SEMANTIC FRAMING IN THE BUILD-UP TO THE IRAQ WAR: FOX V. CNN AND OTHER U. S. BROADCAST NEWS PROGRAMS

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Abstract: The authors conduct an exhaustive analysis of broadcast news transcripts from the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks to the U.S. congressional authorization of force against Iraq. News organizations overall used framing words and phrases complementary to the Bush Administration push for war. Fox News, even more than CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNBC, and public broadcasting, emphasized pro-war framing terms. Fox News over a longer time frame also generally trailed CNN in stories covering the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, the lack of a pre-war link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, majority international public opinion about the war, and the number of American casualties.

The bestselling book *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, subtitled Know Your Values and Frame the Debate, detailed some of the word choices with which the George W. Bush Administration subtly shifted public debate. Inheritance or estate taxes were called death taxes. Tax cuts were called tax relief because relief has a very strong positive connotation. However, the most notable semantic framing happened regarding the War on Iraq, more often phrased by the administration as the War on Terror. An additional technique was to frame Iraq as Saddam Hussein, and then demonize him (an admittedly easy task) in all government pronouncements. The nation-as-person metaphor fits two classic fairy tale mythologies, self defense and rescue. The hero (the U.S. and any allies)

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confronts a dangerous, evil and irrational villain and must defeat him, liberating his oppressed people.[1]

This research project involves using text analysis software to document the use of semantic framing by the U.S. government and how that framing may have been picked up by U.S. broadcast news organizations. The work looks at the one-month period of September 11th to October 11th, 2002, a period stretching from the first anniversary of a massive terror attack on the U.S. to the congressional vote to authorize President Bush to use force against Iraq.

Literature Review

The theoretical construct of framing has both unified and divided much recent research on political communication. In many ways it is a unifying thread, a link between methods of understanding content and techniques of measuring effects. It has been criticized for being a vague catch-all, its meaning shifting between authors and disciplines. Entman, however, nicely synthesized the approaches into this definition: "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."[2]

Framing, as a theoretical concept, emerged from agenda setting—the notion that media coverage does not tell the public what to think, but it does have an effect in telling them what subjects to think about.[3] Framing took agenda setting beyond audience salience and added that media coverage also indicated how that subject was to be approached by the audience, the acceptable range of terms, connections, and interpretations. Many scholars use interchangeably the terms framing and second-level agenda setting, though a dispute has emerged as to how appropriate it is to use the terms synonymously.[4]

One also can see framing as an extension of prospect theory and its assumption that subtle wording changes in any situation's description can affect how members of the audience interpret the situation.[5]

Framing also has roots in cognitive theories about how the human brain works.[6] It ties into schema theory, the idea that the synapses of our brains do not purely save and store facts. Instead, our brains link related ideas in associative patterns; ideas fitting patterns more easily find room than those with no existing "hook" to hold them.

In war and peace terms, schema may have evolved such as "needless suffering of civilians" or "noble and ultimate sacrifice for others."

Traditional communication models are largely linear, beginning with a speaker encoding a message, that message traveling through a medium to an

audience, and that audience decoding, storing, and possibly reacting to the message. The short history of framing as a communication concept has followed that path backwards. It began as a means of understanding reception and storage. Later it was examination of messages for frames, and finally it became a begrudging admiration of the propagandists, politicians, and public relations practitioners who understood the process and constructed messages to maximum effect using it.

Framing can complement a political economy approach to news content. Gandy pulled together a multitude of sources to argue that most news content is the result of routine contacts with traditional sources, usually office holders and the bureaucrats beholden to them. This yields a social relationship, but it also makes sense economically for the news organization and its routines. Even when these "information subsidies" from elites are suspect, time-constrained journalists often just "go with the flow" and follow the pack. This tendency only is stronger when the sources frame a strong and consistent message.[7]

Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon have pointed out that framing can have a particularly strong effect in foreign policy, an area where U.S. public opinion is not well informed and attitudes are not strongly held. Media framing becomes exponentially more important, they note, during the crises that precede potential military intervention. They add that at such crucial moments media can play a significant role in opening the eyes of decision makers to reality.[8]

Another alternative is that media coverage can fail to offer that challenging, eye-opening coverage at a critical moment for war or peace, such as the build-up to the U.S. war in Iraq. That outcome would fit the historical pattern identified by Mowlana that major U.S. media outlets consistently support American foreign policy decisions at least in initial stages, and have not challenged the assumptions behind those decisions.[9]

Elites, such as government and military sources, are well aware of the concept of framing and the value of supportive news coverage. Since the Vietnam War, U.S. military operations have featured ever more sophisticated techniques for molding coverage, such as media pools and "embedded" reporters.[10]

Hiebert also has pointed out that the Iraq War was framed for the American people by a coordinated government effort. That effort included the overall story theme and the issues to be considered, even if some were little more than slogans. "Making good television" was key, and that meant staging visually interesting briefings and embedding reporters with field units. The effort was at least temporarily successful at home, but generally failed in other countries.[11]

U.S. television news in particular merits attention because, as Entman has written, "The mixture of information processed that affects the public, politicians,

and foreign policymakers has shifted toward the inclusion of more visual data."[12] War has played a particularly important role in the development of U.S. cable news operations. The Gulf War made Cable News Network (CNN) a serious contender for news ratings, and the war in Iraq solidified Fox News domestic ratings lead over CNN.[13]

This analysis of broadcast and cable television news coverage is, of course, informed by the work of those who studied framing of Iraq by the traditional [print] press; this research covered both the pre-war and war phases. Boaz, for example, points out that European press treated with legitimacy those calling for deliberation and against a rush to judgment.[14] In contrast, the American press portrayed protest as unpatriotic and anti-war arguments as irrelevant. In addition, the United Nations was marginalized in U.S. news media.[15]

Boaz's observations are supported by the Dimitrova and Stromback (2005) content analysis of U.S. and Swedish elite papers. Responsibility and antiwar coverage were featured prominently in the Swedish papers, but the American papers concentrated on the military conflict frame.[16] This trend also held true when Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, and Trammell turned their attention to 246 international news web sites. International sites stressed responsibility while the U.S. domestic sites featured military coverage, human interest, and media self-coverage. Further, online coverage in countries supporting the war was more positive than the coverage in countries not supporting the war.[17]

The Bush Administration's desire to link Iraq and terrorism was given a lift by *Time* and *Newsweek* as well. Fried analyzed images in the immediate pre-war period and found these magazines frequently juxtaposed terrorism and Iraq and used graphics that linked Iraq to terrorism and terrorists.[18] This outcome fits what Ryan described as a semantic struggle to conflate the September 11th terror attack with the flag, patriotism, and the militarism directed at Iraq.[19] The equation United States = Freedom = Flag even found its way into a popular Ad Council public service announcement in which a neighborhood blossoms with flags in response to the terror attacks. This was so successful that it put anti-war groups on the defensive, forcing them to declare "peace is patriotic" just as Bush was pushing for the Iraq War.[20]

It also was necessary for the Bush Administration to frame the 9/11 attack not as terrorism or a crime but as an act of war. Crimes against humanity unite us in horror against individual acts, but acts of war on nation-states mandate a response against an external nation-state enemy.[21]

Luther and Miller did a very instructive analysis of U.S. newspaper coverage of pro-war and anti-war rallies in the period from the pre-war State of the Union speech to the "Mission Accomplished" photo opportunity. They reviewed 386

stories from the Associated Press and eight newspapers. The news articles used significantly more delegitimization cues for anti-war events than for pro-war events.

The authors also used a mapping and cluster analysis of a different set of data to create master frames for both the pro-war and anti-war sides. Specifically, these frames emerged from analysis of 182 texts (105 anti-war and seventy-seven pro-war) from organizers of rallies. United for Peace and Justice, Act Now to Stop the War and End Racism, Win Without War were the anti-war groups. Americans for Victory Over Terrorism, Young America's Foundation, and Patriots-Defense of America were the pro-war groups.

Fighting for Freedom and Democracy and Threat from Weapons of Mass Destruction were the pro-war frames. The former appeared frequently in news coverage of pro-war events, the latter did not and, in fact, was more likely to appear in anti-war stories. Clearly the failure to find any such weapons became, as the war progressed, an argument for war opponents. Anti-war frames stressed world opinion, oil, occupation, and the strength of the protest events themselves. Global resistance, however, was not as strong a frame as the others.[22]

Most analyses of pre-war coverage tend to use print coverage, not broadcast. This oversight must be corrected. As Hiebert reminds us, the Iraq war was framed by government sources using the techniques of public relations and propaganda. The story lines, issues, terms, and slogans were all geared toward making good television. This article will attempt to address the research gap by examining broadcast transcripts.[23]

Lehmann looked at the pre-war period as related to United Nations weapons inspectors and as covered by two print and two television news organizations from both Germany and the U.S. Each reflected the government position on the war (U.S. for; Germany against). Lehmann also noted how the U.S. media failed to be "watchdogs" about U.S. government claims.[24]

One intriguing cross-cultural analysis of 1,820 broadcast stories was done by Aday, Livingston, and Hebert. They found that during the war one U.S. news organization, Fox News Channel, displayed clear bias in support of the U.S.-led war effort. ABC CBS, CNN, NBC and even the Arab satellite network Al-Jazeera overall exhibited balanced coverage. All the American networks showed a war without much blood, dissent, or diplomacy.[25]

This distinction of Fox News as a decidedly pro-war, pro-Bush news outlet has been the subject of a documentary and accompanying book.[26] Furthermore, Morris' analysis of 1998 to 2004 Pew surveys on media consumption found that CNN and Fox News audiences are becoming politically polarized. Fox News viewers, compared to CNN viewers, are less likely to follow stories critical of the Bush administration but more likely to follow entertainment stories. The findings

suggest the Fox News audience enjoys news accounts that share or reflect their personal views. Network news and CNN audiences prefer news that includes more in-depth interviews with public officials. Further, Fox News viewers were more likely than viewers of non-Fox options to underestimate rather than overestimate the number of American casualties in Iraq.[27]

Program on International Policy Attitudes public opinion polls conducted January through September 2003 found that persons who report relying on Fox News had greater misperceptions about the Iraq War. Some eighty percent of Fox News viewers got one or more of three items wrong. Thirty-three percent believed that the U.S. has found Weapons of Mass Destruction. Thirty-five percent thought global public opinion supported the war. Two-thirds thought the U.S. has found clear evidence Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda. The overall forty-five percent error rate for Fox News viewers was higher than the error rate for viewers of all other broadcast and cable news outlets as well as those who relied on print media.[28]

If U.S. broadcast news programs during this period were not attending to their watchdog role, then one would expect those news programs to rely heavily on administration sources, and pass along predominantly pro-war framing words. This claim will be approached as a research question. Hypothesis One addresses the claim that Fox News will pass along a higher percentage of pro-war terms (as opposed to anti-war terms) when Fox News is compared to another twenty-four hour cable news channel (CNN) or the other broadcast news programs analyzed. A final research question will address whether incorrect Iraq War notions held by Fox News viewers correlates with lesser Fox coverage of those particular subjects (no WMD, no al-Qaeda link, majority international public opinion against the war, number of American casualties). Because some of these matters were not confirmed until after the outbreak of war, some additional tallies and keyword searches will be used to supplement the larger inquiry.

Method

The project used broadcast transcripts from the Lexis/Nexis Academic database. The broadcast and cable transcripts come from a broad array of news and talk programs. The transcripts were identified using the keyword Iraq in the Headline and Key Terms area, the appropriate news or news/talk program in the Show area, and the dates of 9/11/02 to 10/11/02 in the Dates area. Approximately half of these were copied by the researcher, one story per document, into Microsoft Word documents. The remaining half were copied by graduate student volunteers in a Public Opinion class.

The nightly newscasts and morning news programs of ABC, NBC, and CBS were included. CNBC's primetime newscast with Brian Williams was included. The public radio programs All Things Considered, Fresh Air, and Marketplace were included, as was public television's Newshour with Jim Lehrer.

The transcripts for Cable News Network came from the following eleven programs: American Morning, Daybreak, Live Today, Crossfire, Inside Politics, Lou Dobbs Moneyline, Newsnight, Wolf Blitzer Reports, Larry King Live, CNN Saturday, and CNN Sunday.

The transcripts for Fox News Channel came from the following ten programs: The Beltway Boys, The O'Reilly Factor, Your World with Neil Cavuto, Special Report with Brit Hume, Hannity & Colmes, Fox On the Record with Greta Van Susteren, The Big Story with John Gibson, Fox Wire, The Pulse, and Fox News Sunday.

All transcripts were imported into the QDA Miner text analysis program and then further analyzed using WordStat, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS. Subset coding kept track of which transcripts were from Fox, which were from CNN, and which were from the other broadcast newscasts used. The QDA miner program used "Lemminization" to group together stems and stem words (eg. America, American, America's). The program also used an exclusion feature to eliminate small, routine words such as a, an, and the.

The transcript-gathering process yielded 1326 files. Unfortunately, student data copying or entry errors led to 154 unusable files scattered across the various categories with no one category disproportionately affected. The 1172 usable files from thirty-four programs totaled 1,832,405 words, including 23,656 unique words.

The transcripts were compared against three "dictionaries" of words and phrases: the Luther/Miller pro-war and anti-war Frame Words derived from activist groups, a list of words and phrases suggested by the frames identified by other authors in the literature review (Appendix), and a set of keywords and phrases derived from a QDA Miner analysis of twelve Bush Administration briefings during the time period under study.

Findings

The top-ten words in the transcripts (president, war, people, united, state, resolution, Saddam, weapon, Bush, time) yielded few surprises, though even that list hints at the administration's insistence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The patterns are clearer in the top phrases (Table 1). That list makes clear that Weapons of Mass Destruction and Iraqi links to al-Qaeda were

frequent topics, most often viewed through the prism of administration sources, pending military action, and events on Capitol Hill and at the United Nations. Thus, the claims in the first research question generally were supported.

Fox News and CNN (and the other broadcast news programs analyzed) showed little difference in the use of the Luther/Miller pro-war and anti-war terms as derived through the statements of activist groups. However, the broader set of terms derived from the literature review found a significant difference in the expected direction. Compared to CNN, Fox News programs were more likely to use the pro-war terms and less likely to use the anti-war terms. In a bit of a surprise, both CNN and Fox had higher percentages of pro-war and lower percentages of anti-war terms when compared to the other broadcast news programs in this analysis. Specifically, Fox News was 68.8% pro-war framing words; CNN was 63.0%. The combined ABC, CBS. NBC. CNBC, and public broadcasting tally was 60.3% pro-war framing words (Table 2). These results overall support the hypothesis.

The final research question required a modest additional tally. The researchers returned to Lexis/Nexis, and expanded the date range from September 11, 2002 to January 24, 2006. They then conducted a keyword search for Iraq and a full text search for "no WMD" or "no Weapons of Mass Destruction." CNN had 830 transcripts matching those criteria, Fox only 213. The combined ABC, CBS, NBC tally was 358. Debunking the pre-war Iraq link to al-Qaeda could take several constructions. CNN had 21 transcripts with "no link to al-Qaeda" or "no link to 9/11." Fox had 8; the combined networks had 4.

Staying with Iraq as a keyword search, the researchers then tried War in combination with Global or World or International or European Public Opinion in the full text. CNN tallied eighty-eight transcripts, Fox thirty-one, the combined networks twenty-six. The phrases American casualties and war (keyword Iraq) yielded just seventy-four Fox News transcripts compared to 282 from CNN and 201 from the combined networks. These numbers lend support to the second research question. It is quite plausible that Fox News viewers have a distorted view of these matters because they have much less exposure to stories about these topics.

Of course, one could argue that the smaller Fox News tallies could be a result of fewer Fox News transcripts available in the database. However, if one checks the Iraq War story totals, one finds a ratio of less than two to one CNN to Fox stories. The ratios on these particular topics often have CNN with three or four times as many stories as Fox.

Though pro-war outnumbered anti-war terms in this analysis, one should not assume this result comes entirely from parroting Bush Administration terms.

Indeed, twenty-eight frequent phrases used in twelve administration briefings came up in relatively small numbers: 6036 times on CNN, 3200 times on Fox, and 3544 on the other networks studied. For CNN and Fox, these amount only to 0.7% of all words, 0.8% for the other networks. Clearly, pro-war and anti-war phrases also can come from Capitol Hill, think tanks, activist groups, other sources, and original composition.

One final caution is needed. It is clear that during this period the pro-war framing terms were dominant in these transcripts. However, the technique used cannot determine in what context words were used. Nevertheless, it is hard to argue against the proposition that during this key period pro-war terminology framed the debate and that Fox News with CNN and others trailing served up those terms in significant number.

Discussion

Gasher states that language is a powerful weapon of war. He conducted a textual analysis of *Time* and *Newsweek*, covering the two weeks preceding and following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. He determined the news coverage delivered a message remarkably similar to that of the Bush Administration. The war was a relatively benign solution to a serious and immediate threat, a message designed to play to well to a nation still traumatized by the terror attacks of September 11th and still familiar with the Gulf War demonization of Saddam Hussein. The war would be an overwhelming display of technological, moral, and military supremacy welcomed by the oppressed people in the war zone.[29]

The list of phrases certainly validates Gasher's point about the personalization of the war around Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush. Only three phrases occurred in a majority of the news stories: United States, President Bush, and Saddam Hussein. In this historical case study U.S. broadcast news programs quickly adopted the symbolic environment being peddled by the Bush Administration about the forthcoming war with Iraq. These persistently parroted metaphors were not only a political misuse of framing via word choice, but were also an ethical abrogation by news media of their purported watchdog role regarding government abuses.

One should be careful, however, not overstate the case for media influence. As Strobel demonstrated in an exhaustive review of recent wars, media coverage generally plays a supportive rather than lead role in a nation's path to war (30). What is particularly disturbing about the Iraq War is how long the Bush Administration stuck to details from the initial mythology (Weapons of Mass Destruction, pre-war Iraqi links to al-Qaeda) long after news organizations had

carried substantial refutations of those claims. To some outsiders it appeared George W. Bush and his spokesmen had started to believe their own spin, a sort of faith-based foreign policy that if one says it long and hard enough it will become true.

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Table 1. Top Phrases in Iran Broadcast News Coverage (2-6 words)
(excluding video instructions, Van Susteren, Good Morning, Jim Lehrer)

Phrase	Frequency	# Transcripts	% Transcripts
Saddam Hussein	2715	753	64.2
United State(s)	2643	673	57.4
United Nation(s)	1872	541	46.2
White House	1811	480	41.0
President Bush	1502	633	54.0
Security Council	1399	445	38.0
Weapons of Mass	1066	467	39.8
Mass Destruction	1058	462	39.4
Weapon of Mass Destruction	1048	460	39.2
Weapon Inspector	923	389	33.2
Al Qaeda	766	193	16.5
American People	580	243	20.7
Military Action	558	338	28.8
Bush Administration	550	297	25.3
National Security	492	222	18.9
Prime Minister	463	204	17.4
Tom Daschle	434	197	16.8
Nuclear Weapon	433	205	17.5
Year Ago	420	229	19.5
Secretary of State	417	222	18.9
President of the United	402	246	21.0
President of the United State(s)	400	245	20.9
War with Iraq	398	259	22.1
Gulf War	396	248	21.2
Regime Change	371	188	16.0
Capitol Hill	357	211	18.0
Biological Weapons	350	169	14.4

Table 2. Fox v. CNN v. Others on Pro-War and Anti-War Words (Lit Review set)*

	Anti-War	Pro-War	Total
Fox News Channel	2416 (31.2%)	5319 (68.8%)	7735 (100%)
Cable News Network	4497 (37.0%)	7644 (63.0%)	12141 (100%)
Total Count	6913 (34.8%)	12963 (65.2%)	19876 (100%)

Pearson Chi Square for Fox v. CNN, 70.193, p <.001

	Anti-War	Pro-War	Total
Fox News Channel	2416 (31.2%)	5319 (68.8%)	7735 (100%)
ABC, CBS, NBC Networks/Public Broadcasting/CNBC			
	3494 (39.7%)	5299 (60.3%)	8793 (100%)
Total Count	5910 (35.8%)	10618 (64.2%)	16528 (100%)

Pearson Chi Square for Fox v. Networks, etc., 129.473, p <.001

Cable News Network	4497 (37.0%)	7644 (63.0%)	12141 (100%)
ABC, CBS, NBC Networks/Public Broadcasting/CNBC			
	3494 (39.7%)	5299 (60.3%)	8793 (100%)
Total Count	7991(38.2%)	12943 (61.8%)	20934 (100%)

Pearson Chi Square for CNN v. Networks, etc., 15.70967, p <.001

Appendix

Luther/Miller Anti-War Frame Words: war, nonviolent, peace, empire, corporation, civil, world, global, communities, movement, actions, antiwar, people, opposition, organizations, social, resistance, aggression, struggle, march, coalition, solidarity, economic, international, justice, mobilization, oil, demonstration, U.S., protest, marched, campaign, globalization, coordinated, activists, occupation. (Not used: anti, stop, against).

Luther/Miller Pro-War Frame Words: weapons, terrorism, chemical, biological, terrorist, regime, America, terrorists, values, victory, evidence, protecting, terror, Americans, disarm, missile, Western, moral, defense, destruction, threat, troops, freedom, support, democracy, America's, liberty, ideals, nuclear, culture, democracies, security. (Not used: students, talk, experts, Cold, better, superior, pro).

Anti-War Words and Phrases suggested by Literature Review: deliberation, rush, judgment, responsibility, responsible, caution, diplomacy, diplomatic, inspect, inspection, inspector, United Nations, U.N., global, public, opinion, pre-emptive, imperial, civilian casualties, protest, opposition, oppose, attack, invade, invasion, unilateral, oil, occupation, occupy, resistance, sanctions, quagmire, Vietnam, consult, consensus, cowboy, neo-con, empire.

Pro-War Words and Phrases suggested by Literature Review: threat, danger, weapons, Saddam, regime, dictator, tyrant, war on terror, patriot, patriotic, patriotism, military, flag, act of war, democracy, freedom, al-Qaeda, terror, terrorism, terrorist, plot, 9/11, September 11, coalition, fighting, defense, WMD, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Osama, Bin Laden, disarm, power, chemical, biological, nuclear, leader, leadership.