



Framing “the Other” in Times of Conflicts: CNN’s Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War

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Abstract

This study is explored by a qualitative analysis of visual media practices in times of international conflicts. The analysis focuses on one of the leading sources of television news in the world, namely CNN, during its coverage of the 2003 Iraq War. Due to its national and international character and its popularity in coverage of war and international conflicts, CNN is thought of as a world leader in covering global conflicts. Accordingly, this research is directed toward the ways public perceptions were formed about particular ideas through CNN’s coverage. In order to develop an accurate sense of the programming that aired during the period under study, a qualitative content analysis was conducted in which a selected sample was selected and analyzed. This sample consisted of 20 CNN news stories during the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War. Relying on transcripts and videotapes of the key events of the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War CNN’ such as “Decapitation Strike”, “Shock and Awe”, Toppling of Saddam’s Statue and the bombing of Al Jazeera Office in Iraq, the qualitative analysis aims at discerning intonation, verbal and visual emphases and the subtle cues that are uniquely embedded in the visual medium. The analytical tool that is used to conduct the qualitative analysis of the selected sequences from CNN’s coverage of the 2003 Iraq War is grounded in framing analysis. The content and qualitative framing analysis of the selected sample of the CNN’s news stories about the 2003 Iraq War reveal that CNN echoed the American centered perspectives, aligning with the official war narrative supporting the war cause, and abiding by the U.S. military censorship measures.

Keywords: Iraq War, visual framing, CNN, conflict, otherness, media discourse, news creation.

1. Introduction

Journalism is the principal means through which official proclamations are disseminated in many countries of the world, as well as a significant source for information about the globe (Dearth, 2002). In international conflict situations, journalism is a primary source for information about a conflict’s principle parties, the issues upon which conflict is based, and the conflict’s progress, the successes and the failures of policies and decisions (Mhamdi, 2016).

Throughout conflicts between two parties or more, the question of language and communication looms crucial. The language that is used by each party helps define the terms of the conflict, interests and objectives. A key factor in conflicts is information which, if misleading or false, can lead to misperceptions about the parties, their objectives and strategies.

This paper is designed to elucidate the significant and influential role that television journalism plays in shaping international conflicts and wars in which the United States was involved. It will mainly tackle the issue of representation through CNN’s coverage of the 2003 Iraq War. It uses thematic content, textual, and visual media discourse analysis in order to ascertain how the military propaganda and censorship measures, the wartime media-military interactions, and the consequential info-strategic warfare materialised in the television coverage to produce televised war images and narratives shaping public opinions in a fashion that serves the war cause.

The 2003 Iraq war divided the United States during the 2008 presidential elections between pros and cons and left a lot of Americans thinking going to war was a wrong decision. American media is often accused by critics for being too critical of U.S. wartime policies. However, researchers have found that in many cases American media tend to align with the government in times of conflicts and support its war efforts, perspectives and narratives (Barnett & Roselle, 2008;

Robinson, 2004). Due to the powerful effects of television news images and its impact on audience especially when coverage is related to non-Western cultures (Altheide & Grimes, 2005), investigating visual coverage of the 2003 Iraq War uncovers how CNN presented and packaged the war to its audience.

Employing qualitative framing analysis, this paper reveals how the conflict, issues, strategies, and parties were referred to in CNN's content. It addresses the distinctiveness of news creation from events in international conflicts and the significant role that journalism plays in such crises. It emphasizes existing research indicating that news tends to favor polarity over complexity, ethnocentrism and emotions over reasoned argument and violent conflict over negotiated settlement.

2. Literature Review

Since the early 1970s prevalent research has been conducted to examine how media frames tend to affect public opinion and understanding of events. Goffman (1974) states that audience "tend to perceive events in terms of primary frameworks and the type of frame which we employ provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied" (p. 24). According to Tuchman (1978), "the news media have the power to shape news consumers' opinions and topics about which they are ignorant" (p. 2). It is argued that many Americans are quite unaware of the Middle East region and the conflicts that burst there and hence depend heavily on U.S. mainstream media to explore such far away region and its conflicts.

Gitlin (1980) identifies frames as "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (p. 6). Accordingly, media frames "are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (p. 7).

Iyenger and Simon (1993) examine two types of media framing, namely episodic and thematic. Episodic frames refer to coverage of events and issues in terms of "specific events", focusing on on-the-scene coverage of particular people and events. Whereas thematic framing opts for a more general presentation of events that takes into consideration the wider context and the background information of covered events (p. 370). According to Iyenger and Simon (1993), the media coverage of conflicts in the Middle East was exposed to episodic framing which increased public support for U.S. military intervention to resolve the conflict.

The organisational and bureaucratic nature of news creation was examined by several studies during the 1970s and 1980s. Epstein (1973) emphasizes the significance of this phase. In his influential work *News from Nowhere*, Epstein (1973) explains how the consistent picture of society is being shaped by the organisational considerations of media networks and their demands (p. 265).

Epstein (1973) scrutinized the internal workings of American national news networks between 1968 and 1969. Moreover, he interviewed a number of journalists, editors, and crewmen. His argument was that the content of news did not simply reflect what really happened, but it rather was the result of various organisational, political, economic and technical restraints encountered by the producers of news. Consequently, Epstein's observation was that the pictures of society exposed on television as national news were mostly shaped in accordance with organisational imperatives (Epstein, 1973, p. 258).

Following this same line of thoughts, Parenti (1993) strongly advocates that there are various factors that affect and control news making. One of these influential factors is media ownership which was made even worse by its concentration in the hands of a "favoured few" (Parenti, 1993, p. 28). Starting by a famous quotation stated by A. J. Liebling that "freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one", Parenti (1993, p. 26) argues that there is a high degree of media ownership. He mentions that only eight corporations control three major networks, CBS, NBC, ABC, 40 subsidiary television stations, over 200 cable TV systems, over 60 radio stations and 59 magazines (p. 26).

Parenti (1993) goes further to include the hidden role of advertisers in news making. He states that the media owners cannot "offend their large financial interests, especially those of big corporate advertisers" (p. 35). According to him, advertisers will surely cancel ads and financial aid if any reporting affects negatively their industry. Gitlin reports:

The knowledge of who pays the bills can't be dispelled, even though it doesn't always rise to consciousness. Network executives internalize the desires of advertisers. CBS's Herman Keld . . . didn't qualify his answer when I asked him whether ad agencies – and affiliates – are taken into account in programming decisions. 'I would say they are always taken into account. Always taken into account' (as cited in Parenti, 1993, p. 35).

The pattern of media ownership shows a high degree of concentration. Parenti (1993) argues:

Eight corporations control the three major television networks (CBS, NBC, ABC), some 40 subsidiary television stations, over 200 cable TV systems, over 60 radio stations, 59 magazines including Time and Newsweek chains of newspapers including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post, 41 book publishers, and various other media enterprises" (p. 26).

As a result of the media ownership concentration more media critics observed that a "private ministry of information" was emerging in the United States leading to a general attitude that freedom of the press is for those who own the presses (Bagdikian, 2000, p. 23). Arguing in the same line of thoughts, McChesney (1999, p. 91) explains the massive concentration of media ownership caused by the mergers and acquisitions which have led to the monopoly of the media field. He further mentions examples of corporations that dominate the media networks such as Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, and News Corporation. Holding a similar view, Parenti (1993) additionally clarifies that during the 1980s, the media industry was one of the business world's most active sectors when it came to "multimillion-dollar mergers and acquisitions" (p. 27). In that decade, the number of corporations dominating all media shrank from forty-six to twenty-three. By 1990 a few corporations such as Time Warner, News Corporation, Times Mirror, and Hearst controlled the lion's share of magazine circulation (Parenti, 1993, p. 27).

Consequently, all this concentration paved the way for giant media corporations to make huge profit and superior reach that enabled them to dominate and monopolize the media scene nationally and internationally. As it was revealed, a few media oligopolies are currently dominating various fields including television, radio, press, telecommunication, publishing, film and music. This monopoly has obviously resulted in a significant compartment in news reporting. Needless to say, "the social and political implications of big profits and giant media mergers are subjects not critically treated by the news commentators who work for these conglomerates" (Parenti, 1993, p. 29).

Several scholars examined the strong connection between framing and propaganda (Parenti, 1993). Parenti indicates that communicators often resort to framing when they are involved in a campaign of public opinion manipulation. For that reason, it is not astonishing to observe that framing analysis and propaganda analysis have various resembling points and share numerous similarities. Both analyses aim at scrutinizing the contours of the media's function in relation to institutional power. In addition, framing and propaganda analyses permit meticulous examination of the sources of communication by providing a firm platform for investigating the 'orchestration of discourse' incorporating its semantic and syntactic features (Entman, 2004, p. 12). However, the semblance among the two analyses does not suggest that they are identical, because framing is more comprehensive and has a broader scope covering all varieties of media communication, not just that which is marked by bias or propaganda.

3. Methodology

It is worth noting that there are considerable definitions of frames by various theorists and researchers. Gitlin (1980) defines frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse" (p.21). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) refer to frames as "interpretive packages" that give meaning to an issue (p. 13). At the core of this package is a "central organising idea, or *frame*, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue" (p. 13). Hence, by emphasizing some elements of a topic above others, a frame provides a way to understand an event or issue. In this vein, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest that frames activate knowledge, stimulate "stocks of cultural morals and values, and create contexts" (p. 7). Entman (1993) explains that news framing is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them salient" (p. 47). Indeed, framing has been repeatedly identified as media emphasizing certain aspects of news events and downplaying others. In doing so, frames "define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing analysis attends to how the media construct views and storylines and the public's response. It has a strong emphasis on causal reasoning by including the environment in which communication takes place as part of the study (Entman, 2004, p. 5). The premise of media frames analysis is that *how* information about particular issues is presented in news reports affects judgments about those issues. Using this methodological tool, analysts identify the "central organising idea" for news content which supplies the context and the content of the issue through the use of selection, emphasis and exclusion (Entman, 2004, p. 6).

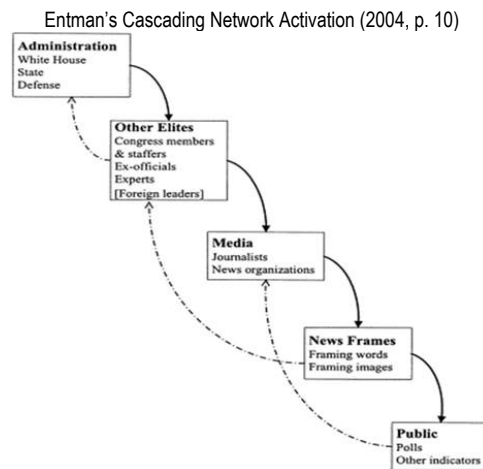
The majority of framing studies apply a broad definition of a frame as introduced by Gamson and Modigliani (1989). In short, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic and how they are presented to the masses of people. Entman (1993) suggests that frames in news can be identified and examined by the "presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide

thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements” (p. 53). Along these lines, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identify “framing devices” that condense information and offer a “media package” of an issue. They identify (1) metaphors, (2) exemplars, (3) catch phrases, (4) depictions and (5) visual images as framing devices (p. 15). A comprehensive empirical approach is offered by Tankard (2001, p. 116) who suggests a list of 11 framing mechanisms or focal points for identifying and measuring news frames:

1. headlines
2. subheads
3. photos
4. photo captions
5. leads
6. source selection
7. quotes selection
8. pull quotes
9. logos
10. statistics and charts
11. concluding statements and paragraphs

Another addition to framing research is Robert Entman’s cascade model which highlights what the hegemony model neglects: “that the collapse of the Cold War consensus has meant differences among elites are no longer the exception but the rule” (Entman, 2004, p. 5). Entman (2004) builds on previous framing research and introduces his model of cascading activation which suggests a larger system of communication that links presidents, elites and foreign leaders, journalists, news texts, and citizens.

Based on a review and synthesis of literature, Entman (2004) provides a standard definition of framing as “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (p. 5). The cascade model is designed to help explain how “thoroughly the thoughts and feelings that support a frame extend down from the White House through the rest of the system” (p. 9). The following figure illustrates the cascading flow of influence linking each level of the system:



It is worth mentioning that framing analysis is the major analytical approach that is used for the qualitative analysis part of this study. Accordingly, it allows for a detailed scrutiny of media ownership, sources and presentation techniques and their vital role in creating content to be presented and disseminated to the public masses in a certain shape for a definite end. Additionally, framing analysis is very useful for scrutinizing discourse structures adopted by journalists. This analytical tool reveals the probable frames that may aim at projecting definite cultural values, political purposes and military plans that are being obscured and merged with media content.

This study is explored by a qualitative analysis of journalism during the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War. The analysis focuses on one of the leading sources of television news in the world, namely CNN. The choice of this TV news channel as the focus of this research reflects my contention that television news is both a significant source of cultural

production and an important source of information for U.S and global audiences in situations to which they have no direct access. CNN is chosen for its national and international character and its popularity in coverage of war and international conflicts. CNN is thought of as a world leader in covering global conflict and war.

This research is directed toward the ways public perceptions were formed about particular ideas through CNN's coverage. It is therefore important that such an examination be grounded in data which describe CNN's content during the period under study, and that this data is verifiable and accurate. In order to develop an accurate sense of the programming that aired during the period under study, a qualitative content analysis was conducted in which a selected sample was selected and analyzed. This sample consisted of 20 CNN programming (packages or stories) during the initial phase of the 2003 Iraq War. This period under study refers to the two months of March and April 2003 and the main events that took place during that crucial period. Hence, the qualitative analysis mainly focuses on CNN' news coverage of key events during the war such as "Decapitation Strike", "Shock and Awe", Toppling of Saddam's Statue and the bombing of Al Jazeera Office in Iraq. Relying on transcripts and videotaped copies of these stories, the qualitative analysis aims at discerning intonation, verbal and visual emphases and the subtle cues that are uniquely embedded in the visual medium. Data was collected through online search. Sequences of the live coverage of CNN through its official website was consulted and it offered a rich and valuable electronic archive full of resources such as reporters' videos, photos, news manuscripts, and talk shows. CNN documented its coverage of the 2003 Iraq War in a "War Tracker" which offers a day-by-day look at the war in Iraq. These resources are available online at CNN international.com. The analytical tool that is used to conduct the qualitative analysis of the selected sequences from CNN's coverage of the 2003 Iraq War is grounded in framing analysis.

The data was coded via a code sheet in which relevant conceptual themes and topics were operationalized into categories for analysis. Specifically, data was collected on references in the stories to:

1. Themes: These are the themes that were stated in the stories upon which the 2003 Iraq War conflict was supposed to have been based. Common themes were weapons of mass destruction, the connection with terrorism, threats to the United States, Islamic fundamentalism, Saddam as evil dictator, and economic reasons.
2. Policies: These refer to the policies that were discussed in the CNN transcripts such as war on Iraq, UN action, and non-violent conflict resolution.
3. Sources: sources that were referenced in the stories were studied with reference to (1) frequencies of references, (2) words quoted, and (3) story support by sources.

This quantitative content analysis examines the volume of coverage in terms of the conflict's themes, policies, and strategies as well as to examine the use of available sources and resources of information in relation to their perspectives and positions.

The following section will detail the results of this qualitative analysis which aimed at discerning textually the state of the world that was presented in CNN content during the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War trying to uncover the frames and discourses that were embedded in CNN's coverage and packaged to its audiences.

4. Findings and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the data reveals a strong tendency to use official government sources over others, especially those of the president and White House. This is borne out in the data about sources, particularly data featuring the high volume of coverage of the president and White House. Additionally, the data pertaining to the recurring representation of themes that have afterwards been proven fake propose that the thoughts and plans presented by influential sources were carried on in subsequent coverage.

It is helpful at this point to apply framing theory to the analysis, in order to put forward the wider implication of the content. Actually, the themes that were highlighted in the coverage had immense potential to instigate fear and inflame violent reaction. The CNN content presented a strong case for going into war with Iraq to oust the evil dictator and preemptively stop the threat he poses to U.S. interests and national security. The eminent levels of source and story support, the nonexistence of questioning of policies and sources, and attribution of themes such as war, terrorism, WMD, and evil dictator to particular prominent and significant sources ascertained these themes as the interests for consideration, and eventually those upon which the 2003 Iraq War was predicated.

The findings of the qualitative analysis of the selected sample of the CNN's coverage of the 2003 Iraq war during the first two months shows that the visual coverage starts with an American-centered war narrative as has always been the case. Such a narrative repetitively reflects a pro-U.S. nationalistic approach and ideological values consistent with the dominant values of American mainstream media and their national audience. This narrative focuses on the role of the

United States as the protector of democracy which has a moral responsibility to fight evil dictators in every corner of the globe, however remote.

This study found that CNN's coverage of the 2003 Iraq War aligns with this pattern and this approach by framing the first two months of the war from a purely American-self-centered perspective focusing on themes and frames pertaining to inevitability of war, good vs. evil, liberation of Iraq, preemptive strike, orientalism, otherness, human dimension, and military might. The conflict frame dominated the coverage throughout the first two months of the war.

The analysis suggests that, on one side, there was a strong support for official proclamations, perspectives and sources in the content and, on the other side, a corresponding reluctance to sustain claims that challenged these assertions. Besides, the visual coverage of the CNN supported both the United States and the U.S. military overtly – by referring to the virtue of U.S. ideology and mission, and implicitly, by recurrently and firmly destabilizing its opponents.

The content is strongly reliant on official U.S. perspectives while undermining contradicting perspectives and their proponents. Numerous references are made to the war's inevitability. CNN's coverage made strong references that clearly delineated good and evil and firmly placed the United States on the side of good while just as firmly presenting Saddam Hussein as evil.

CNN's coverage of Saddam Hussein focused on a number of themes that served the war cause directly and indirectly. For instances, one of the recurring themes on CNN was *Non-compliance*. The focus on this issue implies that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, which was the object of the UN mandates that Saddam Hussein had ignored. The assertion of Iraqi non-compliance entails that Saddam Hussein was breaching international law. Hence, he is represented as a rule-breaker who must have been brought to justice. Similarly, it also implies via contrast that the United States is serving the international community interest and that those who oppose U.S. policy are supporting an evil dictator and a law breaker.

Along with the *non-compliance* with international law theme, CNN repeatedly asserted that Saddam Hussein was an *evil dictator* who prevented Iraqis from enjoying freedom and democracy. The habitual presentation of Saddam Hussein's atrocities implies his intention and willingness to kill his enemies, especially those who are powerless. This type of presentation framed Saddam Hussein as a president who hinders people's rights and behaves violently against his people. These interests were presented in a way that strikes at the core of American and Western values.

Another theme that is noticeable in CNN's coverage is the assertion of Iraq acquisition of WMD which could be an eminent threat to the United States and its allies. Since the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government has consistently warned against further potential attacks and the probable devastating effects that could have resulted if the September 11 hijackers used WMD. The affirmation that Iraq acquired WMD is associated with the possible connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Additionally, when used in concurrence with the claim that Iraq poses a looming threat to the United States, WMD amplify the already existing fears and concerns of Americans in the aftermath of September 11. Furthermore, the WMD and Iraqi threat assertion imply a sense of urgency to war on Iraq. So, a pre-emptive attack to oust Saddam Hussein and disarm Iraq of the WMD is presented on CNN as an urgent necessity.

Going for war with Iraq was directly and indirectly supported by CNN's coverage and was a reasonable and predictable conclusion. Saddam Hussein was presented as a violent and evil man connected to U.S. current enemies threatening the U.S. interests and people. He was not presented in a way that favors negotiation or peaceful resolution of the conflict. Besides, the sheer volume of coverage devoted to war and the military intervention in Iraq, as compared to any other peaceful policy option, left no room for any consideration of other probable policies for dealing with Iraq.

Employing framing analysis employs not only what was included in the CNN coverage, but also what images and videos was ignored. According to Hall (1997) what is absent in the visual coverage is as illuminating as what has been covered. CNN's reporting of the 2003 Iraq War overlooked alternative perspectives such as destruction caused by the U.S. military, antiwar protests, Iraqi sufferings, oil resources and the Middle-Eastern counter-discourse of destruction, invasion and occupation. The post 9/11 atmosphere of patriotism and need for national security "not only promoted self-censorship but also squelched debate" (Kumar, 2006, p. 53). Additionally, images of dead and injured females and children were largely absent from the CNN's coverage. The focus was rather on display of the U.S. military might and smart precise bombs. In so many cases, CNN sought to mimic Hollywood filmmaking techniques to offer audiences movie-like entertainment (Mhamdi, 2016).

5. Conclusion

This study explored media representation in times of international conflicts focusing on CNN's coverage during its coverage of the 2003 Iraq War. It was directed toward the ways public perceptions were formed about particular ideas

through CNN's coverage. A qualitative content analysis was conducted in which a sample was selected and analyzed. This sample consisted of 20 CNN news stories during the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War. The qualitative framing analysis aimed at discerning verbal and visual cues that are embedded in the visual reporting of CNN.

Employing framing analysis, this study reveals a picture of CNN's coverage of the 2003 Iraq War which offers useful corroboration to the existing theories assertions about journalistic coverage of international conflicts. CNN's coverage considerably favors governmental perspectives, particularly President Bush and his White House representatives. The analysis of the data reveals CNN's tendency to use government sources over others. It also reveals the prevalence of a number of frames, namely the Orientalist frame, the conflict frame, the military frame, the liberation frame, the pre-emptive war frame, the otherness frame, and the reconstruction of Iraq frame. This indicates a largely cooperative media-military relationship between CNN and the U.S. military.

The study, nevertheless, has obvious limitations. First, the sample videos and transcripts cover only some episodes of the first two months of the 2003 Iraq War. Hence, the findings, especially those pertaining to the predominant themes and frames, cannot be generalized for the whole duration of the conflict. Second, the study did not focus on the semiotic analysis of the visual war imagery which could have illuminated other aspects of CNN's coverage of the 2003 Iraq War.

Because of these limitations, the investigator suggests that further research be undertaken, in which a focus on the semiotic analysis of the 2003 Iraq War could be addressed. Additionally, enlarging the sample of war episodes under investigation could add new findings to the current literature.

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