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Stephen D. Cooper

*Marshall University*, [coopers@marshall.edu](mailto:coopers@marshall.edu)

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# Embedded Versus Behind-the-Lines Reporting on the 2003 Iraq War

Stephen D. Cooper and Jim A. Kuypers

A 2003 study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that “Most Americans (53%) believe that news organizations are politically biased, while just 29% say they are careful to remove bias from their reports ... More than half—51%—say that the bias is ‘liberal,’ while 26% discerned a ‘conservative’ leaning. Fourteen percent felt neither phrase applied” (Harper, 2003). Now add to this that even some academicians are finally accepting the idea that journalists, as a group, are more liberal than the population as a whole. However, whether political or other biases (Hahn, 1998) affect news coverage is still argued. We believe political biases do affect news coverage, in that reporters and editors select and frame news stories in a way that reflects their predispositions.

Regarding story selection, Bernard C. Cohen astutely observed 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” (1963, p.13). Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw 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 (1972, p. 177). This media effect is called agenda-setting. Subsequent studies of agenda-setting confirmed that the

media can have enormous influence upon political decision making and that they are especially influential in telling the general population what to think about. In short, there is a correlation between the amount of news coverage of an issue and that issue's level of importance to the public.

Further, we find that the news media also suggest *how* to think about those issues. Jim A. Kuypers called this agenda-extension (1997), and it occurs when the media move beyond a neutral reporting of events. One way of locating instances of media bias—in the sense of non-neutral transmission of information—is by studying frames, which is one way the media provides its audiences with contextual cues necessary to evaluate the issues under consideration.

William Gamson asserted that a “frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (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 ideas over others, while making some ideas virtually invisible to an audience.

Although it can be reasonably argued that providing contextual cues for interpretation of events is a part of media responsibility, when journalists infuse their political preferences into news stories the potential for manipulation increases. A powerful feature of frames is that they define problems, causes and solutions, although not necessarily in that order. They also provide the author's moral judgments concerning these problems, causes and solutions.

The power of frames to influence the way in which the public interprets certain issues was demonstrated by Paul M. Sniderman and colleagues. In one example, which involved the issue of mandatory HIV testing, researchers found that frames highlight some values over others, thus increasing or decreasing the saliency of these values: “[A] majority of the public supports the rights of persons with AIDS when the issue is framed to accentuate civil liberties considerations—and supports ... mandatory testing when the issue is framed to accentuate public health considerations” (1991, p. 52). When one considers the pervasiveness of the mass media in America, one must conclude that the potential power of framing is great indeed.

### COMPARATIVE FRAMING ANALYSIS: ONE WAR, TWO FRAMES

Among the easiest ways to identify frames is through the use of comparative framing analysis (Kuypers, 1997, 2002; Entmann, 1991, 1993). To that end, this study looked for differences in war reporting between journalists embedded with

combat units and journalists based behind the lines. The stories analyzed came from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Choosing articles from these two papers created both a strength and weakness in the analysis. The strength was that both of these papers are still (recent *NYT* scandals aside) considered national papers of record. Both have extensive resources to support continuous coverage of any topic, so differences in framing observed in this study were unlikely to stem from limited staff or limited resources. The weakness was that the study analyzed news products of a limited number of journalists. Although unlikely, it is conceivable that differences in framing between the stories of embedded journalists and those of behind-the-lines journalists observed in this study were unrepresentative of news outlets in general, but instead, was an artifact of these two particular newspapers.

To the extent possible, stories by embedded reporters and behind-the-lines reporters were matched by date of publication. This was done to reduce the possibility that any framing differences observed were attributable to changes over time of actual conditions in the combat, rather than a property of the journalistic environment. As a practical matter, one day's difference in date was still considered a match. In all, 66 stories published between March 21 and April 10, 2003, were examined. Twenty-six were from embedded reporters and 40 were from behind-the-lines reporters. This study centered on two major themes in the war coverage: the strength of Iraqi army resistance and the response of Iraqi civilians to the Allied incursion. Space limitations in this volume prevent full discussion of the stories; the following two sections are intended to illustrate the framing differences as concisely as possible, and should not be taken as a complete exploration of the data.

### **IRAQI MILITARY RESISTANCE**

Stories written by embedded reporters often reported Iraqi soldiers surrendering, Iraqi positions destroyed by artillery and aircraft attacks, Iraqi soldiers deserting and abandoning their uniforms and equipment, the superior force of the Allied units, and Allied officers surprised by the lack of Iraqi resistance. Behind-the-lines journalists wrote about 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 belligerent rhetoric by Iraqi officials.

The difference in framing became apparent in the early days of the war. Stories about the commencement of hostilities ran on March 21. 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.”

Directly contradicting the frame of the embedded reporter’s story was the comment that “the mass surrender that characterized the 1991 Persian Gulf war had not materialized.” In the next day’s issue a front-page opinion piece (Apple, 2003, March 24), datelined from 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.”

A week after the war started, a *New York Times* opinion piece written by a Washington-based journalist (Apple, 2003, March 27) framed Iraqi resistance as well-conceived and effective in its use of terrain features, and the Allied forces as highly vulnerable to unconventional tactics. Perhaps echoing reporting on the Vietnam War, the piece described the Iraqi war plan as “a kind of guerrilla defense,” and predicted bloody urban combat in Basra: “the British and the American marines fighting with them are surely going to become involved in some kind of street-by-street, if not house-by-house, urban warfare.” Another opinion piece in the same edition, datelined Kuwait, framed the war as “a tough fight,” referred in the headline to Allied “setbacks,” and asserted that “the Iraqi military’s command and control system is still intact” (Gordon, 2003, March 27).

Reports from embedded journalists, however, were noticeably less pessimistic about the Allies’ chances. In the next day’s edition, one embedded reporter’s story (Kifner, 2003, March 28) noted that irregular forces were slowing the advance of U.S. troops, but characterized the resistance as “nearly constant harassment and ambush by small bands of irregular Iraqi fighters and remnants of army units” perhaps receiving “rudimentary military direction from Republican Guard officers.” Another embedded reporter described a surprise attack on Marine positions around Nasiriya (Wilson, 2003, March 28), which briefly threatened to overrun the command headquarters. The attack was repulsed, and the article ended by quoting an American officer saying, “We had a good day.”

The contrast between the frames of the behind-the-lines journalists and the frames of the embedded reporters was, perhaps, 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 guerrilla 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 bodyguard 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, described resistance to the Allied advance as “only patchy,” but nonetheless framed the situation as “the climactic battle—and the most dangerous.”

This was in stark contrast to stories from the embedded reporters of the *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 an 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—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 6). The army unit occupying the airport in Baghdad encountered only “sporadic” resistance (Branigin, 2003, April 6), 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 7). An embedded reporter detailed a protracted firefight at a river crossing (Filkins, 2003, April 8), characterizing 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) characterized the resistance as “stubborn,” and commented that “news of fierce fighting in Hilla ... belies talk of collapse.”

In fact, Iraqi military resistance did collapse in the next two days. A story from a reporter embedded in a unit entering Hilla (Atkinson, 2003, April 10) referred to “shattered resistance” and “brittle defenses.” A story from a reporter embedded in a unit entering Baghdad described a brief firefight and “mild resistance from snipers” (Finer, 2003, April 10). Stories filed by behind-the-lines journalists continued to highlight what resistance there remained, but acknowledged that the combat was essentially done. One described the extension of Allied control over the city as “halting,” but noted that by the end of the day “Iraqi resistance—fought relentlessly but ultimately hopelessly with rockets, machine guns and other light arms—had died away” (Burns, 2003, April 9).

#### **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. This first became an issue related to the adequacy of the war plans, which anticipated some degree of civilian uprising helping the Allied operations, and later was often linked to the restoration of civil order in areas where the Hussein regime’s power structure had been displaced.

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 Ba’ath Party and Saddam *Fedayeen* members, and civilians celebrating the collapse of the Hussein regime.

The cautious acceptance of Allied forces was a theme running through three reports from embedded reporters published in the March 31 *New York Times*. One characterized the first interactions between American forces and noncombatant Iraqis with the word “peacefully” (Filkins, 2003, March 31), and described how American troops helped an Iraqi civilian get his irrigation pump restarted. Another story used the word “warily” to describe the first contact between troops and civilians (Kifner, 2003, March 31). The wariness is attributed to memory of the brutal repression which followed the Gulf War, and one civilian is quoted as saying, “Don’t make the mistake of 1991.” A report filed from the outskirts of

Basra (Santora & Smith, 2003, March 31,) described civilians caught between British and Iraqi military units. In this story, fear and uncertainty were the predominant emotions, which bred mistrust of the Allied forces: noncombatant residents of Basra were “afraid of Saddam Hussein’s troops inside the city who they said were executing people freely; afraid of the forces outside the city whose intentions they did not yet know; and afraid of what would come as their supplies of food and water continued to dwindle.” A story from a *Washington Post* embedded reporter (Branigin, 2003, March 31) described a similar wariness as an armored column passed villages, prompting residents to raise white flags.

Civilian response to the troops grew warmer in the next few days, 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). A pair of stories from a journalist embedded with units entering Najaf (Atkinson, 2003, April 2; Atkinson, 2003, April 3, ) 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). While the story noted that the boy may well have been killed by shrapnel from Iraqi antiaircraft fire, it framed the residents of the neighborhood as angry at the United States for civilian casualties and resentful at the prospect of an occupation. An analysis in the *New York Times* struck a distinctly pejorative tone when it referred to Iraqi civilians “cheer[ing] the invaders of their country” (Apple, 2003, April 4). The lead story in that same edition (Tyler, 2003, April 4) framed the civilian response in a similar way: “Allied forces had expected a more enthusiastic reception.” The lead story in the next day’s edition of the *Washington Post* (Chandrasekaran & Baker, 2003, April 5) framed civilians waving to passing convoys as a “surprise” to the troops. 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.”

Another 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 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 is quoted as saying, “you are owed a favor from the Iraqis. ... We are friends.”

When the Hussein regime collapsed, the contrast between the framing by embedded reporters and by behind-the-lines journalists diminished somewhat, but did not disappear entirely. A story about American troops entering Hilla, written by the reporter embedded with the unit (Atkinson, 2003, April 10), described the residents as “jubilant,” and “offering thumbs-up gestures and high-fives to infantrymen.” The reporter commented that “the subsequent happy pandemonium had the distinct flavor of liberation.” A story by a reporter embedded with troops entering Baghdad (Finer, 2003, April 10) described a similar response by civilians, “who lined the streets as if they were a parade route.” The events were framed as “the most overt display of welcome the Marines had received since entering Iraq.”

The two front page stories of the April 10 *Washington Post* carry headlines conveyed the celebratory frame, but included a substantial amount of copy supporting the frame of ambivalence and resentment. Both stories were written by the same behind-the-lines reporter, who was based in Baghdad throughout the war. The lead story (Shadid, 2003, April 10a ) framed Baghdad residents as “celebrat[ing] the government’s defeat and welcom[ing] the U.S. forces in scenes of thanks and jubilation.” Most of the description supports that frame, but in the second half of the article the reporter referred to the “conflicting emotions” of the moment, and the “hope that the U.S. presence would not become an occupation.” The other story (Shadid, 2003, April 10b), also appearing above the fold, very strongly supported the frame of ambivalence. One Baghdad resident is quoted as saying, “You must bring these words to the American people. Thank you, thank you very, very much.” Another is quoted as saying, “If they’ve come as invaders...nobody will welcome them.” The crowd is described as having “erupted in cheers” at the sight of American military vehicles, and an Iraqi is quoted as saying, “It is a liberation.” Another is quoted as saying, “This is my country and this is an occupation.” The reporter summarized these sentiments with the comment, “a current of such ambivalence raced across Baghdad along with jubilation and surprise.”

An analysis, on the front page of that day’s *New York Times* (Apple, 2003, April 10), struck a decidedly negative tone about the fall of Baghdad. The event was framed as “the highwater mark for a new American determination to use the nation’s military to project its power around the world.” Near the end of the

article, the reporter acknowledged that “some of the Iraqis in the streets were jubilant,” but quickly tempered the bit of optimism with the comment that “many Iraqis resent America’s Middle East policies as much as other Muslims do.”

### DISCUSSION

Stories about Operation Iraqi Freedom filed by journalists embedded with combat units differed noticeably from the stories filed by journalists working behind the lines, with regard to the framing of war news.

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 firefights, the tedium and fatigue inherent in warfare, the precise targeting of Allied ordinance, the pinpoint destruction such weapons produce, 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 adequacy 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. Journalists based in Baghdad usually included the statements of the Iraqi Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed Al-Sahhaf. In the early stages of the war Al-Sahhaf’s assertions about the war situation were repeated with little or no comment by the reporter. Only when the combat reached Baghdad itself did some journalists begin to question the veracity of Al-Sahhaf’s statements, particularly when Al-Sahhaf denied the presence of Allied forces which were visible from the hotel in which the reporters were staying.

In part, these differences in framing between embedded journalists and their behind-the-lines colleagues can reasonably be attributed to the activities and conditions they 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.

It is not plausible to attribute the framing differences to military control over the reporting of the embedded reporters. The Department of Defense directive establishing embedding as policy (U.S. Department of Defense, 2003) specifically

ruled out any general review of the reporters' copy (para. 3.R), put interviews with troops on the record (paragraph 4.A), and narrowly specified what sorts of information could not be reported because of security concerns (para. 4.G, ff.). Although unit commanders did have the latitude to impose delays on the filing of reports from the combat theater because of concerns for operational security (para. 2.C.4), they were not allowed to exclude reporters from the scene of the fighting (para. 3.G). The directive also stated that the purpose of the embedding policy was to maximize reporters' access to information (para. 2.A), and that restrictions on the release of information in their possession had to be justified (para. 3.R). 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. It is also worth noting that, in general, journalists themselves were satisfied that their access to the combat theater was adequate (Cooper, 2003).

Although we cannot conclusively demonstrate this to be the case, we feel that the best explanation for the stark differences in the framing of the war stories is that behind-the-lines reporters were heavily influenced by newsroom culture, and in the case of the *New York Times*, the paper's stated editorial opposition to the war. In the final analysis, embedded reporters were relaying their eye-witness accounts of events while behind-the-lines reporters could only relay second-hand accounts filtered through their preconceived understandings of the war.

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