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The First Hours of Online Coverage of "Operation Iraqi Freedom"

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Abstract

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While there were some differences in the framing of the event, the majority of the coverage focused on the military conflict frame. However, U.S. online news sites did not incorporate prognostic and responsibility issues as often as their international counterparts. Journalists around the world abstained from using value-laden terms such as "aggression" or "invasion" but often incorporated more subtle cues in their visuals and choice of themes.

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Comments

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Daniela V. Dimitrova, Lynda Lee Kaid and
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President George W. Bush announced military action in Iraq on March 19, 2003, at 10:19 p.m. EST. This chapter analyzes the coverage of online news sites from around the world in response to this attack. It focuses on the immediate coverage of the event by looking at how the Iraq War was framed on the home pages of leading international news Web sites.

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WAITING FOR WAR

In the beginning of 2003 the topic of war, military build up, and weapons of mass destruction saturated the news cycle (Raspberry, 2003).

Iraq and its program for weapons of mass destruction were discussed widely, both within and outside the United Nations. On March 17, 2003, Bush presented Saddam Hussein with an ultimatum: Saddam must give up power and

leave Iraq or the United States would use military force to achieve a regime change. Saddam Hussein had forty-eight hours to comply with the ultimatum. Hussein chose to stay in Iraq, and the "coalition of the willing" decided to enforce UN Resolution 1441 (Balz & Allen, 2003). With that, the forty-nine-day war began.

Even though the world press was awaiting Bush's reaction on March 19, 2003, as the ultimatum expired, they were not expecting the war to begin as quickly as it did. The press would later report that the war began days earlier than planned because U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) wanted to seize a "target of opportunity," which contained intelligence of Hussein's whereabouts (Gellman & Priest, 2003).

Yet it was fascinating to observe how the leading international news Web sites responded almost immediately with substantial coverage of the Bush announcement. One of the central questions addressed in this study was not only how quickly this coverage happened, but also how the Iraq War was framed in relation to national policy stances.

HOW MEDIA FRAME WAR

News media play an important role in framing public issues or events. Framing theory posits that media transfer the salience of specific attributes to issues or events.

While there is no one universal definition of framing, several common key elements are evident. Gamson (1992) defines framing as "the central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (p. 15). According to Entman (1993, p. 52), "to frame means to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient" in the media text. For instance, in the case of war, the media can frame the event as an invasion versus attack, or suggest a positive versus negative attitude toward the war.

Framing is visible through the choice of actors and themes present in the media coverage. Past research shows dominant frames for war coverage to be the conflict frame and the responsibility frame. One of the few studies examining the coverage of the 2003 war in Iraq was conducted by Media Tenor (2003). The study found differences between the TV networks in five countries: the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, South Africa, and the USA. For example, the BBC often reported problems with journalists' working conditions, whereas American TV did not concentrate on this as a big problem. The study also observed that American TV news rarely showed dead or wounded members of the Allied forces. The opposite was true for dead, wounded, or missing Iraqis.

Studies of the coverage of the 1991 Gulf War also provide interesting background of how media cover military conflict. Kanjirathinkal and Hickey (1992), for example, have identified four stages in the mythical drama of the first Gulf War: (1) hero's quest; (2) the encounter with evil; (3) fulfillment of the mission; and (4) return.

Kelman (1995) criticized public discourse during the 1991 Gulf War, noting the framing of self-glorification, neglect for the human costs of the war, and the call for rallying around the flag as things to avoid when framing the issue for the American public.

In a study of the coverage of the first Gulf War, Kaid, et al. (1993) found that there were substantial differences in themes chosen by five leading international newspapers from France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States. They also found that the papers tended to focus on different actors and settings, thus localizing the event and making war a "national" story.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNET COVERAGE

The Internet became a critical information source during the Iraq War.

According to Pew Internet and American Life Project data, the number of online users significantly increased right before the war (2003). In fact, 77% of U.S. Internet users went online in relation to the war, and more than half of the American online population visited a Web site specifically to get information about the war in Iraq.

Researchers have been taking note of how people use the Internet to gather information and news (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001) and how newspapers use the Internet to disseminate the news they report (Dibean & Garrison, 2001). Research findings suggest that people use the Internet to further their existing interests; with regard to news, people are looking for more information about a topic that they are already interested in. In the case of a major conflict such as war, many people are likely to turn to the online news environment as a supplement to traditional media.

As the Internet has become a more accessible information source, studies on the effectiveness and use of online newspapers, magazines, and television news Web sites have increased. Such studies review the work of journalists (Deuze, 1998), the use of the Internet for information gathering (Garrison, 2000, 2001), and coverage of national news events (Dimitrova et al., 2003), as well as online staffing and reporting (Singer, 2001; Singer et al., 1999). Such research provides insights into how online newsrooms operate and cover major news events.

STUDYING THE WEB COVERAGE OF THE WAR

The Iraq War was, without question, a major news event internationally. The research reported here was designed to explore the characteristics of international online news site homepages in the aftermath of Mr. Bush's war announcement. We focused on the question of how the event was framed around the globe and how the war was justified.

To answer these questions, a content analysis of leading international online newspapers was conducted. The list of online news Web sites included the following: BBC (*http://www.bccnews.co.uk*), CNN (*http://www.cnn.com*), *The*

New York Times on the Web (*http://www.nytimes.com*), *The Washington Post* (*http://www.washingtonpost.com*), France's *Le Monde* (*http://www.lemonde.fr*), Spain's *El Pais* (*http://www.elpais.es*), Argentina's *Clarin* (*http://www.clarin.com*), Brazil's *Globo* (*http://www.globo.com*), Egypt's *Al-Ahram* (*http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly*), Turkey's *Aksam* (*http://www.aksam.com.tr*), Russia's *Izvestia* (*http://www.izvestia.ru/*), as well as the Web sites of the major U.S. television networks.

The sample of international Web news sites chosen was based on the national reputation of the news publications and their availability online. The goal was to represent news sources from the countries most involved in the Iraqi conflict. We collected a total of 185 Web sites from forty-three countries in the hours immediately after President Bush's speech.

We analyzed the content of the home pages of all Web sites. The coding categories included pre-defined frames based on Li, et al. (2002) and Semetko and Valkenburg (1999). Web sites were coded by trained coders who were fluent in the language of the site, and intercoder reliability averaged +.88 across all categories, using the formula developed by Holsti (1969).

CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMEDIATE WEB COVERAGE

Using the potential of the Internet, the majority of the online news sites offered substantial coverage of the Iraq War just hours after the Bush announcement.

Specifically, 119 of the 195 Web sites had war-related coverage on their home pages. Of those 119 Web sites, 56% had a "breaking news" or "latest developments" section regarding the war. The Iraq War was by far the leading story across all news sites. Many of the international sites provided links to additional coverage related to Iraq and the war build up. Special sections about the conflict in Iraq were common across all Web sites.

Even though "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was the leading story around the world only hours after the war began, we expected to find some differences in the way the war was framed, especially since the prior debates about possible war were highly controversial.

First, we examined whether six pre-defined frames were present in the news coverage (see Table 23.1). The most common frame in the world coverage overall was the military conflict frame (94%). Reports on the troops, military strategies, types of military equipment, and future attacks were common. The agenda-setter for the U.S. media—*The New York Times*—provided an interactive map of Iraq on its Web site, with additional coverage of the air raid and military analysis of the strike. The second most common frame was the human interest frame (74%). Human interest themes focusing on the families of U.S. soldiers as well as stories about the lives of

TABLE 23.1 WEB SITE FRAMING OF THE IRAQ WAR

Frame	Present across all news Web sites	U.S. Web sites	International Web sites
Military conflict*	94	96	86
Human interest	74	79	68
Diagnostic frame	33	33	32
Media self-reference**	25	35	11
Responsibility frame**	22	15	36
Prognostic frame*	16	11	26

a. N=119; Numbers in table are percentages.
b. * and ** indicate statistically significant differences between international and U.S. news Web sites at the .05 and .01 level respectively, using chi-square comparisons.

ordinary Iraqis were quite common. The BBC, for example, had an interactive essay about the plight of Iraqi civilians on their home page. Many of the U.S. online sites had stories about the lives of U.S. soldiers.

A distant third was the diagnostic frame (33%), which basically discusses the reasons why the conflict occurred. Our findings showed that deep analytical coverage of the roots of the conflict was rare. The media self-referential frame was present in a quarter of the home pages (25%), followed by the responsibility frame (22%), and the prognostic frame (16%). Early reports on the Iraq War failed to provide forecasts for the future development of the conflict.

What was the dominant reference to the event in this immediate online coverage? Was it an attack, an invasion, a military action, "Gulf War II," or "Operation Iraqi Freedom"? Different news sources used a mix of these terms, not only during the initial hours of the coverage, but also throughout the entire war effort.

Most reporters, however, referred to the event as an attack or strike (59%). Less than a quarter of the home pages labeled it a war (23%). Journalists around the world tried to remain objective and use non-value-laden terms to describe the attack during the initial hours. Terms such as invasion and aggression were the exception rather than the rule.

We also examined whether the major reasons given for the war were different domestically or internationally. By far, the removal of Saddam Hussein/regime change was the dominant reason across the sample publications

(64%). (In a way, the justification to attack Iraq was personified by Saddam.) The second most common reason was weapons of mass destruction, which was dominant in 31% of the Web sites. Despite prolonged discussions at the UN about weapons of mass destruction, this was not portrayed as a dominant reason for the war. There were few references to American world domination or oil as main reasons.

We asked who was to blame for the attack by offering different individuals, countries, and groups as possible answers. Blame for the attack was attributed to the U.S. in 61% of the cases. Even though the United States was part of the "coalition of the willing" participating in the war, most reports attributed blame for the war directly to the United States. No blame was assigned in this initial coverage in 19% of the Web sites. Interestingly, almost 11% of the homepages pointed fingers at President Bush as personally responsible for the attack.

Of the six major frames described above, two were similar and four were different when comparing domestic and international Web sites. The U.S. Web news sites emphasized more the military conflict frame and the media self-referential frame. Media covering itself—the difficulties journalists faced in reporting on this story, for instance—were common for the U.S. news sites.

Non-U.S. Web sites, however, emphasized the responsibility frame. For example, *Le Monde* blamed the United States for the failure of diplomatic efforts in the conflict. The French online newspaper cited the Iraqi leader as saying on television that this attack was a "crime against humanity." It was also interesting to observe that international Web sites had more stories about the long-term effects of the conflict, discussing such issues as the rebuilding of Iraq and the future of the region as a whole.

Each national news site also had more extensive news coverage of their own involvement in the war efforts. As might be expected, local political figures and other national actors were mentioned. For instance, the Turkish online newspaper had more extensive discussion of the controversy regarding giving airspace to the coalition forces. This topic was not present in most of the other news sites.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the Web coverage of the Iraqi War was the use of photos to frame the event visually. Several Web sites used images of Bush and Saddam literally facing off against each other, which implies a personal type of battle, instead of one between two countries. Also, many of the Web sites in our sample quickly uploaded photos of Baghdad city, shots of Iraq being bombed, and of U.S. military carriers launching missiles.

This emphasis on the actual weapons and explosions is somewhat noteworthy, as it focuses on the actual violence and military conflict, literally, exploding. Strangely, the *China Daily* used a file photo from the 1999 U.S. bombing of Yugoslavia. Most Web sites, however, had either live pictures from the bombing or mug shots of Bush or other political figures.

In the aftermath of the military conflict, it became obvious that the

media—and the Internet in particular—had a tremendous impact on world opinion about the Iraq War. A subsequent poll conducted by Pew examined global attitudes and revealed clear divisions among the publics in different countries (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2003). For example, when asked if the use of military force against countries that threaten your own country is justified, the vast majority of the Palestinian and Lebanese public said it is never justified (57% and 65%, respectively).

Many countries in the Arab world and elsewhere also blamed the United States and its allies for not trying hard enough to prevent civilian casualties in Iraq (79% in Brazil, 74% in France, 52% in Germany, 67% in Italy, 72% in Russia, 88% in Turkey, 74% in South Korea, 83% in Indonesia, 81% in Nigeria, 91% in Morocco). Even among the coalition of the willing, the survey shows some doubt that the attack on Iraq was justified.

The majority opinion in Spain showed regrets about the decision to go to war (62% say the country made the wrong decision) with 37% of Australians feeling the same way. The differences in world opinion about the war and its consequences may be at least partly attributable to the differences in the local news coverage of the Iraq war. The differences in framing, in particular, are likely to have contributed to such diverse attitudes around the globe.

CONCLUSION

The conflict frame and the human interest frame dominated the international Web news coverage immediately after the war began.

Our analysis also shows that there were some important differences in the framing of the Iraq War between American and international online news sites. We found that U.S. Web sites had a stronger conflict and media self-referential focus. On the other hand, the responsibility frame and the prognostic frame were more common in the coverage of foreign Web sites.

This study is limited because it focused on the immediate coverage of the Iraq War. Future research should encompass a longer time frame and examine whether the frames emerging in the early coverage remain the same over time. Also, comparison with the online coverage of other breaking news events would be important.

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