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**One war, different coverage: Exploring cultural
influences on international media framing of the
Iraq War**

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to demonstrate in empirical terms how cultural forces shape media coverage of global events. To buttress this fact, the spotlight was on international media coverage of the war in Iraq. The Iraq War was a defining media event. To underpin cultural influences on the war coverage, the paper reviewed five studies (Ravi, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Kolmer & Semetko, 2009; Barker, 2012, Gou et al., 2015) on the coverage of the war in different countries. Results revealed that the cultural context within which each news source was situated shaped the news representation of the war. The cultural factors that influenced the coverage were beyond the control of journalists and their media organizations, suggesting that culture is an important variable that should be considered when studying news production and coverage. The findings reinforce the widely held view that news production is shaped by competing influences, including cultural values.

Keywords: *News, culture, cultural influences, framing, Iraq War*

Background to the study

In August 1990, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, with his military might, invaded Kuwait, one its neighboring countries. Commentators at the time accused him of plotting to restore colonialism. But the US led a coalition, in what is now known as the Gulf War, to restore freedom to the people of Kuwait. This did not, however, terminate Saddam's reign as he and his elite military units were still in control in Iraq. The United Nations accused him of possession of huge stockpiles of deadly weapons.

In April 1991, the UN Security Council created the United Nations Special Commission, UNSCOM, to find and dismantle this arsenal. The UN went further to impose economic sanction on Iraq that would be enforced until the country eliminates all nuclear, biological and chemical weapons capability. Two agencies were assigned this arduous task: UNSCOM would uncover and destroy Iraq's biological and chemical weapons, including its ballistic missiles program; the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, was charged with uncovering and dismantling Iraq's clandestine nuclear program.¹

Thereafter, the two bodies went to work. From 1991 to 1998, the inspection teams carried out several inspections in Iraq with varying degrees of success. As was widely reported, for the first few years, Iraq officials failed to disclose much of their special weapons program to the inspectors. But in 1995, a major breakthrough came for the teams. Saddam's son-in-law, Kamel Hussein, defected. According to reports, he had been in charge of the bio weapons program and revealed to UNSCOM that there was a vast arsenal of weapons they had failed to uncover, including biological weapons; and described how the government was hiding them. He fled Iraq but had to pay with his life when he returned home.¹

The teams continued their investigations until December 1998 when UNSCOM was expelled by the Iraqi authorities. A summary of the report of their findings corroborated UN's allegation, (UNSCOM, 1999).¹ Further inspections in Iraq were stalled for four years. Although, the UN had created the United Nation Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, UNMOVIC, as a replacement for UNSCOM, through the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1284 of 17 December, 1999, weapons inspection did not resume in Iraq until 27 December, 2002.

UNMOVIC, the new body under Dr. Hans Blix, was to continue with UNSCOM mandate to disarm Iraq of its Weapons of Mass Destruction (chemical, biological and missiles with a range of more than 150km) and to operate a system of ongoing monitoring and verification to check Iraq's compliance with its obligation not to reacquire same weapons the UN Security Council has banned. Inspection only resumed after appeals by the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, Arab States and pressure from the US and other Member States of UN. Iraq finally bowed to pressure as it accepted to once again, allow unconditional inspection.¹

On 8 November, 2002, UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1441, which emphatically demanded Iraq's cooperation to be "immediate, unconditional and active". The resolution threatened "serious consequences" in the event of any new material breach. In his first briefing of the UN Security Council on 25 November, 2002, Han Blix told the Council: "The Iraqi side assured

us (his team) that Iraq intended to provide full cooperation with us in the implementation of the Resolution 1441 (2002), while expecting correct and professional conduct from the organizations.”²

With this assurance, the inspection teams began work. But when Blix returned to the Security Council to present UNMOVIC’s Work Program on 19 March, 2003, (the day the war began) a disappointed Blix submitted: “I naturally feel sadness that three and half months of work carried in Iraq have not brought the assurance needed about the absence of weapons of mass destruction or other prescribed items in Iraq, that no more time is available for more inspections and that armed action now seems imminent.”³

But long ago, the US had vowed that it would no longer allow Saddam to dictate the pace. Speaking on CNN on 3 September, 2002, US National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, underscored the administration’s sense of imminent danger as he stated the risk of waiting for a conclusive proof of Saddam’s determination to acquire nuclear weapons was too grave because “we don’t want the smoking gun to become mushroom cloud” (Patterson, 2002).

As far as the US government was concerned, Iraq was deceiving the world. Speaking to American people in his annual “State of the Union” address, on 28 January, 2003, Bush claimed, “The dictator (Saddam Hussein) is not disarming. To the contrary, he is deceiving...year after year, Saddam has gone to elaborate lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risk to build and keep weapons of mass destruction.” He alleged that Saddam intended to use the weapons to “dominate, intimidate and attack.” He stated emphatically:

Failure to act would embolden other tyrants, allow terrorists access to new weapons and make blackmail a permanent feature of world events. The United Nations would betray the purpose of its founding, and prove irrelevant to the problem of our time. And through its inaction, the United States would resign itself to a future of fear.⁴

For Vice President Dick Cheney, his fear if America did not strike Saddam immediately was that “Saddam would simply be emboldened and it would become even harder for us (US) to gather friends and allies to oppose him.”⁵

Still accusing Saddam of deceit at the Centre of Strategic and International Studies Washington DC, on February 5, 2003, Secretary of State, Colin L. Powell, dismissed the 12, 000page document Iraq passed off as the truth in connection with her alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction as nothing but:

a rehash of old and discredited materials, with some new lies thrown in for good measure to make it look fresh. Fresh lies on top of the old lies. It repeated the biggest lie of all, the claim that Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction, thereby setting the stage for further deception of the inspectors as they go about their business.⁶

Powell affirmed that the US government would “act with a coalition of willing nations” if the UN is “unable to take action.” Given this statement from a highly placed US official, observers believe that the US was set for battle, with or without UN mandate. In a press conference on March 6, 2003, Bush re-echoed Powell’s speech. He boasted:

I’m confident that American people understand that when it comes to our security, if we need to act, we will act, and we really don’t need United Nations’ approval to do so. When it comes to our security, we really don’t need anybody’s permission (*VOA News*, March 6, 2003).

Prior to this time, as reported by John King of *CNN*, “more than 200, 000 troops had already been positioned near Iraq (*CNN News*, March 7, 2003). The songs of war had already escalated to a feverish pitch. The world was apprehensive as events rapidly unfolded. Following a 24-hour ultimatum issued to Saddam and his two sons, Uday and Qusay, by America to leave Iraq or face war, UN weapons inspectors were pulled out of Iraq on March 18, 2003, as efforts to disarm Iraq peacefully reportedly failed.

At last the dooms day came. By the late hours of March 19, 2003, the US, supported by its chief ally, Britain and “a coalition of willing nations” embarked on a war the US government labelled “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

Cause of the war The immediate cause

The immediate cause of the war, analysts believe, is Saddam’s refusal to heed the 24-hour ultimatum to leave Iraq with his two sons, Uday and Qusay, or face armed conflict. The US handed down the directive as a last resort to avert war. However, before issuing the ultimatum, it was reported that the US has already moved over 200, 000 troops near Iraq. But given Saddam’s antecedent, nobody expected him to heed the threat. Many argued that he would rather prefer to die in the war to flee Iraq on America’s order.

Remote cause

The remote cause of the war, observers believe, is the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US that left, in its wake, colossal damage. They contend that even when, in 1998, Iraq expelled UN weapons inspectors from the country, the US never canvassed the use of force to disarm Iraq, neither did it lead “a coalition of willing nations” on a military action against Iraq. All the US did according to sources, was to mount pressure on Iraq to allow weapons inspectors back to Baghdad.

But soon after the monumental attacks on 11 September, 2001, which the US accused the terrorist organization, al Qaeda, then led by the now late Saudi fugitive, Osama bin Ladin, of masterminding, the US began seriously pushing for a policy of forceful regime change as to disarm Iraq of its alleged stockpiles of deadly weapons. Two key US officials, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, were quoted as having insinuated in a security meeting, a day after the attacks, that the US use it as an excuse to launch military action against Iraq (Woodward, 2002).

But analysts wonder the connection between Iraq and al Qaeda. Allen (2003) quotes President Bush as saying, “You can’t distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terrorism. They’re both equally as evil and equally as destructive.” Bush added, the “danger is that al Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam’s madness and his hatred and his capacity to extend weapons of destruction around the world.” In a speech at the Cincinnati Museum Centre, Ohio, Bush concluded that “...confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror.”⁷ Even Powell reinforces observers’ position that the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks is a major drive behind the war, when he avers: “Leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few months or years is not an option, not in a post-September 11 (2001) world.”⁸

Another remote cause is the insinuation in some quarters that Saddam represents an “unfinished business” of the first Bush administration, and that Saddam did sponsor a plot to assassinate President W. Bush’s father in 1993 (Record, 2003). Some commentators observe that young Bush was out to avenge this attempt on his father’s life by seeking to de-Saddamize Iraq.

Again, in January 2004, a former Treasury Secretary of the Bush administration, Mr Paul O’Neill, alleged that Bush had always considered Saddam a threat even before the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks. The former Treasury Secretary, who did serve as a member of the National Security Council, argued that he found no “persuasive evidence” that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. He concluded that Bush had long nursed the ambition to fight Saddam even before coming to power (*VOA News*, Jan. 12, 2004). Many say America has always classified Iraq among rogue states, which according to the US Security Strategy (2002) are states that “brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers; display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are party; are determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction, along with other advanced military technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes; sponsor terrorism around the world; and reject human values and hate the United States and everything it stands for”⁹ and therefore, saw Iraq as a challenge that must be confronted.

News and Cultural Values

Culture is a very broad term that is often used in different contexts. Schwartz (2004, p. 43) defines culture as the “rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms and values prevalent among people in a society.” Hall, who is very popular for his pioneering works in cultural studies, defines culture as “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, language and customs of any specific historical society as well as the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life” (Hall, 1996, p. 437). Culture is the sum of a people’s means of self-expression.

Schudson (1995, p. 14) labels news a cultural narrative “produced by people who operate, often unwittingly, within a cultural system, a reservoir of stored cultural meanings, and patterns of discourse.” Most news sources are steeped in the core values of a specific country (Neuman, et. al., 1992) and are agents of cultivating national identity (Blumer, 1992; Hadenius, 1992; Gitlin,

1995). In international news reporting, journalists adopt frames congruent with the political environment in their respective nation. As Gurevitch et. al. (1993) have insisted, for an event to be adjudged newsworthy, it must be “anchored in narrative frameworks that are familiar to and recognizable by newsmen as well as by audiences situated in particular cultures” (p. 207). For example, Clausen’s (2003) study of the news communication strategies adopted by journalists around the globe in reporting the 9/11 terrorist attacks found that journalists in different countries selected different elements in their coverage in order to reflect the local cultural framework. As far back as 1979, Gans had established ethnocentrism as one of the most significant determinants of U.S. media coverage of foreign policy and international events, and that editors were more inclined to use stories that feature wide spread American democratic ideals and cultural values (Gans, 1979). Similar results have been reported in other societies (Hafez, 2000; Hickey, 2002; Clausen, 2003). In the same vein, the Nigerian media have been criticized for fragmentation along ethnic lines (Uche, 1989; Umechukwu, 2001; Chiboh, 2007; Kogah, 2007; Akinfeleye, 2011).

Comparative framing analysis, which investigates differences in news frames of the same event from various cultural perspectives and ideologies, has found distinct disparities in the frames emphasized by various news channels (Hickey, 2002; Topsoushian, 2002; Yang, 2003; Ravi, 2005; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Kolmer & Semetko, 2009; Fahmy, 2010; Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011; Barker, 2012; Berry, et. al., 2015; Berbers, et. al., 2015; Ramasubramanian & Miles, 2018). For instance, in the Syrian refugee crisis, Berry, et. al. (2015) found cross-national differences in framing with Swedish, Italian, and Spanish newspapers reporting the crisis in a fairly positive manner, whereas those from Germany and the UK tend to reflect more polarization. Similarly, in their news analysis of Syrian fighters in Flanders and the Netherlands, Berbers, et. al. (2015) reported that the main frames used were the victim, terrorist, martyr, Don Quixote, and adventurer frames. Results from another study on comparative analysis of Arabic and English news media framing of the Syrian refugee crisis, found that, “Although the border frame was popular across all news sources, English sources were more likely than Arabic sources to use the victim frame and less likely to use the war frame” (Ramasubramanian & Miles, 2018, p. 4488). Furthermore, in the U. S.-led coalition against al-Qaeda, Fahmy and Al Emad (2011) demonstrated that Al Jazeera English was much more likely than Al Jazeera Arabic to use reports about the coalition against al-Qaeda as lead stories and front-page news. Al Jazeera Arabic accorded such reports less prominence.

Research into news as a cultural product has also extended into the field of photojournalism. Kim and Kelly’s (2008) study of news and feature photographs in ten elite American and Korean newspapers found significant differences in photojournalism style. American photojournalists were more interpretative in approach grounded in individualism, while their Korean counterparts were merely descriptive, in keeping with their society’s collectivist attitudes. The Koreans worked more strictly in line with their societal obligations, acting “according to the group’s interest rather than according to their own interpretations” (Kim and Kelly 2008, p. 171). Visual analysis of photographs about the 9/11 attacks and the Afghan War indicated that the English newspaper, *International Herald Tribune*, focused more on human suffering and patriotism, while the Arabic newspaper, *Al-Hayat*, focused on material loss, antiwar frames, and humanizing the war victims

(Fahmy, 2010). Also, a study of newspaper coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake in 15 countries insisted that the degree of graphic photographs could be linked to socio-cultural differences, such as individual countries' religious traditions and levels of societal violence (Hanusch, 2012).

The Syrian refugee crisis has also prompted some photojournalistic framing studies. Bleiker, et. al. (2013) documented the absence of recognizable facial features in pictures of refugees in Australian news media. Such depersonalization was attributed to framing the refugee crisis as a security threat. Similarly, Cmeciu (2017) studied 12 images used in the "Debating Europe" platform that used strategies such as blame shifting and emotional frames to legitimize the lack of global action. In addition, Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) found that CNN's visual coverage adopted techniques such as close-up shots to emphasize the human-interest angle, but *Der Spiegel*, a leading German newspaper, focused on security and xenophobic frames.

Theoretical Framework Framing Analysis

Framing selects and interprets some aspects of an event and ignores others. Entman (1993, p. 52) writes that, "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, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/ or treatment recommendation* for the item described" [italics in original]. Media frames provide subtle cues using visual and verbal/textual devices that facilitate certain causal interpretations over others (Entman, 1993; Gilens, 1996; Iyengar, 1990). They activate related thoughts, feelings, and concepts through the cognitive networks of association (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2004).

Media framing influences audience perceptions of the issue, the key actors, and the possible solutions to social issues (De Vreese et al., 2001) as well as salience of the event. Factors such as journalists' personal biases, organizational structures and practices, journalistic routines and norms, individual schemas of journalists, political ideology, national context, political elites, cultural orientation, and geopolitical issues determine the selection of media frames (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Reese et al., 2001; Clausen, 2003; Entman, 2004; Shen, 2004; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). Therefore, culture is one powerful force that works along with other intervening variables to shape news production and coverage.

Research Method

Five studies (Ravi, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Kolmer & Semetko, 2009; Barker, 2012, Gou et al., 2015) on framing the Iraq War by different international news sources in several countries were reviewed. The works were purposively selected to underpin cultural influences on how each news source portrayed the war. The select articles were published between 2005 and 2015 in leading communication journals around the globe. The journals include: *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Howard Journal of Communications*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *The International Communication Gazette*, and *Journalism Studies*.

Results: How cultural forces impinged on coverage of the Iraq War

Although media organizations want their audiences to believe that news texts approximate the event they report, news production is a process of competing influences, and the final product is

shaped not only by technical transformation, social, political, financial factors, and journalistic decisions, but also by cultural values (Gans, 1979; Hallin, 1986, 1994; Kellner, 1993; Kalb, 1994; Gitlin, 1995; Schudson, 1995; Bennett, 1996; Hall 1997; Bagdikian, 2000). As Bennett (1996, p. 9) wrote, “Viewing the news as a human construction makes it easier to see that every society constructs its public information differently, and that each system contains different limits or problems.”

In considering cultural influences on news framing, it is important as Barker (2012) has advised, “to first recognize that meaning is produced and negotiated through the use of language” (p. 7). Hall (1997) has described language as a representational and signifying system. Language uses signs and symbols such as sounds, written words, facial expressions, gestures, images, musical notes and objects to represent concepts, ideas and feelings. As a cultural code, it enables members of the same culture to share sets of concepts, images and ideas and thus to think and feel about and interpret the world in similar ways. However, we need to be reminded that:

...language is by no means a perfect vehicle of meaning. Words, like currency, are turned over and over again, to evoke one set of images today, another tomorrow. There is no certainty whatever that the same word will call out exactly the same idea in the reader’s mind as it did in the reporter’s. (Lipmann, 1965, p. 42)

As generally agreed, words carry no meaning in themselves. Often, meaning is assigned and negotiated. Culture influences both message creation and reception. The relationship between language and reality also affects news production, as the reporter must first filter what they understand about an international event within the context of their own frame of reference and culture and then communicate the event using words and pictures. In the end, news production is culture-laden!

The Iraq War was a defining media event. It proved that culture, as Barker (2012) suggested, is an important variable that should be considered when studying news production and coverage. The war coverage tasked journalistic objectivity to the last degree. For instance, Nwankpa (2004, p. 61) confirmed that:

In American media, the war was either “the war in Iraq” or “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Washington’s phraseology for its forceful regime change in Iraq. Many western media adopted this Washington’s coinage in describing the war. But in Arab and Muslim media, the war was attacked as “the invasion” of Iraq. The picture of the war depicted in these media (Arab and Muslim) is that of subjugation and suffering of Iraqis.

Ravi (2005) conducted a cross-cultural study of newspaper reporting in the lead-up to the Iraq war. The results showed that Pakistani and Indian newspapers were more focused on aggregates of fatal events, while British and US newspapers focused more on individual events. Ravi argued that the reason for this difference may lie in societal values, as the Asian countries placed a higher value on the community, while the Western countries were more individualistic. Dimitrova and

Connolly-Ahern (2007) did a content analysis of the websites of prestige news media in the US, the UK, Egypt and Qatar, examining both the frames used by news media in their coverage of the war, as well as voices heard and ignored. The results indicated that the “tale of war” was constructed differently by the various international news sources studied. Arab online news channels were more likely to use the military conflict and violence of war frame, whereas Coalition media emphasized the rebuilding of Iraq frame. Similarly, Kolmer and Semetko (2009) carried out a comparative content analysis of the flagship main evening TV news programs in five countries about the war and reported that despite some dissimilarities among networks within countries, there were significant cross-national contrast in the subtopics emphasized in the coverage, the tone of the coverage of the opposing sides, and the volume of news devoted to the Allies (the UK and the US). It was concluded that war coverage was shaped by the national and international contexts in which the news was produced.

In a study of cultural influences on Swedish and American media portrayal of the Iraq War, Barker (2012) found that the American media coverage of the war was more masculine in content than its Swedish counterpart, a reflection of both societies’ differing cultural dimensions. The American society is more masculine than the Swedish which is more feminine in nature, according to Hofstede’s (1979) cultural dimensions. In a subsequent study, he observed that dominant cultural values are translated into political priorities (Hofstede, 1980) Each nation’s news media tend to reflect same in their news content. News media often takes on the coloration of a given milieu under which it operates. Barker (2012) further revealed that American media focused on military strategy, interpreted the war from the troops’ perspective, and explained it as the U. S. bring freedom to the people of Iraq. Conversely, Swedish media interpreted the war from the international community’s and the suffering Iraqi civilians’ point of view and explained it as a failure of the international community. Gou et al. (2015) did a comparative analysis of coverage of the war in newspapers of the US, Mainland China, Taiwan and Poland. Analyzing competing hypotheses about the globalization of news versus the influence of cultural and political stances in the construction of attribute agendas during the opening two years of the war, their study found some support for both factors, but with the preponderance of the evidence reflecting the political stance of each newspaper's government.

Conclusion

As the paper has further demonstrated, news is a cultural product. That one war could be framed differently across the various news sources studied is indicative that culture is a strong variable that should be paid attention when analyzing news production and coverage. Cultural context influenced the war coverage in the studies reviewed; yet we do know that journalists do not deliberately set out to mislead their audiences. By focusing on different aspects of the war, media coverage differed across countries. There is a broad consensus that news production is shaped by several competing influences, including cultural factors. Culture, therefore, is a broad construct that explains differences in political and media systems across nations, including variations in values and beliefs underpinning attitudes, perspectives and behavior (Fisk, 1989; Hall, 1980, 1989; 1996; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Kagan, 2003).

Notes

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