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American Behavioral Scientist 2009 52: 678

DOI: 10.1177/0002764208326515

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U.K. Media and Media Management During the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

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Media's role in wartime has long been the subject of controversy, marked by claims that media promote, or indeed constrain, military action, and over the impact of patriotism and new technologies on wartime levels of media autonomy. Based on a detailed examination of U.K. press and television coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and of the U.S./U.K. coalition's media briefings, this report summarizes initial findings concerning media management and press content. We show that the coalition consistently promoted the humanitarian case for war, humanitarian operations and 'slow but sure' military progress, while U.K. press coverage largely reflected this focus upon military progress, accepting and even promoting the broader humanitarian rationale for war. Nevertheless, we uncovered a degree of media criticism that emerged in response to events outside the coalition's control, such as civilian and military casualties. We also direct readers to further outputs from the project analyzing various aspects of British media coverage of the invasion in greater detail.

Keywords: *media, press, media-management, Iraq war, media-state relations*

The relationship between media and war has long been the focus of controversy. This is due, at least in part, to U.S. experience during the Vietnam War. During that cold war-era conflict, the belief that an oppositional media fueled antiwar sentiment, thereby contributing to U.S. military failure, became encapsulated in the notion of the *Vietnam Syndrome*. As President Nixon (1978) claimed, the "relentless and literal reporting of the war" resulted in "a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength of purpose at home" (p. 350). The existence of the Vietnam Syndrome is open to debate, but it has generally been perceived by

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governments and military to be genuine, and the result has been ever more sophisticated attempts to manage and influence media (Taylor, 1992). The strategy of *embedding* journalists alongside frontline troops is a prominent and recent example of media management. From the perspective of governments, then, media are beasts to be tamed during war. In parallel, a critical literature suggests that media eschew objective reporting in times of war in favor either of implicit support for government war objectives or of explicit cheerleading for their national military. In the conclusion to their edited collection *Taken by Storm*, Bennett and Paletz (1994) explained the failure of U.S. journalists to report the 1991 Gulf War impartially as a function of “insufficient dedication to the freedom of the press, fear of provoking government outrage, shared frames of reference with governing elites, and the pursuit of sales” (p. 284). Of course, there is no agreement among journalists themselves about their proper role in wartime. However, it is notable that in spite of strong political and military pressure to embed with military units to cover the 2003 Iraq war, some Western journalists were determined to maintain a more autonomous role and braved considerable danger to report the war as *unilaterals* (Tumber & Palmer, 2004). Underlying these diverse perspectives are empirical questions about whether wartime media offer a one-sided perspective (and if so, why) and the normative question of how media should report war.

This research report deals primarily with the first empirical question above and concerns levels of media autonomy (or objectivity) in the case of U.K. press coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In this article we provide an overview of the initial findings of a 2-year Economic and Social Research Council-funded research project¹ examining British press and TV coverage as well as coalition media-management operations. The focus in this report is on the initial aggregate-level findings that emerged from our media-management and press analyses. More-detailed analysis, including the results of our TV news analysis, can be found in full-length research articles (Goddard, Robinson, & Parry, 2008; Murray, Parry, Robinson, & Goddard, 2008; Robinson, Goddard, Parry, & Murray, in press). Full and final results will come in the shape of a research monograph (Robinson, Goddard, Taylor, Parry, & Murray, in press).

Media, War, and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Debates and Controversies

At a political level, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the most controversial British foreign policy decision since the 1956 Suez Crisis and involved widespread opposition from both the general public and parliament before, during, and after the invasion phase. In this situation, accusations of bias and distortion were regularly leveled at both the U.K. media and the U.K. government. The most prominent controversy was the dispute between the Blair government and the British Broadcasting Corporation

(BBC) surrounding the claim that prewar intelligence concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability had been intentionally exaggerated by the prime minister's office. The fallout from this dispute led to the Hutton Inquiry (Ministry of Justice, 2004) and ultimately to the resignations of the BBC's Chairman and Director General. Our research contributes to these debates about government and media bias, providing a thorough analytical account of how the main U.K. TV news outlets and national newspapers reported events immediately prior to the invasion, during the main invasion phase, and for a short time following the fall of Baghdad. We have also examined, in detail, coalition media-management operations.²

At an academic level, U.K. media coverage of the 2003 Iraq war is, at first glance, a possible exceptional case vis-à-vis the critical literature on media and war. This literature maintains that media lack autonomy in wartime and remain largely deferential to government war aims (e.g., [Bennett & Paletz, 1994](#); Carruthers, 2000; Glasgow University Media Group, 1985; Hallin, 1986). For example, Daniel Hallin's (1986) seminal work on U.S. media and the Vietnam War found that critical reporting surfaced only after the U.S. administration had become split between *hawks*, who believed victory had to be attained whatever the costs, and *doves*, who believed the price of victory in Southeast Asia was not worth paying. Furthermore, Hallin found that media rarely reported outside the bounds of this elite debate to argue that the war was fundamentally wrong or immoral. Various reasons are put forward to explain apparent media deference to government war objectives. These include excessive dependence on government sources when constructing the news, ideological factors such as anti-Communism during the cold war, patriotism, and news values rooted in episodic coverage. The broader context to the 2003 Iraq war, however, suggests the possibility of a more autonomous and adversarial media. Specifically, some (e.g., [Entman, 2004](#)) have argued that the passing of the cold war bipolar order, which previously united journalists and policy makers in an ideological fight against Communism, has led to a greater willingness on the part of media to question foreign policy. In addition, technological advances during the past 25 years, including the proliferation of highly portable news-gathering equipment, the rise of 24-hr global news, and the Internet, are argued by many ([Deibert, 2000](#); Rothkopf, 1999; Volkmer, 1999) to have reduced government control over the information environment, thereby facilitating greater levels of media autonomy and criticism. Furthermore, as a consequence of the high levels of political controversy within the U.K. executive and legislature, theories that emphasize the role of elite dissensus in increasing levels of media criticism (e.g., Entman, 2004; [Robinson, 2002](#); [Wolfsfeld, 1997](#)) might predict the presence of significant levels of media criticism in this case. Finally, some attention has been paid in recent years (e.g., [Lawrence, 2000](#); [Wolfsfeld, 1997](#)) to the ways in which events that occur beyond the control of governments (e.g., civilian casualties, *friendly fire* incidents, terrorist attacks) can challenge government attempts to influence the media agenda and lead

to greater levels of criticism from media. However, the extent to which such uncontrolled events lead to media criticism in the case of war remains the subject of debate.

With these controversies and debates in mind, we carried out a detailed content and framing analysis of the seven major national newspapers: the *Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Sun*, together with their Sunday equivalents. We also examined the major U.K. TV news outlets, including the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4 evening news broadcasts, as well as a segment of the nonterrestrial 24-hr channel Sky News. Building on a range of existing frameworks designed to measure media autonomy and bias (drawing, most notably, on Hallin, 1986; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991), we documented a wide variety of indicators relating to media autonomy, from the variety of sources used by media to the prevalence of particular pro- and anticoalition frames. With respect to coalition media-management operations, a content analysis of available coalition briefings was carried out to identify the subjects, issues, and themes promoted during the course of the invasion. The period of analysis ran from March 17, 2003, to April 18, 2003, beginning 3 days before the invasion, continuing through the major-combat phase of the war, and ending 4 days after the fall of Tikrit.

Coalition Media-Management Operations

Key approaches to media management during the war included the use of embedded reporters and the dissemination of coalition messages via press briefings and other public announcements. Although the policy of embedding was not unprecedented, it was unusual in terms of the numbers of journalists deployed to frontline units and the extent of systematic preplanning and training devoted to it by the military. Generally seen as a successful strategy from the coalition's point of view, embedding journalists with frontline units enabled the journalists to file reports based on their firsthand experience alongside coalition troops, without having to rely on the secondhand information provided in the array of coalition press briefings.³ As such, embedding was also attractive to news organizations in its promise of dramatic and immediate coverage of coalition soldiers in action.

Nonetheless, press briefings remained an important component of coalition media-management operations. Although U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM; based in Doha, Qatar) provided the focal point for the dissemination of coalition information to journalists via news conferences, a consistent range of messages was communicated across different briefing forums, including statements to the British parliament; press conferences held in Downing Street, at the U.K. Ministry of Defence, and the U.S. Departments of Defense and State; and statements by the White House Office of Global Communications. Across these outlets, we found that the main strategy of the coalition's news management was to focus attention on three themes and to ensure

that unfolding events were interpreted in relation to them. First was the theme that the campaign was progressing. An emphasis was placed on confidence in the success of the military campaign and the inevitable overthrow of the Saddam regime, but there was also an attempt to deflate overoptimistic expectations of a rapid victory. Here, there was clear evidence that the media were a key target for this message—not least in the comments referring to media performance in reporting Kosovo and Afghanistan that came from briefing podia. This theme accounts for the domination of the *battle* frame within coalition briefing subjects: In fact, 40% of the subjects coded within statements fell under this heading. The second major theme focused on the need to build a better Iraq; 9.4% of subjects, the second-largest group, dealt with the reconstruction and future of Iraq. The third-largest emphasis (9.1%) was on the scale of humanitarian efforts to assist the Iraqi people. But we found some notable issues to be virtually absent from coalition briefing activities, including two of the key justifications of the war, WMD (1.5%) and terrorism (1.7%).

The three major themes were consistently communicated across the period of the study and across the different briefing forums. This consistency reflected lessons from media operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. However, the United Kingdom mounted a lower level of briefing activity than during the Kosovo crisis, and the daily U.K. briefings present in that campaign were not replicated for Iraq. Despite formal mechanisms of coordination, such as daily telephone conferences between coalition spokespersons, there were limits to the ability of such activities to produce uniformity. It was also recognized that intensive briefing activities could be counterproductive. In the Iraq conflict, one message expressed in press conferences on both sides of the Atlantic in the early days of the war that reflected ideas of the how the news management effort should be run was a refusal to provide a running commentary on events.

Overall, however, coalition media-management operations were largely successful in communicating a consistent set of themes across the period of the study and, combined with the policy of embedding, encouraging a news agenda focused on slow but sure coalition military progress.

Reporting the War: U.K. Press

Our analysis of U.K. media was one of the most detailed of its kind and enabled us to provide a complex examination of how television and press behaved in reporting the conflict and how particular issues were covered. For now, in offering an outline of our press findings, we confine ourselves to some of the key aspects in reporting the war and, for the most part, to aggregate findings among newspapers. Looking first at the subject agenda embraced by the U.K. press during the course of the conflict, we found news reports to have been dominated by coverage of the battle. More than 49% of newspaper stories related to the ongoing military

campaign, associated matters of strategy, or both. Because we also coded during a short period running up to the war, as well as a week after the fall of Baghdad, the data revealed the dramatic shift in the news agenda away from *diplomacy* and *rationale for war* prior to the conflict and on to battle coverage, as well as away from battle coverage and on to the issue of *law and order* once Baghdad had fallen. The subjects of *diplomacy* and *Iraqi people* each appeared in around 10% of news reports. Controversial issues such as *civilian casualties* and *antiwar protest* accounted for considerably less than 10% of news stories across newspapers. Only a fraction of coverage (less than 6%) focused on substantive issues such as the *rationale for war* (which we took to involve the threat posed by WMD, humanitarian justifications for action, and a linkage with the war on terror). Coverage, then, was largely event-driven (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and gave relatively little space to substantive issues.

With respect to political actors' access to the news agenda, coalition officials dominated, with more than 80% of newspaper reports mentioning at least one. Also well represented were members of the Iraqi regime (more than 50%) and Iraqi civilians (31%). Other relevant actors, such as the antiwar movement, UN officials, experts, and humanitarian organizations, received far less access to the press, with none of these groups appearing in more than 12% of coverage. Figures for sources actually quoted by the press further emphasize the success of the coalition in gaining access. The coalition was responsible for more than 45% of direct quotations across newspapers, but in contrast to the wide extent of their coverage, quotes from the Iraqi regime never amounted to more than 5% of the total. Similarly, although Iraqi civilians received a substantial degree of media attention, they were less well represented via direct quotation, averaging 9% across newspapers. Other actors received relatively little coverage, usually less than 10%. For example, antiwar actors were responsible for approximately 5% of all quotes, and humanitarian actors never achieved more than 4% across newspapers.

Our *reporter tone* variable measured journalists' adherence to norms of objectivity and neutrality toward actors (defined as *straight* reporting, as opposed to openly deflating or reinforcing commentary). More than 80% of reporting in the broadsheet newspapers was straight, although the tabloids fell below this figure. By this measure, then, much of the U.K. press largely fulfilled expected norms of neutrality and objectivity. Closer examination of instances in which journalists did engage in reinforcing or deflating commentary, however, revealed a clear tendency to depart from objective reporting when discussing the Iraqi regime. The picture for newspapers was complex because of the great diversity of viewpoints represented in the press, but at the aggregate level, the Iraqi regime was by far the most likely actor to receive deflating commentary.

Finally, our framing analysis provided an indicator of subtler forms of bias. Here, we assessed the extent to which reports favored the coalition perspective or reflected an alternative perspective. Our coding frames were developed only for key areas of

coverage by which the range of media debate during the war could be assessed, namely, *battle*, *civilian casualties*, *military casualties*, *humanitarian issues*, *law and order*, and *justifications for war* (involving WMD, humanitarian motives, and war-on-terror connections). With respect to battle, for example, stories were coded as positive for the coalition if they emphasized, implicitly or explicitly, military success. Conversely, stories were coded as negative for the coalition if they focused on military failures with clear disdain or critical distance in reporters' comments and with antiwar sources being drawn on and given priority over coalition sources. The subjects chosen for framing analysis also enabled us to distinguish between areas in which procedural criticism might occur (battle, civilian casualties, etc.) and those in which substantive criticism might occur (e.g., justifications for war).

Many reports about the battle itself favored the coalition, and only a small number played negatively. So for the predominant subject, coverage tended to be either favorable or mixed for the coalition and only rarely problematic. A very different picture emerges, however, when we consider the subjects of civilian casualties, humanitarian issues, coalition military casualties, and law and order. For civilian casualties, less than 11% of reports played positively for the coalition whereas 68% of press coverage was coded as negative. With respect to humanitarian issues, most reports were critical of coalition attempts to manage humanitarian operations, with 40% of press coverage being coded as critical whereas only 25% of press coverage gave more-positive assessments. The subject of coalition military casualties was also problematic for the coalition, with 26% of reports reinforcing the coalition frame vis-à-vis casualties and 22% deflating. Finally, law and order attracted a large proportion of critical coverage. Only around 10% of law and order stories were positive for the coalition whereas approximately 30% were coded as negative.

Contrasting with the significant levels of procedural criticism outlined above, our findings fail to offer strong evidence of press coverage that was autonomous in its approach to the official narratives and justifications for the war in Iraq. Most reports making substantial reference to the WMD rationale for war reflected and reinforced the coalition argument—for example, by relaying the coalition's claims regarding Iraq's WMD capability in unproblematic terms. Less than 15% actually challenged official narratives in this respect. In referencing the humanitarian argument for war, coverage overwhelmingly reflected official narratives concerning the moral case for war. More than 80% of stories mirrored the government position, and less than 12% challenged it. The rationale for war least accepted by U.K. press was offered by the war on terror. Here, 47% of press reports were reinforcing whereas 40% of press reports challenged it. For this category, a large proportion of coverage was coded as mixed.

Regarding internewspaper variation, the *Sun* stood out as the only paper offering uncritical support for coalition operations. Other newspapers were more mixed; nevertheless, even the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, and the *Mirror*—the most avowedly antiwar papers—gave a considerable amount of implicit or explicit support to the military campaign and the assumptions on which it was based.

Preliminary Findings

From these outline findings, some aggregate-level conclusions can be drawn about the U.K. press' contribution in shaping the story of the war for its readers. The coalition was clearly the most successful actor, both in securing access to media and in gaining airtime for extensive direct quotation, so coverage of the war was narrated largely through the voice of the coalition, with much less attention given to other actors. Measuring the balance of reinforcing versus deflating commentary, only the Iraqi authorities stood out as receiving negative treatment from the U.K. press. In respect to *battle*, the dominant subject area, the news agenda was largely consistent with the coalition briefing strategy. Moreover, the coverage given by most newspapers was largely positive toward and only rarely critical of the coalition's military operations. At the aggregate level, then, U.K. press coverage tended to reflect the coalition perspective regarding the course of the military campaign. An effect of this focus on the detail of battle progress was that subjects that might have been reported more critically were effectively crowded out of the coverage.⁴

A more adversarial media role can be identified in relation to the specific subject areas of civilian casualties, military casualties, humanitarian operations, and the issue of law and order in Iraq. Although a considerable proportion of coalition briefings was orientated toward these issues, coverage was more often critical of the coalition than supportive, and here we have the most extensive evidence of an independent press operating as a challenger to official narratives. In particular, whereas the coalition sought to promote humanitarian operations in 9.1% of briefings and the issue of reconstruction in 9.4% of briefings, press coverage tended to downplay these issues (less than 5% of press coverage) and, when actually covering them, generally did so in a fashion that undermined the coalition line. Two important qualifications need to be made, however. First, these subject areas represent a relatively small proportion of overall coverage, which, in the main, played positively for the coalition. Second, such critical reporting related primarily to procedural matters such as the need to provide adequate humanitarian relief to civilians. Examination of substantive criticism about the justifications for war (WMD, humanitarian, war on terror) revealed greater success for the coalition.

In fact, the WMD and war-on-terror justifications do not seem to have been much of a priority for the coalition's media-management operation. Coalition briefings rarely mentioned them (in less than 2% of those that we coded). Nonetheless, press coverage mainly served to reinforce the official line, although war on terror was the more skeptically treated. Combined with the lack of media attention to the subject of *rationale*, this suggests not only that once the war started, debate over the reasons for war was granted less importance but also that the general tendency was to accept official explanations. A central coalition theme, promoting the moral case for war in Iraq to replace dictatorship with democracy, seems largely to have been accepted by journalists. As noted above, the second-largest area of attention within briefings (9%) related to the theme of

building a better Iraq. Hence, although the practicalities of supplying humanitarian aid were predominantly criticized, the broader humanitarian rationale also went virtually uninterrogated by media, which accepted and, at times, promoted it.

Concluding Comments

The U.K. press and TV coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq presented an unusual case study of war and media. The war was deeply controversial, and widespread debate and controversy have followed over the role of media. The initial and summary findings set out in this research report, however, indicate that during the invasion phase, accusations of antiwar bias are difficult to sustain. Far more often than not, British newspapers reported news that was positive for the coalition and did not diverge significantly from the battle agenda promoted during coalition briefings and further reinforced via the policy of embedding. At the same time, our research did establish a range of media criticism that emerged in response to events outside the control of the coalition, such as civilian and military casualties.

At present, beyond formal and detailed explication of the results summarized here, we are conducting analysis along three strands: First, although aggregate-level findings, as set out here, are important, we feel it is also necessary to examine variations across both the course of the conflict and the media outlets. Close analysis along these lines can reveal interesting exceptions to the norm. In particular, we are currently examining variation in coverage across the press, in which several newspapers maintained a more antiwar stance throughout the conflict. Here our aim is to understand and explain how these newspapers negotiated the difficult task of continuing to oppose a war once British troops were in action. Initial conclusions regarding this issue can be found in "Patriotism Meets Plurality" (Goddard et al., 2008). Second, we are continuing a detailed analysis of a series of case studies that have been identified from time-series data drawn from our research and that indicate points of successful coalition media management or points of heavily critical media coverage. These include the decline of prewar media debate over justifications for the war and the shift away from supportive coverage once Baghdad had fallen, one instance each of civilian and military casualties, and coalition media-management operations in relation to the Basra uprising and the rescue of Jessica Lynch. Here, the goal is to understand precisely how these events unfolded and why they had the impact that they did. Third, we are also examining closely the treatment of particular actors during the course of the conflict. For example, current work focuses on the extent to which the antiwar movement was successful in maintaining positive media attention both before and after the start of the invasion; again, initial findings vis-à-vis coverage of the antiwar movement can be found in "Reporting Dissent in Wartime" (Murray et al., 2008).

Finally, although our study is focused on providing a detailed investigation of U.K. media coverage of the 2003 Iraq war, it is possible and necessary to extend

such detailed analysis both to earlier wars and to any future conflicts. Research along such lines would lead to an accumulation of knowledge that helps build a more complete empirical and theoretical account of wartime media–state relations. In particular, comparative research would help illuminate the extent to which technological advances, shifting geopolitical landscapes, and strengthened government attempts to influence media have affected how media report war.

Notes

1. Economic and Social Research Council award reference RES-000-23-0551. Applicants: Piers Robinson, Peter Goddard, Robin Brown, and Philip M. Taylor; research assistants Katy Parry, Craig Murray, and Cristina Archetti. The databases (press and TV) and codebooks are available through the Economic and Social Data Service (<http://www.esds.ac.uk/>) and direct from the authors.

2. This component of the research was conducted at Institute of Communication Studies, Leeds University, by Robin Brown and Philip M. Taylor.

3. For a detailed explanation of the embedding policy, see the article “Why Embed? Explaining the Bush Administration’s Decision to Embed Reporters in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq,” by Cortell, A., Eisinger, R. M., and Althaus, S. L. in this issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*. See also Tumber and Palmer (2004).

4. In a comparable analysis of U.S. TV reporting of the war, Aday, Livingston, and Herbert (2005, p. 18) also found the dominance of episodic battle coverage to have had this effect.

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Katy Parry is a PhD student at the University of Liverpool, examining the use of photography in the UK press depiction of war, with particular reference to the Iraq War in 2003. Her research interests include developing a model of visual framing analysis in order to examine how narratives or ideologies are promoted in visual news discourse.