

Public Abstract

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What processes are at work when one news outlet talks about the War on Terror and another talks about the “war on terror”? Do readers pay more attention to news about political violence when it is portrayed as part of the fight against terrorism, and do such portrayals make readers more willing to let the government take extraordinary measures on their behalf?

This dissertation examines those questions under the theory of securitization, which suggests that political actors can designate some processes or events as threats to national security by portraying them as “existential” threats, or imminent dangers to the nation’s physical or cultural well-being. It studies news content in three newspapers to examine changes in the news frames through which such threats as terrorism are organized and explained. Then, in an experiment, it explores whether a securitization frame affects how readers process and understand news.

The content analysis found that a salient example of securitization, the idea of a “war on terrorism,” appeared as a consensual frame in distinct sectors of the media market after the September 2001 attacks. The frame diverged predictably in ensuing years, suggesting that the securitization frame changes in response to news organizations’ sense of audience expectations and perceptions of the boundaries of political debate.

The experiment found that securitization appears to produce less-attentive processing among those opposed to the government. The absence of securitization, on the other hand, appears to produce more-attentive processing among those who consider themselves politically to the right of the media. Emotionally, the frame has no effect on opponents of the government but produces more trust in government among pro-government audiences and those to the right of the media.

The results underscore the importance of news language and framing. Further research on a broader range of securitizable topics is suggested.