles fought between democracies at various points in history to undermine the concept partly or entirely. Rummel's evidence seems to suggest a strong correlation in modern times,

but others have proposed a few supposed counterexamples to presumably blow the theory out of the water. For example: What about Athens and Syracuse in ancient times, some ask? (A possible counter-response: scholars disagree about whether Syracuse was actually a democracy. The surviving evidence about the nature of Syracuse's government is not clear enough or comprehensive enough for us to decide conclusively one way or the other.) Others ask--what about Finland during World War II? (The typical counter-response is that Finland was fighting a separate war against Russia during World War II, not the West.)

Others attempt to split history into two periods, admitting the truth of democratic peace in the 20th century but denying its validity in ancient times. Russett (2006), for instance, while acknowledging democratic peace in modern times, disputes its existence in Ancient Greece, pointing in part to conflicts between Athens and Sparta. But his analysis of what constitutes a democracy seems strangely twisted. For one thing, he considers Ancient Sparta to be a democracy--even though most people, at best, would call Sparta an oligarchy, given its two kings, military ruling class, and the huge portion of the population that was enslaved as helots (outnumbering citizens by a wide margin.)

While not every advocate of democratic peace is prepared to admit the apparent exceptions, even if one does admit some counterexamples, it seems at most these would merely qualify democratic peace a bit. The theory would hold true for the most part, if not 100% of the time, but democratic peace would not be refuted. It would merely be a strong tendency, not an absolute rule.

Some scholars (Farber, 1997) have attempted to challenge democratic peace for other, conceptual reasons, casting doubt on its supposed explanations or causes. His point of view for attacking the theory is that apparently if the scholarly community can't establish a coherent theoretical framework for why democratic peace exists, then it must not exist, no matter how much the evidence seems to back it up. (This seems somewhat akin to the notion that if a seven-foot tall man walks into the room, he isn't really seven feet tall unless you have a strong theory explaining why he is seven feet tall.)

Farber, furthermore, notes there were few democracies before 1914. He counts only four--Greece, the United States, Switzerland, and Norway. He feels it is impossible draw any meaningful conclusions from this small sample group. And yet this is to deny the very nature and importance of the early democracies. In fact, one might make the exact counter argument, that these first democracies were of tremendous importance in world history--perhaps the most important and compelling examples of all--given their rise against despite great odds and the whims of history.

But in the end, it is important to note that even those who question the causes of democratic peace nonetheless acknowledge the validity of the claim itself. Even a critical Rosato (2003, 585), for instance, who feels this peace "may not be caused by the democratic nature of those states," acknowledges "there are good reasons to believe that... there is certainly peace among democracies."

Indeed, the evidence has reached such an overwhelming tilt in favor of democratic peace that Dafoe (2010), examining the flaws of various studies

attempting to debunk the theory, says democratic peace has survived so many challenges that it is time to put the matter to rest once and for all. It is time to accept the truth of democratic peace and henceforth consider all those who question it as being on extremely shaky ground. He asserts, “As the number of studies supporting the descriptive inference of democratic peace continues to grow, the probability of a future study overturning this study becomes increasingly less likely (Dafoe, 2011, 206).” In legal parlance, we can issue a summary judgment against doubters from the get go.

My own contribution to the democratic peace theory would be this observation: It seems to me that one reason scholars are having a hard time understanding the underlying cause of democratic peace is that they are focusing on structural explanations or (pseudo-) mathematical explanations of the phenomenon not grounded in the basic psychology underlying the theory.

One could argue the main dynamic at work in democratic peace theory is this: democracy = good = friend; dictatorship = bad = enemy. It’s important to understand democratic theory at this most basic psychological level; this view tends to permeate all members and classes and structures in democracies--from the poor to the elites. President Ronald Reagan, summed up this point of view succinctly when he called the Soviet Union the “evil empire.” You cannot understand democratic peace merely by describing the phenomenon; you must understand the moral evaluation and judgment occurring in democratic society--how its population views other countries and governments on a moral level.

Scholars have attempted to take this ethical or moral element out of the discussion and then wonder why explanations based simply on structural explanations (for example, are democracies peaceful because they handle external struggles the same as they do internal struggles?) fall short. This basic demonization or fear of dictatorships exists in citizens in democracy for a good reason. If a democracy conquers another democracy, there is little reason for the average person to fear his or her life would change more than after a change in leadership after a routine election. But if a dictatorship conquers a democracy, the average person has reason to fear basic freedoms may vanish overnight; it may be the end of the world as he or she knows it. Scholars who view democracies and tyrannies as merely different and discount or ignore the perceived moral supremacy of democracies, overlook the basic psychological explanation of why democracies do--and must--consider each other friends--and why democracies consider non-democracies to be enemies. Qualitative research may be premised on the notion of describing not evaluating, but unfortunately judgment is necessary in some cases.

Democratic peace is important in analyzing media's coverage of the Iraq War anniversary for two reasons: First, although some scholars cringe at the notion, nonetheless democratic peace may have direct bearing on the question of validity of the war; if democracies really don't fight each other, this would tend to support the official America justification of the war--that installing a democratic government in Iraq and Afghanistan would lead to long-term peace among nations in the region (notwithstanding current internal power struggles.) Spreading democracy spreads

peace. Secondly, democratic peace sheds light on the underlying cause of the war itself. While historically democracies do not fight each other, it is indisputably true that democracies and non-democracies fight each other all the time.

Understanding this basic, historical tension between democracies and other forms of government can help journalists grasp at a more basic level what was driving the conflict, above and beyond the arguments used by both sides at the start of the war. If, as it were, you understand the basic dynamics of what causes a divorce in general, you would have a deeper understanding of a particular divorce case than you would get by merely hearing both spouses give a “he said, she said” laundry list of various grievances. You realize there might be something larger going on that has an impact on all relationships (whether among people in the latter case or nations in the former.)

Literature Review

Introduction.

It is hard to rise above politics, especially in covering highly charged political matters such as foreign affairs and wars, but to the extent that reporters are able to do so, they expand the views and minds of their readers. The media has every right to be critical of the government and is under no obligation to serve up propaganda or campaign for war. But journalists should also seek out the truth beyond politics and groupthink (whether the pressure is coming from the government or the public.) Otherwise, one runs the risk of superficial reporting that merely preaches to the choir

of the believers and alienates the dissenters, without really informing or challenging either.

Of course, even with the best of intentions, it is extremely hard to do ‘instant’ historical analysis of an event that has just concluded. The 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War in fact came just a year and a half after the end of the war and withdrawal of U.S. troops. Reporters were placed in the somewhat difficult position of attempting to predict the future long-term significance of the war with just a few years’ perspective under their belt. Historians, who usually have benefit of analyzing events (such as the decline and fall of the Romans Empire) from a much longer timeframe, are faced with the opposite dilemma and must work against the tendency to read into events with hindsight and assume everything was predestined to be just as events turned out.

Perhaps the best reporters can do to overcome these limitations, and avoid a mere political analysis of current events, is to place events in a larger historical or worldwide context and to consider things in the more philosophical light of political science rather than the polarized left / right water cooler / Facebook politics in America.

The 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War offers an interesting case study to take a look at how well the media did in its news coverage of an extremely political, divisive event. The American public underwent a shift from being largely supportive of the war in the beginning to being much more critical at the war’s end. It

is a hypothesis of this study that the media probably also underwent a shift in its coverage of the war, and it probably ended up more critical than it began.

But because of the recent date of the anniversary of the war, few studies, if any, have analyzed the media's coverage of the 10th anniversary of the start of the war. However, plenty of studies have examined the media coverage of the war itself.

Methodology

This study analyzes how four elite newspapers--two in the United States and two in the United Kingdom--reported on the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War. The reason papers in both the U.S. and U.K. were considered is the different overall national context and the effect this might have on newspaper war reporting. Both nations were direct participants in the Iraq War. But public opinion about the war varied greatly between the two countries.

From the beginning of the conflict in 2003, the British public was less favorable toward the war than Americans. British pro-war sentiment peaked at 60% in the early years, but by 2007, 83% of those in the U.K. opposed the war, according to an Ipsos MORI polls (2013). However, as the war wore on, British opposition to the war declined a bit to 70% against. In the United States, Gallup (2014) polls show that at the beginning of the war, 75% of the American public supported the war. As in Britain, public support in the U.S. reached its low point in 2007 and 2008 (with 62 or 63% thinking intervention was a mistake and 36 percent thinking it wasn't.) By the 10th anniversary of the start of the war, that opposition had also softened, to 53% of Americans thinking the war was a mistake. Overall, then, British support over the

years dropped from 60% to 30% in favor, and American support dropped from 75% to 42% in favor. In addition, the papers considered--The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal in America and The Times and The Guardian in the U.K.--are perceived to span a range of political positions. At least on the editorial pages, The Journal and The Times of London are on the more conservative side and The New York Times and The Guardian are on the more liberal side.

Because the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War occurred on a known date--March 19, 2013--I focused on this date as my central point. But newspapers did not limit their coverage of the anniversary to the exact date. In the weeks leading up to, and indeed even afterward, the newspapers still made references to the anniversary. So I searched for articles appearing in a four-week period before and after the anniversary (March 5th - April 2, 2013)

This study focused on the media's coverage of the 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq war--as opposed to, say, media coverage of the early years of the war--for two main reasons:

- 1) Others academic studies have already been done that tended to find that the media was "easier" on the official American government positions early in the war, when public opinion was in favor of the war. But by the war's end, the public's mood had also shifted--and the media became much more critical of the government. I could not find any studies focusing solely on the media's later coverage of the war, including the anniversary period, in particular.

2) The coverage of the anniversary of the war came after the official end of fighting by American troops, and the anniversary was seen by many as an opportunity to reflect on the war. The opportunity to wax philosophical is an opportunity to wax political, and I felt the more reflective coverage of the anniversary, freed from the “just the facts” mode of daily reporting, might allow any underlying biases to become apparent.

I decided to limit my textual analysis to news coverage, excluding editorials-- because I was only interested in articles that were supposed to be “objective.”

Originally I planned to search the Factiva database (which contains an archive of all four papers) for articles containing the words “Iraq War 10th anniversary.” But the sample was fairly small and I was afraid I was missing something, so I widened the search to simply look through the four newspapers for the term “Iraq War” during a four-week period before and after the anniversary.

I included some articles that only discussed the anniversary of the war incidentally (such as one about the tendency of war veterans to be violent criminals) since I felt the articles could provide insight into a possible slanted view of the war-- to see how the war was framed when it was mentioned in passing and not the main focus of the story.

I also tried searching each paper’s websites directly using the same criteria, again to try to prevent my missing anything, but because of pay walls, I was really only able to make an effective search of the New York Times website directly, since the university had a subscription I could use.

Initially, I began analyzing articles by using word count software to see which words and phrases were the most common. Matthew Gentzkow of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business has done some interesting studies of liberal bias in the media using large databases covering many newspapers and searching for particular phrases identified as slanted. But because my sample size was quite a bit smaller, I didn't ultimately I feel this approach was the most helpful or insightful, since the word count mostly showed how common prepositions are in the English language. Plus, because this was a qualitative study, not quantitative, I was interested in more complicated themes such as tone and framing, which a purely quantitative approach might not provide.

To spot check the online search, I pulled microfilm from the Library of Congress for three of the papers and went through paper issues of The Wall Street Journal (the only the library had hard copies of)--to make sure I didn't miss any articles. I also found this approach, besides giving me piece of mind about the effectiveness of the web search, allowed me to see first hand how much important the editors places on each article by its page and position thereon--something the web search made harder to grasp.

Based on the results of looking at the microfilm, I decided to re-do my online search, widening the search further to just use the terms "Iraq" for the two week period before and after the anniversary date. I knew I had missed an article in a few of the publications because I on the microfilm had seen articles in the Guardian and on The Wall Street Journal front page discussing a bombing on the anniversary date I

knew the other papers would not have covered.) My first online search did not pull up The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and The Times articles about this bombing because their articles covering it did not include the term “war.” So I manually scanned the online list of all articles mentioning “Iraq” during the period in question and, with this one exception, did not discover any other articles to include.

The search revealed this many articles for each paper (in some cases the total included different versions of the same article):

- 1) The New York Times--8
- 2) The Wall Street Journal--4
- 3) The Times of London--10
- 4) The Guardian--30

(I excluded the Sunday Times; though it shares the name as the daily paper, a separate staff publishes it.)

I re-read the articles multiple times to develop a list of frames that seemed to be prevalent throughout. I also considered the ways the media did not frame the war anniversary, since it also shed light on the frames that were presented. The study also considered the extent to which the articles places the war in a larger global or historical context, and whether the articles considered important topics from political science that form the foundation for a serious discussion of war or forms of government.

The Guardian, by far, gave the most prominent coverage to the anniversary--running a three-part series “Iraq War: 10 Years On”--right on the front page--

including about 62 articles and opinion pieces on the war. The vast majority of these articles were opinion pieces, not news pieces. The Guardian website did not make it especially easy to decide which it considered to be opinion and which it considered to be news. While the New York Times, for examples, labels some of its online articles as “opinion,” the Guardian did not give any such clue at all in its online articles, leaving it up to the reader to judge for himself or herself which was which. (Considering how much difficulty I had in some cases placing a piece in a particular category, I imagine the average reader would have a harder time and might fail to make the distinction, at least online.)

I noticed that all four papers ran photo retrospectives on the war; unfortunately, these appeared to be mostly online and since the images were not included in the Factiva database, I could not analyze them. So I concentrated solely on written news coverage.

In addition, I generally did not include pieces that were only published on the paper’s online blogs and not in the print edition, since most of these seemed to be opinion pieces.

Media Framing of the Early Years of the Iraq War

Academics have not merely been critical of the Iraq War; they have been quick to cast a critical eye on the media’s coverage of the Iraq War as well. There have numerous studies examining news reports on the war, especially focusing on the early years.

Researchers often did a comparative analysis of how American media approached the war versus international media organizations, such as those in the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, Arab nations, and others.

Most research, using content analysis, focused on whether or not the media was sufficiently critical of the war--or independent of official American sources--or instead just passed along the official line (from the American side.)

Perhaps one of the most profound studies examining media coverage of the Iraq War was that by Dimitrova and Stromback (2007), comparing U.S. and Swedish media coverage. The authors went beyond an easy political assessment and thus achieved a deeper understanding. The researchers did a qualitative content analysis of two elite newspapers in the U.S. (The New York Times and The Washington Post) and two prominent papers in Sweden, contrasting news reports with the attitude of political elites in each country. In all, the study examined 740 newspaper articles from the four papers in both countries during the official war period--March 20th to May 1, 2003 (when Bush declared the end of major military operations in Iraq.) The study found a strong connection between the tone of media coverage in each country and the beliefs of dominant political elites in each country. For example, during the early days of the war, when the U.S. public strongly backed military action, news coverage in the U.S. was less critical of the American war effort and was deferential to official sources. In contrast, in Sweden the public and the main political parties were against the war from Day One. Needless to say, Swedish troops did not

participate in the conflict. The analysis showed the news coverage in Sweden was more negative.

The study found a strong correlation between news coverage of the war and national political sentiment. If history is written by the winner, then journalism is written by the home team. But the study suggests that this slant is something that media in all nations are susceptible to. It wasn't just the American media; so is the media in Sweden and presumably other countries.

(On a side note, the study did not directly address the more political question, of course, of which nation's pro- or anti- war stance was the "correct one." While it may be tempting these days to see Sweden's criticism of the war as heroic, one might also consider the perils of assuming pacifism or an anti-war stance is in all cases morally superior to the decision to go to war... It is food for thought that Swedes today, as I heard firsthand on a trip this summer, are critical of their nation's infamous neutrality during World War II, when Sweden rolled out the red carpet for Nazis and allowed Sweden to be used as a base from which to attack Norway.)

Kristensen and Orsten (2003) considered the way the Danish media covered the Iraq War. Unlike Sweden, Denmark did not send troops to Iraq. The study was unusual insofar as it was one of the few to consider the media coverage in one of the lesser players involved in the Iraq War; most studies concerning the media in the participant countries focused on the major players--the United States and United Kingdom.

Kristensen and Orsten did a content analysis of several thousand total articles and items from Danish newspapers, radio, and TV in two periods in March and April

203. They considered the extent to which the articles relied on multiple viewpoints and sources and, in particular, whether any of those sources was “non-official.” The authors noted that the Danish media set out to do the right thing at the beginning of the war--“the Danish media tried to what they were supposed to do” (Kristensen and Orsten, 2003, 340). But as time went on, the effort lagged--and the independent, critical, alternative coverage became secondary and supplementary to covering the official line. That is, the execution of the coverage did not often live up to the professed goal. (Dimitrova might have found it interesting to note that this less critical phase seemed to coincide with a decision by the Danish opposition party to not criticize the war once it was underway, seeing such an action as unpatriotic. So in effect the Danish media coverage might be argued to be following the consensus of the nation’s political elites, as Dimitrova found to be the case in Sweden and the U.S.). Overall the study noted a sort of homogenization of the world’s news media, especially TV, in which it is difficult to differentiate the TV coverage of any one particular nation from another (in the Western world at least). It’s all starting to look the same.

Horten (2011) compared U.S. and German media coverage of the Vietnam War and the early years of the (second) Iraq War. Here again one sees how national political context can shape media coverage but in sometimes unexpected ways. “Unsurprisingly, media scholars have found that the media of combatant countries are usually less critical and more supportive of wars than those of non-combatants. (Horten, 2011, 32).” But in the case of Vietnam, Germany’s news media was actually

more favorable toward the Vietnam War, and the America's media less favorable, in the early days. Horten attributes this to Germany experience during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Germans were very distrustful of the spread of Communism and viewed Vietnam to be sort of an extension of the Soviet regime's influence. But as time went on, the attitude of the German media shifted, as a younger guard took over the nation's newsrooms, and the German media became more critical, eventually seeing America more as the aggressor and even going so far as to compare the America's aggression to the Nazi's.

When it came to the Iraq War, Horten notes the German media did not want to repeat its earlier mistakes in covering the Gulf War, which had been "dominated by the 'CNN Show' (Horten, 2011, 39)." While Germany did not send troops to Iraq, there was a great deal of interest in the war and it received extensive media coverage. Again, in a way that Dimitrova might appreciate, Horten asserts that because of the fact that Germany did not send troops to Iraq and because the German public opposed the war, it was much easier for the German media to be critical of the war. While German reporters were embedded with American troops, there was less of a tendency to rely on this embedded coverage. And there was a strong tendency to use footage and reports from a variety of sources, including Arab TV. The German newspapers also took on a watchdog role, devoting 15% of war coverage to a critique of the media, especially TV coverage. So at one point, when a German TV reporter embedded with American troops let slip the gaffe "we have better weapons" (referring to America's military), the German newspapers were all over it.

Horten observes that a study of U.S., British, and German TV news coverage of the war found the German media was far the most negative, while Britain was the best balanced, and America was the most pro-war. Horten concludes: “When a country is determined to go to war, its media find it difficult--if not impossible--to resist the call to arms (42).” He feels that other parts of the world received a more critical look at the Iraq War from their news organizations. He maintains American news media tends to be the most effective at taking a critical stance once an active political opposition framework has developed in the U.S. on a particular issue.

Still, while it might seem easy to conclude that foreign news coverage of the Iraq War was superior to American reporting because it was more critical, actually the coverage of each case was simply following the dominant political discourse in its respective region. Some British Middle Eastern scholars refer, for instance, to the “reporting style of Al-Jazeera as ‘contextualized objectivity.’ By this they mean that the network strives for fair and balances reporting, yet like all other global news channels, it is inextricably linked to the dominant political perspectives of its viewers and driven by competitive market forces within its region (Horten, 2011, 44).”

Media Framing of the 10th Anniversary of the Start of the Iraq War

The “Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma” website at the Columbia Journalism School has examined how well newspapers cover war and other traumatic issues. The Dart Center concluded, “Newspapers generally do not provide context and statistical information,” with coverage focusing on the episodic (incidents) rather than thematic (big picture). In addition, “Many news stories feature provocative or

salient aspects of an event, ignoring overarching patterns or risk factors for particular events.” (Sarah Tiegreen and Elena Newman, 2008)

Dart’s comments on the lack of context provided by news coverage turned out to be an insightful observation illustrated throughout many of the frames used in the news coverage of the anniversary of the 10th anniversary of the start of the war.

Gentzkow’s study (2010) showing, among other things, that news coverage tends to appear to be biased according to common opinions about a newspaper’s ideological position are, indeed, reflected in this study as well.

Frame 1: A Long War, Historically Significance Anniversary.

One of the main frames used by all of the papers in the sample was the length of war and the related notion that the period was of deep historical significance in assessing its outcome. These themes were, of course, not limited to these papers, but the frames can definitely be found in varying degrees in all four of the papers.

The Guardian, as noted, gave the anniversary by far the most prominent coverage -- splashing a multi-part series, “The Iraq War: 10 years on” on its front pages over several days. The paper’s March 20 issue stressed an attack in Baghdad that “took place ten years to the day after President George W. Bush announced the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein” (Beaumont, March 20, 2013). The New York Times, however, limited front page coverage on the date of the anniversary to a small block in the lower left hand corner (with full-page spreads deeper in the paper.) The Wall Street Journal and The Times didn’t note the anniversary at all on their respective front pages on the date of the anniversary, but

The Journal did play a sizable front-page story, below the fold, the day after the anniversary (March 20th). It reported an attack in Baghdad on the day of the anniversary itself. Although this study was restricted to examining news coverage of the anniversary, it is worth noting that all of the papers gave substantially more space to editorials discussing the war.

The New York Times adopted its own twist on the length of war frame. While stressing the deluge of coverage the anniversary was receiving, the Times added that the war something no one wanted currently in the U.S. government wanted to talk about:

The war that arrived a decade ago is still too painful and too controversial to discuss... So as historians, pundits, and former government officials in Washington and London produce a wave of reminiscences on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq... Iraqis are more concerned with the present.” (Arango, March 19, 2013)

The New York Times reiterated the theme in an article on March 20th that began with a reference to President Obama’s public appearance on St. Patrick’s Day:

(O)n one topic, there was a conspiracy of silence: Republicans and Democrats agreed that they did not really want to talk about the **Iraq War**.

The 10-year anniversary of the American invasion came and went on Tuesday with barely a passing notice in a town once consumed by it. Neither party had much interest in revisiting what succeeded and failed, who was right and who was wrong....” (Baker, March 20, 2013)

But what The Times didn’t consider was whether we do, in fact, celebrate the beginnings of other wars. Do we, for instance, celebrate the beginning of World Wars I or II? The Civil War? Vietnam? Why, then, should we celebrate the beginning of the Iraq War?

(In the case of the Revolutionary War, we celebrate the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776; however the Battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775 were the kickoff of actual fighting in the war. While July 4th is a major holiday in American, the April date is much less conspicuously marked.)

In addition, what the papers tended to call “the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War” was, of course, the anniversary of the start of the war--not the end of the war--a fact that the papers glossed over. As a matter of fact, though it does not sound as dramatic, the 10th anniversary of the start of the war was actually just fifteen months after American troops pulled out of the country.

Perhaps the newspapers general emphasis on the anniversary is not surprising given the public’s and the greeting card industry’s fondness for anniversaries and birthdays. But anniversaries are also manmade events that have more to do with reflecting our particular calendar rather than events in the real world.

The Times of London, however, did go beyond the frame of the date having great historical significance, including a comment from former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who said, “We still don’t know how this is going to end...With the Korean War, it is amazing how different Korea looks after 60 years than it looked after 10 or even 30.”

The other papers did not consider the fact that in the larger historical context, wars often look quite a bit different decades or centuries after they are fought than they do in the short term after the fighting. To cite some well-known examples from American history, America eventually became friends and even allies with former

enemies Japan, Germany, Vietnam, South Korea and the United Kingdom--but in a timeframe that sometimes measured decades.

Moreover, the Iraq War was by no means the longest war in history, nor the longest war in which America has fought, though none of the papers went to the trouble of placing the war in any larger historical context. The period of official fighting of American troops in the Iraq War was eight years and nine months. The Vietnam War lasted ten years and two months. The Revolutionary War lasted eight years and five months. An earlier war in the region, the Iran-Iraq War lasted seven years and eleven months.

Frame 2: Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Certainly in the popular imagination and editorial pages, the frame and slogan of “Weapons of Mass Destruction” came to almost exclusively define any discussion of the Iraq War during the anniversary period and, in particular, the cause of the war.

This frame also carried over to the news pages of the papers studied.

For instance, The Times “referred to the dodgy dossier” and “misuse of intelligence information by the Bush Administration.” (Taylor, March 14, 2013)

Two days before the anniversary, the Times of London carried a piece about a documentary about the Iraq War written by its defense correspondent saying, “The Blair and Bush government rejected intelligence refuting the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and built the case for war on a defector whose information was regarded as suspicious, a documentary says” (Coghlan, March 18, 2013). The article quoted the filmmakers without any response from “the other side.”

The frame did not usually directly address the issue of whether intelligence information concerning weapons of mass destruction was simply mistaken or an intentional lie--but context often suggested the latter. In addition, the frame suggested that weapons of mass destruction were the sole--or most important--criterion in evaluating the legitimacy of the war, overriding considerations of the nature of the Iraqi government, for example.

For example, the Times of London, in an interview with Dick Cheney noted, "Mr. Cheney holds the line on the most discredited intelligence: that Iraq was trying to buy uranium from Niger; a claim that appeared in the intelligence dossier on WMDs by Tony Blair's Government." (Taylor, March 14, 2013)

The Guardian went even further, beyond the framing solely on weapons of mass destruction, by raising the issue of a larger intelligence failure in an article entitled, "Iraq war was national disgrace, say former military chiefs." In an interview with a former British Air Force official, The Guardian wrote, "Burridge pointed not so much to the Blair government's discredited Iraqi weapons dossier, but to the failure to gather any useful information despite having been overflying Iraq at will since the first Gulf war more than 10 years earlier." (Norton-Taylor and Watt, March 18, 2013)

The New York Times, unlike the British papers, did mention the possibility that the administration was merely mistaken, not lying, about WMDs, another not in an overly complimentary way:

Stephen J. Hadley recently described the cascade of misjudgments and inaccurate assumptions inside the Bush White House leading up to the war as

a “failure of imagination.” His explanation of what went wrong is rife with lessons for two crises--one in Syria, another in Iran--that President Obama confronts as he lands in Israel on Wednesday morning.

Mr. Hadley told a small group gathered here to dissect the long-term lessons of the Iraq war that it never occurred to him or his boss, President George W. Bush, to ask: “What if Saddam is doing all this deception because he actually got rid of the W.M.D. and he doesn’t want the Iranians to know?”

Instead, the White House and the intelligence agencies leapt to the conclusion that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader who had pursued so many weapons of mass destruction in the past, must still be on the same quest” (Sanger, March 20, 2013).

Only The Wall Street Journal didn’t mention WMDs in its anniversary coverage, though it should be noted that The Journal did run editorials that supported the war.

Interestingly, causal frames such as “grab for oil,” which were also common in the popular imagination among critics of the war, did not occur as frequently (except in the Guardian which carried an article exploring the oil motive.)

Frames such as “payback for September 11th” were not emphasized in the news coverage.

Frame 3: Violence of War (Episodic not thematic). Disaster.

In keeping with the observations of the Dart Center at Columbia, coverage of the war overwhelmingly focused on “violence of war”--indeed one might say “disaster and catastrophe” and “terror.”

The Wall Street Journal, in a March 15th article about a car bombing that killed 18 people, wrote the attack “brought fresh threats of terror to downtown Baghdad following the months of relative quiet.” But The Journal went on to note:

“Many Iraqis believe the past decade of conflict has brought only violence and poverty,” citing a Gallup poll. (Bradley and Nabhan, March 15, 2013)

The anniversary itself might have seemed to be an opportunity to explore more thematic coverage, but several car bombs that exploded on the day of the anniversary, drawing the media back to the episodic violence frame.

The Guardian trumpeted a headline “Iraq rocked by wave of explosions” and described Baghdad in the accompanying article as “convulsed by a deadly wave of explosions” (Beaumont, March 20, 2013)--perhaps suggesting something more along the line of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The New York Times called “the attacks... a devastating reminder of the violence that regularly afflicts Iraq. And they somehow seemed more poignant coming on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the American-led invasion.” (Arango, March 20, 2013)

None of the articles questioned whether the attacks might have been planned to gather media attention.

And while frames such as “The Arab Spring” predominated in coverage of other events in the Middle East and Northern Africa, this frame did not occur in the Iraq anniversary coverage, which instead focused on violence. In contrast, in an academic study of “The Iraq War Ten Years On,” Louise Fawcett of Oxford maintained:

...(T)he war generated a series of changes that have had a central impact on the political evolution and international relations of the Middle East, though not in the manner anticipated by either its supporters or critics. The war and its consequences, which have become merged with developments surrounding the

Arab Spring uprisings, which started at the end of 2010, have contributed over the long term to the acceleration of popular demands for the greater liberalization of politics, to shifts in the regional balance of power and to international realignments. Authoritarian regimes across the region have been increasingly challenged; there are new sectarian divides; Iran has been empowered by the demise of its old rival Saddam Hussein. (Fawcett, 2013).

Fawcett was not quoted by the major media in the coverage of the war anniversary.

Nor did frames such as “rebuilding Iraq” or “regime change” or “democracy” receive emphasis during the anniversary period.

The Times, however, challenged the hopeless violence frame with the single most “positive” news story about the outcome of the war during the anniversary period headlined, “Ten years after Saddam, Iraqi Kurds have never had it so good.”

The article begins:

Ask a Kurd in Erbil if the war to oust Saddam was a good idea and you will be laughed at. The answer is self-evident in this city’s glittering shopping malls, rampant development, double-digit economic growth, and a disposable income quite unimaginable a decade ago. (Loyd, March 15, 2013)

The Times of London article stands in stark comparison with the New York Times article the same day headlined “Iraqis’ Pain Never Abates as Attacks Kills Dozens.”

Frame 4: Religion / Sectarian Factions.

A related, overlapping yet different frame centered on religion and sectarian factions and fighting. With the official end of the fighting involving American troops, the news coverage during the anniversary period focused on sectarian faction and violence.

While the papers did sometimes attempt to delve into the underlying dynamics of the factional fighting, the implication was almost always that the United States was to blame for the factions and the sectarian violence as well as the casualties resulting from it. The articles did not refer to the fact that conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims dates back to the year 632 AD and the death of the prophet Mohammed. Little attempt was made to put the Sunni / Shia conflict into historical context or refer to the fact that the religion has often been a basis of conflict throughout history.

The New York Times, for instance, wrote on March 19th:

The central legacy of the war, many experts say, is a political system midwived by the United States in which the spoils of power are divided along sectarian and ethnic lines. As such, compromise--in the streets and in Parliament--has been nearly impossible. Today, the notion of a national identity that supersedes the sectarian seems a fantasy. (Arango, March 19, 2013)

And in the March 18th Guardian mentioned previously (“Iraq war was national disgrace, say former military chiefs....”) the paper quotes a former British military official saying:

The real failure was to plan properly for what happened. Whose fault was that? More, I suggest, the Americans’ than ours.’ He added: “Into the power vacuum created, al-Qaida and others moved and sowed the seeds of the disastrous next few years. (Norton-Taylor and Watt, March 18, 2013)

The Wall Street Journal wavered a bit between framing and not framing the U.S. as the chief culprit in the sectarian violence.

The Journal painted a bleak picture of U.S. intervention in Iraq in its March 15th article on a car bombing. But then on March 20th, The Journal gave some of the deepest background and context to the in-fighting among factions, without referring

to the United States as cause, describing the car bombing incidents the previous day thus:

The coordinated nature of the attacks underscored renewed determination by Sunni insurgents, including those linked to al Qaeda, to exploit Iraq's heightened sectarian polarization to bring down the current Shiite-led central government, Iraqi officials and analysts said and undo the political process that was ushered in after the U.S.-led invasion.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who is a Shiite, issued a statement late on Tuesday, blaming the bombings on unnamed regional states who want to reignite sectarian warfare in Iraq." (Dagher, S. and Nabhan, A., March 20, 2013)

In Britain, The Times presented the most pro-war and pro-American assessment of the sectarian fighting, not only in the formerly mentioned article talking about how the Kurds have benefited from the removal of Saddam Hussein, but also in another article that questioned placing the questioned the blame for factional fighting on the U.S.:

Though a clear majority of Iraqis today enjoy a better quality of life--including economic opportunities, relative freedom of speech and improved security--Baghdad and Sunni-dominated provinces in the west are still plagued by violence.

Despite the unpopularity of the invasion, many Iraqis acknowledge that the country's current problems are related more to its own internal dynamics than to the Americans and British. 'Blair and Bush handed us over a country with a constitution and process, and left under agreement,'" Hoshyar Zebari, the Foreign Minister said last week.

For what has happened now we must blame ourselves. We must take the consequences of our own actions. (Loyd, March 20, 2013)

Even The Guardian, by far the biggest critic of the U.S. war, though it suggested the U.S. was the cause of the sectarian fighting, did acknowledge other

forces were at work. On March 20th, the paper described the war “as the beginning of an occupation that led to events of the sectarian war that pitted Shia against Sunni in five years of brutal blood-letting and ethnic cleansing.” (Beaumont, March 20, 2013)

But The Guardian went on to note in the same article, however:

While violence in Iraq has decreased in recent years since the end of the sectarian war in 2008, tensions have been rising again in the country, fanned by Sunni protests over equal rights and human rights abuses in northern and western provinces, in particular centred on the city of Falluja.

Analysts have blamed the slow response of the Shia-dominated Iraqi government to these protests for a resurgence in Al-Qaida in Iraq, which some claim has helped bring fresh recruits into the terrorist organization” (Beaumont, March 20, 2013).

Of course, religious factions have had a long history of attacking each other in the Middle East and Europe, but none of the articles made an effort to mention any of this historical context or provide any explanation of the religious disagreement. Many books have been written about the longstanding Shia / Sunni conflict in history; tensions between the groups existed centuries before the Iraq War.

Frame 5: Extremely Costly and Deadly War, “Catastrophic Casualties and Cost.”

Another major theme of the newspaper coverage during the anniversary concerned the large numbers of deaths and the great cost of the war. Even the two papers that tended to be less harsh in their reflection on the American role in the war-- The Wall Street Journal and The Times of London--described the situation in bleak terms.

The Journal noted, “As the Iraqi death toll mounts, so does the war’s costs to the U.S. Government. The decadelong (sic) effort cost \$1.7 trillion... Fighting over the past 10 years has killed 134,000 Iraqi civilians.” (Bradley, M and Nabhan, A., March 15, 2013)

The London Times chimed in, saying (in an article about an anti-war documentary) the costs “challenged the rationale for a war that claimed the lives of more than 100,000 Iraqis and 4,000 Western troops, including 179 British servicemen.” (Coghlan, March 18, 2013)

But while all the papers trumpeted the “great cost of the wars” none of them actually went to the effort of comparing the Iraq War to other wars--offering a regional, global, or historical context (perhaps because such comparisons tend to minimize the scale of the Iraq War?).

While some would say that human history has been nothing but one war after another, none of the articles noted dozens of wars in recent history that were deadlier, including World War I or II or Vietnam. Nor did any of the articles mention the fact that more American soldiers died in the American Revolutionary War than in the Iraq War, and more Iraqi civilians were killed in the nearly eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War two decades before the American-Iraq War.

In addition, the Iraqi civilians deaths were always described by all the newspapers in passive voice without giving an agent, tending to suggest the civilians were killed by American soldiers, without clarifying how many were killed by fighting among Sunni and Shia factions. (In addition, because the deaths on the

American side were comparatively low, there was a tendency to focus on the deaths or casualties on the Iraq side to question effectiveness of the American effort. And most papers emphasized indirect costs of the war as direct costs in apparent attempt to inflate the cost of the war, even though all wars have had indirect costs.)

Interestingly, while historically war has been framed as a stronger side defeating a weaker side and the victory has generally been considered greater based on the amount of death and destruction inflicted on the losing side, in the Iraq War, the media framed any negative consequences for Iraq as signs of defeat or loss by America. The media framed the purpose of war to be building up peace and security in your enemy, not defeating an opponent (something that Machiavelli might find rather interesting.)

This study has repeatedly noted the failure of some of the world's leading newspapers to put the war into any larger context global or historical perspective. It does not intend to repeat the same mistake. In the next section we'll see how the cost and fatalities in the Iraq War compare with other wars in U.S. history and the region.

Conclusion

Going into this study I felt certain newspaper editorials were clearly against the Iraq War during the period of the war anniversary. I wasn't completely sure whether the anti-war rhetoric would influence news coverage, though I suspected it would influence the coverage some.

What I found was that while all of the papers could be critical of the war, there was a definite spectrum (aligned with Gentzkow's study showing that newspaper

coverage does, in fact, followed the paper's perceived bias). The Times of London and The Wall Street Journal were willing to consider some positive frames of the war, whereas the New York Times tended to only consider the negative--and the most negative of all was The Guardian. National context and public opinion did seem to play a part insofar as the most critical paper, The Guardian, was located in the U.K., where, as noted, anti-war sentiment had always been stronger. But The Times of London was willing to consider more positive aspects of the war than the New York Times, so political viewpoint also seemed to play a part in the coverage. Not surprisingly the most conservative American paper in the study, The Wall Street Journal, had a more positive outlook on the war than the most liberal British newspaper, The Guardian. (If I had looked at Fox, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera, as Gentzkow had, the results probably would have been even more glaring.)

What was interesting was not just what the papers said, but what they didn't say. I do not begrudge the media the role of being critical of the American government, but clearly in the news coverage of the Iraq War anniversary there was less criticism and reflection on the evils and excesses of Saddam Hussein. There was no consideration of what might have happened had Saddam had stayed in power (considering his track record of invading his neighbors), and no consideration of whether the Iraq War was a possible catalyst of the Arab Spring. And more disturbingly there was a sort of moral relativism about the merits of tyranny versus democracy. One was merely different than the other, not better.

I was surprised, though, by just how little larger, historical context any of the papers provided. The Dart Center hit the nail on the head. Perhaps because there is such a focus on anecdotes in the media these days--the emotional over the intellectual--the anecdotal over the statistical--that it seemed to simply not occur to the editors to include this sort of coverage. I would have expected at least one of the papers would have done a probing news analysis story considering varying points of view examining “Was the war worth it?” or “What is the outcome of the war?” I also thought there might be some sort of more philosophical piece examining, “Was the Iraq War a just war?” But no such reflective pieces were to be found.

Not only did all of the papers fail to put the war into any larger global or historical context, but the news “analysis” coverage did not seem at informed in any way by important concepts from political science, such as democratic peace theory. While philosophers in Western Civilization have spent centuries theorizing over right and wrong, tyranny versus democracy and other grand notions, these ideas were conspicuously absent from the news coverage of the 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War. While I was not expecting a philosophy dissertation, I did expect at least some sort of reference or debate about the issues surrounding the morality of war, or lack thereof, as part of the anniversary coverage. This was not to be found. Indeed, in all of the papers, any sort of probing reflection about the merits of the Iraq War was largely confined to highly political pontificating on the editorial page.

To the extent that the media that can rise above simplistic political coverage of complex events like war by putting circumstances into the larger historical and global

context--and also by considering the war from the more sophisticated or philosophical framework of political science--reporting can elevate and enlighten the public rather than merely reciting the perceived wisdom of water cooler discourse.

Why should the media bother to do so? Is it worth the time or the trouble to probe more deeply?

As Mark Twain once said, "It ain't what you don't know that hurts you. It's what you know that ain't so." History proves time and time again the pitfalls of instant historical analysis--something journalists should keep in mind when assessing wars.

Few wars have been more controversial or notorious in American history than Vietnam, which may be the nation's one universally agreed foreign relations disaster. Nonetheless, the outcome of this disaster 40 years later is that public opinion polls show Vietnam has the most positive outlook on America of any nation in Asia and there is currently a rush by McDonald's and Starbucks to open a franchise on every block in the country.

Indeed, when visiting Japan, if you wish to see where America dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki nearly 70 years ago, you will be comforted to know that not far away from ground zero you will be able buy a cup of Starbucks coffee and a Big Mac.

History has the last laugh when it comes to assessing the long-term significance of any given war.

There are various ways further research could expand upon this study, such as:

- 1) evaluating a larger sample of newspapers, both American and international, and 2) exploring the differences between editorial and news coverage during the anniversary period. While it would be a larger undertaking, examining online news stories from broadcast networks, such as Fox and Al Jazeera, would provide an eye-opening perspective into the subject of possible media bias. In addition, it would be interesting to interview the editors of some of the leading newspapers or media organizations (including those studied herein as well as others) to ask them why they chose to run the news articles they did and also why they seemed to put more emphasis on editorials than news analysis.

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