

1-1-2005

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Jim A. Kuypers

Stephen D. Cooper
coopers@marshall.edu

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Recommended Citation

Kuypers, J. A., & Cooper, S. D. (2005). A comparative framing analysis of embedded and behind-the-lines reporting on the 2003 Iraq war. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 6, 1-10.

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A Comparative Framing Analysis of Embedded and Behind-the-Lines Reporting on the 2003 Iraq War

Jim A. Kuypers & Stephen D. Cooper

A 2003 study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that “Most Americans (53 percent) believe that news organizations are politically biased, while just 29 percent say they are careful to remove bias from their reports” (Harper, 2004). Although it would seem that the audience for news has a strong concern that news products are slanted in some way, scholarly opinion on the media bias issue is far from settled (Cooper, in press; Vatz, 2003).

Although a contested position, we believe that reporters and editors frame the news in a way that reflects their personal feelings and newsroom culture (Kuypers, 1997, 2002, 2005; Cooper, in press). Audiences usually receive their political news from only a few press sources; rarely do they read the original statements of those being reported upon. Yet all that one has to do to see how the press changes--regardless of intentionality--the meaning of covered material is to compare the frames used by the press with those in the material being reported. For example, if the press reports on a politician’s speech, compare the actual speech to the press accounts of that speech.

Cohen (1963) made an astute observation: the press “may not be very successful in telling its readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). For example, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that voters learn about an issue in direct proportion to the attention given that issue by the press, and that voters tend to share what the media defines as important. This is called agenda setting. Subsequent studies into agenda setting confirmed that the media have enormous influence upon political decision making, and that they are considerably influential in telling the general population what to

think about. In short, there is a direct correlation between the amount of news coverage of an issue and the level of importance the public assigns to that issue.

Moving beyond studies of agenda setting, one finds that the news media also suggest *how one should think*. Kuypers (1997, 2002, 2005) called this *agenda-extension*, and it occurs when the press moves beyond a neutral reporting of events. One manifestation of agenda extension is in the framing of news stories. A frame is “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). Facts remain neutral until framed; thus, how the press frames an issue or event will affect public understanding of that issue or event. On this point Gamson argued that facts “take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (p. 157). Framing thus elevates the salience of some facts over others. A powerful example of agenda extension is found in a study by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991). These researchers used mandatory testing for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) as the issue for their study. They found that the effect “of framing is to prime values differentially, establishing the salience of the one or the other. [A] majority of the public supports the rights of persons with AIDS [acquired imuno-deficiency syndrome] when the issue is framed to accentuate civil liberties considerations--and supports . . . mandatory testing when the issue is framed to accentuate public health considerations” (p. 52). Whereas agenda setting would allow us to count the instances of press comments on this topic, framing analysis allows us to discover how the comments shape our perceptions of the topic.

Although it can be argued that providing contextual cues for interpretation of events is a necessary part of reporting, when journalists infuse their political preferences into news stories the potential for manipulation of audience perceptions increases. This becomes especially important when one considers that a powerful feature of frames is that they define problems, causes, and solutions, although not necessarily in that order (Kuypers, 1997, 2002; Entman, 1993). In addition, they provide the journalist’s moral judgments concerning these problems, causes, and solutions (Kuypers, 2002, in press). In short, when journalists frame, they construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted in a specific way. Thus journalists can, knowingly or unknowingly, guide the interpretation of readers toward a particular point of view.

Comparative Framing Analysis: One War, Two Frames

A fruitful way to study frames is with comparative framing analysis (Kuypers, 1997, 2002; Entman, 1991). In the present study we looked for differences in war reporting between journalists embedded with combat units and journalists based behind-the-lines. Embedded reporters were those who traveled with combat troops and essentially co-existed with a particular unit in the field. Behind-the-lines reporters were those reporters positioned away from the combat or even based in the USA. The stories we analyzed appeared in the New York Times and Washington Post .

Using these two papers has its advantages and drawbacks. One advantage is that both papers are still considered papers of records. Another advantage is that both have the necessary resources to fund continuous coverage of any topic, thus differences in framing are unlikely to flow from limited staff or resources. The drawback is that we analyzed the news products of a small number of reporters. Although we feel it quite unlikely, it is conceivable that some differences in framing between the stories of embedded journalists and those of behind-the-lines journalists observed in this study are not representative of news outlets in general, but rather are a feature of these two particular newspapers. To the extent possible, we matched stories run by embedded reporters and behind-the-lines reporters by date of publication. This was done to reduce the possibility that any framing differences observed were due to changes in combat conditions, rather than a property of the journalistic environment. As a practical matter, one day's difference in date was still considered to be a match. We limited our pool of stories to hard news stories and featured commentaries on the day's events; we did not examine every story about the war. Rather, we chose stories from embedded and behind-the-lines reporters that were about the same event so that we could look for any differences in how the reporters framed the event.

We examined 66 stories published between 21 March 2003 and 10 April 2003; 26 from embedded reporters and 40 from behind-the-lines reporters. Our analysis discovered two prominent themes in coverage of the war: the strength of Iraqi army resistance and the response of the Iraqi civilian population to the Allied incursion. Because of space limitations, the following two sections only illustrate the framing differences we observed in the coverage.

Iraqi Military Resistance

Stories written by embedded reporters described Iraqi soldiers surrendering; Iraqi positions destroyed by artillery and aircraft attacks; Iraqi soldiers deserting; and Allied officers surprised by the weakness of Iraqi resistance. In contrast, stories written by behind-the-lines journalists featured Allied casualties and equipment losses; the potential for unconventional attacks by the Iraqi military; the ferocity of paramilitary or irregular Iraqi forces; the possibility of urban combat situations in cities such as Baghdad; and the belligerent rhetoric of Iraqi officials.

Stories about the commencement of hostilities ran on 21 March 2003. In the New York Times, the headline of the story filed by an embedded reporter was, “G.I.’s and Marines See Little Iraqi Resistance” (Myers, 2003, March 21). Much of this story described how easily the Allied forces overran the Iraqi border defenses, and noted that “the first two border posts turned out to be empty, their soldiers having fled.” The headline of the story filed from Kuwait was quite different: “16 Die On Copter; U.S. and British Forces Suffer First Losses in Crash in Kuwait” (Tyler, 2003, March 21). Two days later, a story by another embedded reporter described many Iraqi soldiers surrendering, and only limited resistance. This story framed the combat as “general retreat by the Iraqis with groups of fierce holdouts” (Filkins, 2003, March 23). In contrast, the headline story in that issue (Tyler, 2003, March 23), with a Kuwait dateline, emphasized Allied casualties and loss of vehicles, mentioned “heavy fighting and mortar exchanges” from the Iraqi forces, and commented that there was “no outward sign Saturday that either the government or military command of Mr. Hussein was wavering.” In the next day’s issue a front-page opinion piece (Apple, 2003, March 24), datelined Washington, described the Iraqi resistance as stiffening, and tougher than Allied commanders had expected. An overview article (Collins, 2003, March 24) referred to the coming “showdown with the Iraqi Republican Guard,” described the area around Baghdad as “intensely defended,” and commented that on the prior day “allied forces faced the fiercest fighting of the war so far and suffered their grimmest casualty toll.”

The contrast between the frames of the behind-the-lines journalists and the frames of the embedded reporters was even more striking as the serious fighting for control of Baghdad began. The headline of a hard news story by a journalist based in Baghdad (Shadid, 2003, April 3) referred to the coming “climactic

defense” of the city. Iraqi officials were described as “defiant,” and said to “boast that the country’s most vaunted units are primed to repel an assault for which they have planned for years.” This story continued the frame that the battle would become “block-by-block guerilla warfare, with civilians caught in between.” An analysis by behind-the-lines journalists (Ricks & Weisman, 2003, April 3) framed the situation as a “dilemma” for the Allied forces, who faced urban combat against “Hussein’s most loyal fighters, drawn from the Republican Guard and his body-guard Special Republican Guard,” who might be planning to “hol[e] up in the city and wag[e] a grinding war of attrition.” The lead story (Chandrasekaran & Baker, 2003, April 3), datelined Kuwait City, did describe resistance to the Allied advance as “only patchy,” but nonetheless framed the situation as “the climactic battle-- and the most dangerous.”

This is in stark contrast to stories from the embedded reporters of the Washington Post . One story (Branigin, 2003, April 3) was headlined, “No Sign of Capital Defenses.” This reporter’s unit encountered “surprisingly little resistance,” and the Republican Guard units were described as “disintegrating,” with no sign of “the heavy Iraqi equipment expected to mount the main defense of Baghdad.” Another story (Finer, 2003, April 3) described a unit moving “more than 70 miles through Iraq’s central desert in an advance that met little opposition.” These troops took control of a strategically important airfield abandoned by a “fleeing Iraqi army.”

The war front moved into Baghdad over the next few days. Stories from embedded reporters painted a mixed picture of relative quiet punctuated by firefights, but the stories from behind-the lines journalists based in Baghdad--now close to the front lines!--tended to emphasize the intensity of the fighting. An embedded reporter described a unit searching for Iraqi troops in a suburb of Baghdad, but finding only abandoned positions (Finer, 2003, April 8). The army unit occupying the airport in Baghdad encountered only “sporadic” resistance (Branigin, 2003, April 7), but another brigade tasked with securing an intersection in the southern part of the city became involved in “five hours of killing and fiery chaos” (Branigin, 2003, April 8). An embedded reporter detailed a protracted firefight at a river crossing (Filkins, 2003, April 8), and characterized the Iraqi resistance as “tough, but uncoordinated.”

Stories filed by behind-the-lines journalists framed the hostilities as being more intense. One described Baghdad as having become a “war zone,” and referred to Republican Guard troops and armament having “poured into the capital,” while

irregular forces carrying rocket propelled grenades moved in the streets (Shadid, 2003, April 6). Another described the gun battles as “fierce” and the Allied advance as “grinding” (Tyler, 2003, April 7). As Allied forces began consolidating their control of the city, Iraqi resistance was still described as “fierce” (Burns, 2003, April 8; Shadid & Chandrasekaran, 2003, April 8). An analysis in the New York Times (Apple, 2003, April 9; Apple, 2003, April 10) characterized the resistance as “stubborn,” and commented that “news of fierce fighting in Hilla . . . belies talk of collapse.”

Iraqi Civilian Response to the Allied Forces

Another important theme in the coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom was the response of Iraqi civilians to the incursion by Allied forces. Early reporting, both from embedded reporters and behind-the-lines reporters, dealt mostly with combat operations, but a distinct theme of civilian response developed after the first week or so of fighting.

In general, the reporting from behind-the-lines journalists featured collateral damage caused by combat; privations suffered by Iraqi civilians after combat passed through their areas; and resentment toward occupation troops. In contrast, reports from embedded journalists described positive interactions between Allied soldiers and Iraqi civilians; Allied efforts to restore basic utilities to the civilian population; Iraqi civilians’ fear of reprisals by Baath Party and Saddam Fedayeen members; and civilians celebrating the collapse of the Hussein regime.

Initially cautious, civilian response to Allied troops grew warmer after the first week of combat, at least in the reports from embedded reporters. Two stories described Iraqis standing by the road and waving at convoys headed toward Baghdad (Branigin, 2003, April 3; Finer, 2003, April 3). Several stories from a journalist embedded with units entering Najaf (Atkinson, 2003, April 2; Atkinson, 2003, April 3; Atkinson, 2003, April 10) likewise framed the civilian response as welcoming, even in the turmoil of war. In the first, civilians were described smiling at American troops, clapping, and “gestur[ing] impatiently for the Americans to press deeper into the city center.” The next day’s story framed the welcome as “jubilant,” but noted residents’ concerns that food and water had become scarce. Another reporter embedded with troops approaching Baghdad described civilians “cheering and encouraging the troops as they passed,” framing what he saw as

“one of the warmest receptions the Americans have gotten to date” (Filkins, 2003, April 4). An Iraqi civilian fleeing Baghdad was quoted as saying, “You have saved us, you have saved us from him.”

Stories written behind-the-lines, covering the same time period, were strikingly different in their framing of the civilian response to the Allied incursion. One story described the burial of a young boy killed in Baghdad (Shadid, 2003, March 31). Although the story noted that the boy may well have been killed by shrapnel from Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, it framed the residents of the neighborhood as angry at the USA for civilian casualties and resentful at the prospect of an occupation. A story datelined from Zubair (Glasser, 2003, April 5), filed after the fighting had moved on to Basra, described civilians’ “ambivalence” about the incursion in this way: “On the streets, children wave and smile at passing British troops. At the now-empty police station, a banner hangs. Shame on America, it says.”

An analysis in the New York Times (Apple, 2003, April 6) referred to “the natural tendency of many Iraqis to feel their patriotic impulses bruised by the presence of heavily armed invaders [emphasis added] in their midst.” This is in stark contrast to the frame of an embedded reporter’s story (LeDuff, 2003, April 8) about American troops entering a town of 45,000: “by noon it was apparent that the townspeople considered [the troops] liberators.” The crowd’s reaction is described as “euphoria,” and a resident was quoted as saying, “you are owed a favor from the Iraqis. . . . We are friends.”

Discussion

Reporting about Operation Iraqi Freedom differed greatly between embedded and behind-the-lines reporters. The embedded journalists often described the war in terms of the weakness of Iraqi army resistance; the frequency with which regular Iraqi forces deserted or surrendered; and the joy of Iraqi civilians at the demise of the Hussein regime. Their stories described the confusion and uncertainty of fire-fights; the tedium and fatigue inherent in warfare; the precise targeting of Allied ordinance; the pinpoint destruction such weapons produced; and friendly interactions between Allied soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

Stories filed by behind-the-lines journalists described the war in terms of the potential of Iraqi forces to mount significant unconventional counterattacks; the

ferocity of the Iraqi irregular forces; the inadequacy of Allied war planning; and the vulnerability of the Allies' long supply lines. These stories emphasized civilian anger at collateral damage; interruptions to utility infrastructure; and mistrust of American intentions.

In part, these differences in framing can be attributed to the activities and conditions reporters could directly observe. Embedded journalists, traveling with combat forces, directly experienced the tedium, intensity, danger, and uncertainty of those situations; they observed first-hand the dominance of Allied tactics and weaponry, and the elation of Iraqi civilians as the Hussein regime disintegrated. Behind-the-lines journalists witnessed different aspects of the war. At a physical distance from the actual fighting, their stories concerned the uncertainty and unpredictability of the war's course, the anarchy that sometimes developed when the control mechanisms of the Hussein regime collapsed, the potential--but not the actuality--for significant Iraqi military resistance and counterattacks, and the belligerent rhetoric of the Iraqi Minister of Information.

We feel it implausible to attribute the framing differences to military control over the reporting of the embedded reporters. The Department of Defense directive that established embedding as policy (U.S. Department of Defense, 2003) specifically ruled out interference with reporters' copy (paragraph 3.R), stated that the purpose of embedding was to maximize reporters' access to information (paragraph 2.A), and required that restrictions on the release of information in their possession had to be justified (paragraph 3.R).

The practice of embedding journalists with combat units was a significant change in Department of Defense media policy (Cooper, 2003). Embedding replaced the pool coverage used in the Persian Gulf War, which had prompted complaints from news outlets and organizations about restricted access to the combat theater. Journalists covering the 2003 Iraq War also had the option of being credentialed as "unilateral," which meant they were not affiliated with a particular combat unit, but did not enjoy the logistical support, physical protection, or immediate access to operations provided to the embedded journalists. Some journalists chose to cover the war as unilaterals (Fisher, 2003; Ricchiardi, 2003a).

Prior to the start of hostilities, there was a predictable skepticism about the promised openness of the combat theater to journalists (e.g., Bushell & Cunningham, 2003; Ricchiardi, 2003a), and concern about the possibility that embedded journalists would lose the required critical distance from the events they covered

(e.g., Bedway, 2003; Chasen, 2003; Cockburn, 2003; Jensen, 2003; Martin, 2003; Strupp & Berman, 2003). In general, however, the embedding policy proved satisfactory to both the military and the press (Blumenthal & Rutenberg, 2003; Cooper, 2003; Fisher, 2003; Galloway, 2003; Mitchell & Bedway, 2003; Ricchiardi, 2003b; Rieder, 2003; Shooting at the Messenger, 2003; Zinsmeister, 2003). Moreover, returning journalists have not voiced complaints about their experiences while embedded, and many papers have continued with the practice (Arrieta-Walden, 2004). In sum, any notion that the copy of embedded reporters was censored by the military while that of behind-the-lines journalists was free from interference--and that the framing differences are attributable to the greater freedom of the behind-the-lines journalists--is not supported.

One of the persistent problems in the discussion of media bias is the question of a baseline measurement against which any purported bias can be measured. We do not mean to suggest here that the embedded reporters were somehow free of preconceptions that might color their field reports. It is worth noting, however, that both the embedded and the behind-the-lines journalists were drawn from the same pool; that is to say, all reporters were acculturated into the current norms of their profession, before they reported on the war. To what, then, can those differences in the framing of their war reporting be attributed?

Although we cannot conclusively demonstrate this to be the case, we strongly feel it likely that behind-the-lines reporters were less able than embedded reporters to divorce themselves from the editorial positions of their respective papers, and the general climate of media opposition concerning military action. After all, while embedded reporters were relaying their eye-witness testimony, behind-the-lines reporters relied on second hand accounts filtered through their preconceptions concerning the outcome of the war (Kuypers, 2002). Here lies the important point of this study. The power of the behind-the-lines reporters' established frames greatly influenced how they reported the war; whereas embedded reporters, observing direct contradictions of their previously established frames, were in a better position to report on what they actually witnessed. In some sense, then, this presented audiences with a choice on how to view the war. Embedded reporters presented a much more positive view of US military actions and possibilities than did their behind-the-lines counterparts. Once the practice of embedded reporting diminished, readers increasingly lost this choice, because the previously established and dominate framing of the mainstream press returned (Kuypers, in press).

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