

Framing of Iraq war 2003 by the British Newspapers

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Abstract:

This study explored the framing of the Iraqi war of 2003 by the British newspapers namely The Guardian and The Independent. The study revealed how Iraq war was covered and what media frames were employed by the British newspapers. For this, editorials of these newspapers were analyzed by employing the technique of thematic analysis. By analyzing the data, it was found that British press mostly framed Iraq war in a negative stance. The British newspapers frequently adopted anti war frame and criticized British government support to the Iraqi attack. The British press was more concerned about humanitarian and rebuilding issues in Iraq. Overall, it was noted that the coverage of Iraq attack was dominated by oppositional themes and press did not support government policy on Iraq crisis.

Keywords: Media frames; British press, Iraq war 2003, Weapons of mass destruction.

I. Introduction

The coverage of the Iraqi invasion 2003 was mostly framed in the perspective of pro-war ideas by the Western media (Altheide, 2009; Groshek, 2008; Aday, 2010). Particularly, the American government was much concerned regarding coverage of the Iraqi attack because war images play important role in producing public opinion and public sentiments like “patriotism, sacrifice, humanity, and fairness” (Zelizer, 2004, p.115). For this reason, it was propagated by the US government and the American media that Iraq was invaded in the pursuit of mass destruction weapons, to restrain Saddam Hussein’s activities who had connections with Al-Qaeda (Katzman, 2004) and to establish democracy for the masses of Iraq. As President Bush said during his speech to nation on March 17, 2003, that Saddam government had the history of atrocities in Middle East and also had hatred for US and its friendly countries. The Iraqi government remained involved in supporting terrorist groups including al Qaeda who killed many innocent people in US or other countries. Bush assured that his government would fight against these brutal challenges to achieve the course of safety (Bush, 2003).

Iraq was attacked on March 20, 2003 by the allied forces. Britain was major coalition partner in this war with the US. There were enough studies conducted on the

coverage of Iraq war 2003 by the American media which revealed that the US media mostly supported the war (Aday, 2010, Bennet, 2003, Aday, Cluverius & Livingston, 2005, Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams & Trammell, 2005). The present study would investigate that how the British press framed the war. The study would reveal the stance of coverage and dominant media frames employed by the British newspapers. Therefore, the news framing of the Iraqi attack would offer interesting case study regarding the British newspapers how they looked at the war when their government was supporting the war and their army participated in it.

II. Framing

An appropriate theoretical framework for this study is media framing theory. Goffman (1974) described media frames as “schemata of interpretation,” which helped the audience to understand the issues meaningfully (p. 21). Entman (1993) said, “framing essentially involves selection and salience” and further defined framing as:

“selecting 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” (p. 52).

Reese (2007) defined frame as “organizing” and “structuring” work. In like manner, de Vreese (2005) concluded that frame underlined the prominent aspects of the issue. In fact, frames categorize the world for the journalists who report them and the audiences who trust these reports (Gitlin, 1980). The application of framing strategies is common in communications and reporting of news.

Nelson and Boynton (1997) postulate that frames affect public thought by emphasizing particular principles and information, and portray them as an issue of significant value, whereas, if they appear in a different frame, that frame may depict the reality alternatively. Kinder and Sanders (1990) were of the opinion that frames are often entrenched in political discussion, this is quite identical to the idea of media frames and the individual frames that depict the “internal structures of the mind” (p.74). Likewise, Bateson (1972) argued that frames demarcate, “a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions)” (p.186), accordingly, people understand and estimate the social reality in framed communication (Clair, 1993). As Reese (2001) put it: “frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p.11). In this manner, frames indicate the main theme and direction of the news story. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) stated that a media frame provides main theme to news story that further guides the audience about the complexities of the issue. In the case of the Iraqi war of 2003, many studies describe how different media outlets frame the incident. Some of the media support this war; particularly American and Western media (Kellner, 2004; Levenson, 2004; MacArthur, 2003; Ryan, 2004) but on the other hand, Middle Eastern and Muslim countries adopt an oppositional stance and some channels or newspapers are concerned about the consequences of war.

Therefore, the present study investigated how often British press followed their respective government policies, relied on government sources or adopted a neutral and critical approach in the coverage of the Iraqi war.

III. Framing of Iraq war 2003

There were number of studies had been conducted on the coverage of Iraq war 2003 from different countries. Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams and Trammell (2005) found in their comparative study of US and international news website regarding coverage of the Iraq war 2003 that foreign sites adopted a responsibility frame whereas American sites were dominated by pro war stance. Similarly, Dimitrova and Stromback's (2005) argued in their study about the framing of Iraq war by US and Swedish newspapers that the US press generally preferred military and official frames whereas responsibility frame and anti-war protests were reported by Swedish press. It appeared that American media typically sensationalized war by focusing on war victories as illustrated by embedded journalists (Graber, 2006). Correspondingly, the American media did not comment on the connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda and also did not question the facts regarding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction from their government (Calabrese, 2005).

Fahmy and Kim (2006) conducted a comparative study about the visual framing Iraq war by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* newspapers. It was found that both the newspapers gave less coverage on anti war aspects. As only 20% of their coverage was devoted to the images of Iraqi people casualties. Mostly coverage was given to military troops, political leaders of America and Britain, and the conquests of allied forces.

However, Ingrid (2005) presented a different perspective on the framing of the Iraqi war of 2003. He analyzed the comparative coverage of the US and German media in this regard. He found that German media tried to provide the balance reporting on the issue by including Iraqi sources and advocating to give more time to UN inspectors for probing WMD. Conversely, the US media dominated by pro war stance. This comparative study suggested that during crisis, the media were mostly culturally bound and less inclined to bring opposing viewpoints (Ingrid, 2005). Similarly, Johnston (2004) observed that during Iraq war 2003 German media followed their government position on the issue. As German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder expressed anti war opinion, likewise the German media gave negative coverage to the US viewpoint on Iraq war.

On the other hand, the previous studies on British media revealed that there was balanced approach was adopted by British media in the coverage of Iraq war 2003. Mostly, British media supported government policy but at the same time, it also discussed controversial arguments against Iraq war. Robinson, Goddard, and Murray (2009) noted that during the fight against terrorism, the principles of patriotism and official sources farmed the media performance in favor of UK Government. Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell and Threadgold (2006) identified considerable reliance of British media on official sources. They divided the coverage into three thematic categories connected with the governments' case of Iraq war: immorality of the Iraqi regime, the threat of Saddam's mass destruction weapons, and reception given by the Iraqi people to the coalition forces. The findings indicate that British media supported the official stand by highlighting the immorality of Saddam regime and welcoming gesture of the Iraqi public whereas it refrained from the critical questions regarding the claims of grave threats from WMD to the world. Similarly, Robinson, Goddard, Parry and Murray (2009)

identified British media's conformity to the official viewpoint by relying on government sources and notion of patriotism.

Conversely, the researchers also found considerable data on causalities and humanitarian issues. Somehow, it indicates towards the objective and balanced coverage trends of British media as well. Papacharissi and Oliveria (2008) found in their study regarding the British newspapers that they stressed all international players should participate in eradicating terrorism. They gave importance to opinion of foreign experts in this perspective and discussed alternative policy options and diplomatic approach on Iraq crisis. Similarly, Susan (2004) analyzed the coverage of '*The Independent*' on the war on terror. It was found that the newspaper gave balance coverage on the issue by sympathizing with America on the 9/11 crisis and condemned killings in Afghanistan and Iraq. Similarly, Hammond (2003) noted in their study that British mainstream media, for instance, Channel Four and Daily Mirror had included many references of criticism on American imperialism and also presented reports related to anti-war protests and condemnation.

By keeping in view the previous literature, the present study would explore the stance of coverage by the British press regarding Iraq war 2003. The previous research mostly adopted quantitative approach regarding the coverage of Iraq war. However, the present restudy would investigate the stance of coverage through qualitative approach. Moreover, it would investigate that what media frames were employed by the British press in the coverage of Iraq war 2003. The research questions are given below.

RQ 1: How the Iraqi war 2003 was framed by the British newspapers?

RQ 2: What frames were employed by the British press in the coverage of Iraq war 2003?

IV. Method

For this study, a qualitative research design has been employed. This provided an opportunity to the researcher to build a complex and holistic picture, analyze words, reports, information and conduct a research in a natural setting (Creswell, 1994). For analyzing the text of newspaper editorials, the study employed the technique of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was one of the qualitative techniques that is mostly employed by the researchers. It identifies 'what' and 'how' themes (Popping, 2000) through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p.258). Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze classifications and patterns within data. It described data with rich detail and interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a qualitative systematic method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organized and described your data set in (rich detail). However, frequently it went further than this, and interpreted various aspects of the research topic" (p. 79).

V. Population for the study

For this study, two British newspapers namely *The Guardian* and *The Independent* were selected. Newspapers were retrieved from the Lexis Nexuses database and newspaper web sites. The population for this research study included all editorials using the word "Iraq war 2003" or "Saddam Hussain", or "WMD", or "Iraq", or "Iraq invasion" in the headline or leading paragraph in the selected newspapers from 01 March 2002 to 31 August 2003. This time period was chosen because very after Afghanistan attack 2001, Bush administration started to accuse Iraq for having WMD and threatened

the country for invasion. From then media started to report on Iraq conflict. Although Iraq was invaded on March 20, 2003 but media discourse on Iraq conflict was stated before one year.

VI. Unit of Analysis

The entire editorial including title, headline, body text, and themes is taken as a unit of analysis. The rest of the articles, photographs and editorial cartoons on editorial page are excluded from the study. The editorial is chosen as a unit of analysis because it depicts the opinion of its newspaper and organization. Moreover, the editorial also give impression regarding the political affiliation of the newspaper and depicted the newspaper policy. The editorials depict the opinion of a newspaper on the particular issue rather than objective reporting. That's why editorials for this study are chosen.

VII. Analytical strategy

By applying thematic analysis, the researcher investigated how the British press framed the Iraqi attack 2003. For analyzing the content from newspapers, the study employed inductive and deductive thematic analysis. The editorials of the British newspapers were chosen as the unit of analysis. The researcher started to analyze data based on the prior categories derived from previous literature but during analysis new themes and categorizes emerged from data.

In this study three types of coding was utilized: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding involved labeling and classifying the phenomenon that was pointed by the data. Such coding did not bring descriptions of the different aspects of data but it captured its meanings (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In axial coding, the data was analyzed again by making associations between categories and its subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analysis explained the phenomenon implanted in the data. Selective coding integrated the categories to a structure or theoretical framework. In this case, first step was to identify core category. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) core category was a conceptual idea that covered all other categories. Core category was a central idea of the research. It was the main theme of the research that explained the whole phenomenon. Based on the following method data from the British newspaper editorials was analyzed. For this purpose, the researcher used NVIVO 10. The data indicated the positive, neutral or negative themes of the data. The data pointed out different media frames and prominent issues. At the last stage, the researcher found out core categories from the data. These core categories depicted findings of the study.

VIII. Findings

By analyzing the coverage of the British newspapers (*The Guardian* and *The Independent*), it was observed that the negative themes were more dominant than positive or neutral ones. *The Guardian* sometimes adopted neutral stance on Iraq crisis but mostly it opposed the attack. However, *The Independent* was completely against it.

From the perspective of negative framing of the Iraqi war, the British press discussed the following themes in their editorials. Such as the implications of war, oppositional statement against the war, negative public polls, inspection of weapons of mass destruction, criticism on the US policies concerning to Iraq attack, violation of UN

resolutions by the United States, deteriorating security situation and the US's extension of 'War on Terror' to other countries.

With the beginning of the War on Terror, the US started to accuse Iraq of its possession of weapons of mass destruction. Bush's statements indicated that the US had planned tough strategies against Iraq. *The Guardian* argued that before settling Afghanistan, the US should not have extended its anti terrorism campaign to Iraq. It was remarked that without the authorization of an international organization the US policy against Iraq would be irrational. If the US had planned to pursue this course of action without the UN, it would go without British support. If Blair supported Iraq attack, his decision would not be backed by the British people. There were number of editorials noted from *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, which highlighted negative public opinion, public protest inside and outside the Britain and oppositional statements by the leading social, political, and religious personalities of the world. *The guardian* commented on the British support to the US war on Iraq in these words;

"Six months ago, we could be proud of our support for the US. Today, pride has been replaced by an alarm that Mr. Blair is enthusiastic to lend our support to Mr Bush's deeply dangerous schemes" (*The Guardian*, March 19, 2002, p. 19).

Further, the British press mentioned that there were many European and Muslim countries such as France, Germany, Belgium, China, Russia, Turkey, Ireland, Italy, Australia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran that opposed the Iraqi war. German chancellor Gerhard Schroder publicly criticized the US polices over Iraq. Moreover, the British newspapers highlighted the oppositional statements by prominent political and religious personalities against the war such as British Minister Clare Short, Javier Solana, Chris Patten from the European Union, Dominique de Villepin, the French Foreign Minister, President Chirac's and Henry Kissinger. Javier Solana from the European Union opposed Iraq attack in these words;

"There can be no excuse for slipping into war because of the dictates of logistics or the weather,"(*The Independent*, February 01, 2003, p. 18)

The other theme that generally stressed by *The Independent* and *The Guardian* in their editorials was the role of the United Nations in the inspection of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the US response to it. Both the newspapers mentioned that the US did not show positive response towards United Nations inspection. Although United Nations team mentioned that the Iraqi Government provided them with all assistance, the United States was not ready to accept the findings of the United Nations. On March 03, 2003, *The Guardian* commented that the US ignored the findings of UN inspectors who said that they did not find any smoking gun in Iraq. Even Hans Blix challenged the US allegations of Iraq's deception on 14 Feb. *The Guardian* commented that perhaps the US had detached itself from an inspection process and was not ready to comply with UN resolutions. At this time, any positive development by Iraq could not restrict America to invade the country. The British newspapers emphasized that the unilateral stand of Britain and the US had affected multilateral institutions like the NATO, the European Union, the Arab League, and the UNO. The consequences of war would increase the sufferings of the Iraqis.

Later on, the process of war in Iraq was framed in a negative stance by highlighting civilian casualties, excessive use of bombs, tough targets and violations of international laws. On March 31 and April 07, 2003, *The Guardian* revealed the extent of incidents of civilian casualties. Bombing on Hilla, a small town near Baghdad killed 33 civilians and injured 100 people. In another incident in the pursuit of Saddam 50, civilians were killed in one day. *The Independent* framed the war process in these words; "The final countdown to an unsupportable conflict has begun" (*The Independent*, February 07, 2003, p.16).

The Guardian and *The Independent* criticized the use of cluster bombs and heavy bombardment in Iraq. *The Guardian* argued that the use of cluster bombs was against international laws because it had dreadful impacts on the civilians. During war process, the British newspapers frequently published article on increasing casualties, destruction and worsening security situation in Iraq. They criticized America's pro war policies in Iraq.

After the war, *the Independent* remarked that although the war was over, we had to pay for its consequences over many years to come. This war brought many stories of human sufferings, miseries and civilian casualties. The brutal images of war could not be erased from the eyes of spectators that became the continuous cause of fury in the Muslim community. The attack would increase more suicide attacks against Western civilians, encourage terrorists to enhance global terrorism and would destabilize the region. In these circumstances, the post-war situation would be more expensive than expected.

After the war, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* highlighted the worsening of law and order in Iraq. They urged on the United States government to resolve security and humanitarian issues in Iraq. The British press supported the United Nations leading role in post war Iraq. In September 2003, *The Independent* supported the idea that some international force should take charge in Iraq. The UN must play an active role in postwar affairs. However, America wanted to install pro American government in Iraq after war. The British press did not support pro-American political set up in Iraq after war. It argued that all UN members should play their role to resist American participation in the civil war of Iraq. The United Nations should come forward to stabilize the precarious security situation in Iraq.

The other issue that was continuously discussed by the British press was the missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. After the attack, *The Guardian* stressed on searching missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The newspaper argued that weapons of mass destruction were the prime reason to invade Iraq. Now it seriously asked the Bush administration where the weapons were. The delay in locating missing weapons would increase public skepticism over the US intelligence and Bush's policy regarding Iraq. It criticized that the Bush administration exaggerated this issue by extraordinarily emphasizing on weapons of mass destruction. At this stage, the US had distanced itself from UN inspection in Iraq, which was a bad policy. In the present scenario, only the UN was the international and objective body that could pursue inspection and present information. *The Independent* argued in its editorials in September 2002:

“Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair have still not produced the evidence to justify war” (*The Independent*, September 09, 2002, p. 14).

Overall, the framing of the Iraqi war was quite negative. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* were against the war since the beginning of allegations against Iraq. The newspapers highlighted negative statements, public polls, and oppositional comments over the war, collateral damages, and resistance by the Iraqi forces and chaotic situation in Iraq. During the postwar period, the press highlighted the deteriorating security situation of Iraq, inability of allied forces to control the situation and US’s arrogance not to give the leading role to the UNO in the postwar process. The press also criticized British government for not finding WMD’s in Iraq after war that was framed as strong justification to attack Iraq.

However, there were only few references observed that indicated positive and neutral stance towards the framing of the Iraqi war. There were limited themes noted which framed Iraq attack in a neutral or positive stance. For instance, *the Independent* framed neutrally Saddam’s offer to renew a UN inspection inside Iraq. It argued that although Saddam could not be trusted, he often took time when he felt threatened. However, this time, it appears to be immature to overrule his offer. Allowing inspection in Iraq could have turned the situation in a positive one. The war could have been avoided through peaceful diplomacy. *The Independent* pointed that Saddam’s offer to renew talks with the UN arms inspectors might have been a bluff but his offer could not be dismissed without exploration.

Likewise, few editorials from both newspapers framed the fall of Baghdad in a neutral or positive stance. *The Guardian* considered it as an impressive conquest of allied forces that wiped out 35 years of tyrannic rule of Saddam. The Iraqis felt relieved and crushed Saddam’s statues. It was sure that most Arab and western leaders either supported the attack did not feel relieved after the fall of Baghdad. On the other hand, some Arabs considered it as a wrong act and the defeat of Muslims and the Arabs. There were many Arab leaders who did not like Saddam but they did not approve the attack. Countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya and North Korea might have been alarmed by the fate of Saddam. *The Independent* stated that the Iraqi capital was liberated, statues were torn down, secret forces were destroyed, and all information apparatus was demolished. “The all-powerful apparatus of information control has evaporated. Hesitantly at first, the rejoicing crowds came out on the streets to celebrate. Once oppressed people have lost their fear, there can be no turning back” (*The Independent*, April 10, 2003, p. 12).

But at the same time, *The Independent* indicated that with the fall of the regime, there were threats of lawlessness and insecurity. It would be the allied forces’ duty to restore the situation. *The Independent* was alarmed that the US had won war in Iraq by defeating Saddam’s forces in a short time but the US and the UK had to pay a price in the form of Arab resentment and global insecurity. Every passing day increased anxiety in the Middle Eastern region.

By concluding, it can be stated that the overall framing of Iraq war 2003 was negative by the British press. In the coverage of the Iraqi war of 2003, the negative and oppositional themes were dominant but at the same time, there were limited themes from both newspapers which adopted positive or neutral stance over the conflict.

IX. Discussion

It was explored by the study how the British press framed the Iraqi war 2003 and what media frames were employed. The findings revealed that Iraq war was generally framed in a negative stance by the British newspapers. Mostly, the press criticized pro-war ideas and pro-war policies of the US and British governments. However, at that time, British government supported the war and its army participated in it. Contrary to this, British press opposed the war and framed it as un-authorized war without UN endorsement. It criticized the British government for participating in a war that was not authorized by the UNO. The British press highlighted 'anti war' themes such as negative opinion polls, oppositional statements, missing WMD, humanitarian crisis, worsening law and order, killings and destruction. It was noted that the British press generally used 'anti war' and 'humanitarian frame in the coverage of Iraqi war. Overall, the stance of coverage was dominantly negative against the Iraqi invasion 2003.

Furthermore, tone of the editorials was critical against Iraqi attack. *The Independent* particularly used hard language against America and its policies related to the Iraqi crisis. The *Guardian* and *The Independent* discussed the statements by President Bush and other members of Bush administration. Mostly, the US policies and President Bush's Statements against Iraq were framed negatively by the press. Bush administration was generally portrayed as 'US hawks' by the British press. Susan (2004) also observed in her study that the British daily, *the Independent* framed America positively and negatively in its coverage of War on Terror. America was depicted as country to take revenge at every cost. Similarly, Hammond (2003) also endorsed the same idea that British mainstream media, for instance, Channel Four and Daily Mirror criticized America for its imperialist policies and included stories related to anti-war protests and condemnation.

The British press also highlighted humanitarian issues in Iraq. They discussed the shortage of food, medicine and other necessities. It urged the British and the US governments to help war affected people. These findings were consistent with the previous studies that found considerable data on casualties and humanitarian crisis in Iraq (Susan, 2004; Hammond, 2003).

Another aspect that received negative framing was the issue of missing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after war. British press inquired to the British Government why missing weapons of mass destruction not found from Iraq after war. It also wrote that after war United Nations inspectors should be sent back to Iraq to find out the weapons. The newspapers criticized the British and US Governments for not finding weapons of mass destruction from Iraq. Overall, the British newspapers were much against Iraq attack. They strongly disapproved the war. This was the new finding of this study. Contrarily to the previous studies on the coverage of the war on terror and the Iraq war 2003 from British media perspective that British press mostly supported the war (Robbinson, *et al.*, 2009; Lewis, Brookes, Mosdell and Threadgold, 2006; Robbinson, Goddard, Parry and Murray, 2009).

However, in the case of Iraq war 2003, it was discussed above that British press completely opposed the attack. While discussing about the fate of Saddam Husain, the British newspapers did not support him. The newspapers supported the collapse of oppressive regime but it was alarmed that tyranny should not be replaced by another

tyranny. It argued that Iraqis should have right to form their representative Government. The foreign Government should not be imposed on them. It should be noted that British press was completely against the attack.

However, British press supported victory against Saddam because they considered him as tyrant and autocratic. The end of his autocratic rule would bring democracy for the people of Iraq. But at the same time, British press did not consider Iraq attack justified without UN authorization. It could be concluded that 'anti-war' frame and 'humanitarian frames' dominated the coverage of Iraq war by the British press.

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