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War Drums:  
A Retrospective Analysis of Post 9/11 Media and the Mis-education of the American Public

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Keywords: adult education, Iraq war, political communication, propaganda model, ideological detoxification

Abstract: This empirical research contributes to the critical analysis of media as a source of information and misinformation for adults; paying specific attention to the institutional nexus of political communication serving as a tool of the structural elite in bolstering an agenda contingent upon a mis-educated populous. The theoretical framework resides within the critical theory of media utilizing the propaganda model as a perspective analysis of the structural components of political communication. It adds to the continued critical analysis of media by scholars who assert that consumers of media are indeed bound to the ideological discourse as participants, and that to some degree they have the agency to realize the source of the dominant ideology; however, if they are media literate or obtain proper education they will possess or will develop within themselves the ability to reject the current messages maintaining the ideological status quo.

Problem Statement

Socialization is the process whereby people learn and internalize values, beliefs, and norms of their culture and in doing so develop a sense of self. To better understand the society that we live in one must take into account the importance of media. Media affects us in our daily lives, we see it in our homes and in our schools we listen to it in our cars. Media increasingly play a central role in shaping our ways of living, our cultures and our societies (Williams, 2003). People rely on media to serve as information databases, to shape their beliefs, and enhance their ideologies. Therefore to understand contemporary society we must understand that media serves as a powerful socializing and educational agent (Graber, 1980). Thus, in order to foster a more critically educated class that can determine the source of news and determine if the aired justifications are truly in their best interest, media literacy is extremely important. Steven Brookfield’s (1986) articulated need of ideological detoxification in adult education of media offers a fundamentally critical approach to political communication studies. Adult education in media literacy is extremely vital to substantively understand the political matrix between...
government agenda, the owning class of media, media institutions, and the accepted rational of U.S. foreign policy.

Perhaps one of the most telling contemporary research done which illustrates the power of media, was that of Steven Kull and the PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll. In 2003, Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in conjunction with Knowledge Networks (KN) conducted a Poll to survey Americans attitudes toward the war in Iraq. Between June and September a series of three polls were conducted by Knowledge Networks with a total of 3,334 respondents. This was combined with the findings from four other polls conducted January through May for a total data set of 8,634 respondents. The poll found significant portions of the public having believed that Iraq was directly involved in the September 11 attacks, that evidence of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda have been found, that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after the war, and that world public opinion has approved the U.S. going to war with Iraq. (Kull, 2003: 2).

The frequency of misperceptions regarding evidence of al-Qaeda links, weapons of mass destruction being found, and world public opinion favorable to the U.S. unilateral invasion of Iraq revealed varied. Eighty percent of respondents whose source was Fox News had at least one key misperception; seventy one percent of CBS viewers, sixty one of ABC, fifty five percent of NBC, fifty five percent of CNN, forty seven percent of Print Media sources, and twenty three percent of PBS-NPR represents the percentage of respondents who held at least one key misperception (Kull, 2003: 13). PIPA/KN then looked more closely at each misperception. When asked whether the US has found “clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization,” among the combined sample of three month period forty nine percent said such evidence had been found. This misperception was higher for those who viewed Fox News with sixty seven percent stating that evidence was found, forty nine of NBC viewers believed that evidence was found, forty percent of those who got news from print and sixteen percent of those who viewed or listened to PBS-NPR held the same misperception (Kull, 2003: 13).

When the respondents were asked whether the US has “found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction,” twenty two percent of all respondents over June-September mistakenly thought this had happened. Once again, Fox viewers were the highest with thirty three percent having this belief, twenty percent of NBC viewers had this belief, seventeen percent of print media respondents held this belief and eleven percent of those who watched PBS or listened to NPR held this belief. All respondents were asked: When questioned about the Iraq-al-Qaeda link, among those who got there new from Fox and those who did no follow the news at all, forty two percent had misperceptions, rising progressively higher at levels of attention to eighty percent among those who followed the news very closely. (Kull, 2003: 13-16). Kull (2003) found that a significant portion of the public believed that Iraq was directly involved with the September 11 attacks and that evidence of links between Iraq and Al Qaeda has been found. Interestingly, the percent of people having the misconceptions varied by what they identified as their primary news source. Fox News watchers had the highest rate of misperceptions, while those who relied primarily on NPR and PBS had the lowest proportion holding misconceptions. Kull’s research demonstrates the power of media. Despite PIPA/KN’s contribution to our understanding of media’s role in constructing realities, PIPA/KN’s work does not explore what may account for the differences in people’s perceptions of the Iraq war. The work does not address the content that could have led to these misperceptions. This research intends to fill that gap.
Methods

While conducting polls from January through September 2003, PIPA/Knowledge Networks discovered that a substantial portion of the public held a number of misperceptions related to the Iraq conflict; moreover, they found that “the extent of Americans’ misperceptions varied significantly dependent on their source of news” (Knull 2003: 12). Those receiving their news from PBS or NPR were the least likely to hold misperceptions while Fox News watchers were the most likely. To explore what accounts for the varying degree of misperceptions it is important to look at the content of the news presented on these news programs. It is from these news sources that the sample for this study is drawn. Each news source has several news programs as well as news stories posted their websites. Thus, it is necessary to focus the research on a sample of the news programs. According to Jupitermedia Corporation (2008) prime time nightly news tends to draw a large audience throughout the day, the primetime nightly news programs were selected for analysis (http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/ratings/default.asp).

Sample

The “Special Report with Brit Hume” which airs on Fox News from 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm central and “All Things Considered” which airs from 4:30 pm until 6:00 pm central time were chosen as multimedia samples. Three four-month periods of time were selected for analysis. Transcripts were obtained for each Monday night program, from September 17, 2001 through December 31, 2001; from May 6th, 2002 through August 26, 2002, and from December 2, 2002 through March 17, 2003. This produced a sample of 98 news programs, 49 news programs for Fox News’s “Special Report with Brit Hume” and 49 news programs for NPR’s “All Things Considered.”

For each of the 98 news programs, the transcript for each news stories was read and evaluated. A total of 1,123 stories were analyzed; 250 stories from Fox News’s “Special Report with Brit Hume” and 873 stories from NPR’s “All Things Considered.” Target phrases were also analyzed within TIME Magazine issues beginning with the issue after the attacks on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001, through March 13, 2003. These ‘Target phrases’ consisted of September 11, War on Terror, Terrorism, Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Taliban, Al Qaeda, Religious Ideology. Cover stories dedicated to the issue along with the main articles within the index where analyzed as ‘targeted’ articles and received a ‘hit’ based upon the “target phrases.” Therefore, the data only represents a fraction of the articles actually covered by TIME Magazine.

Measures

Type of Story: This is a nominal level variable. Each story was categorized into one of three categories, either a non-Iraq story (0), Iraq neutral story (1), or an Iraq mobilizing story (2). To determine whether an Iraq story is to be coded as a neutral story or as a mobilizing story, the content of each story is analyzed using a code sheet (see Appendix A). For each story, the following questions were answered: What is the issue? Who is responsible? What is the solution? If the issue, who is responsible, and the solution are defined collectively, if there is a clearly defined “us” versus “them” frame, and if the Iraq story launches a moral appeal, the story is coded as a Mobilizing Iraq Frame. If the Iraq story fails to meet all three of the criteria, the story is coded as an Iraq neutral frame. Seven catch phrases were selected based upon the misperceptions found in Kull’s (2003) work, they consisted of: Weapons of Mass Destruction,
9/11, State Sponsors of Terrorism, Osama Bin laden and Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda linked to Iraq or Saddam Hussein, and International support

**Dependent Variables**

*Mobilizing Frames Ratio:* This is a ratio-level variable. For each news program the total number of news stories was divided by the total number of mobilizing frames. The decision to use a ratio as a dependent variable, instead of a simple frequency count, was made to control of the variation in the total of news stories. The values for the Mobilizing frames ratio ranged from .00 to 1.0.

*Total Number of Catchphrases:* This is an interval level variable. Drawing from the PIPA/KN piece, the catchphrases were listed on the code sheet” Weapons of mass destruction, Nine-eleven, State sponsors of terrorism, Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden linked to Saddam Hussein, Al Qaeda linked to Iraq or Saddam Hussein, International support for invasion of Iraq, in addition to there being room for unanticipated catchphrases. Each time one of these catchphrases was present in a story, the catchphrase was coded as 1 (catchphrase is in the story). The total number of catchphrases in the entire news program is summed together for the news program; the total number of catchphrases present in each news program range from 0 to 19.

**Independent Variables**

*Progression of Time:* The date for every news program is recorded in the following format: dd-mm yy.

*Television Station:* The station on which the news program was aired is recorded. Fox News was coded as “0.” NPR was coded as “2.”

**Tests of Significances**

*Pearson’s Correlation:* To answer the question if there is a relationship between the progression of time and the ratio of mobilizing frames, Pearson’s correlations are conducted because both variables are of the interval/ratio level. If the alpha value is below .05 the relationship is deemed statistically significant and not simply due to chance. To determine if the relationship between the progression of time and the ratio of mobilizing frames is a positive or negative relationship, the sign before the Pearson’s r-value is examined. If the sign is negative then the relationship is deemed negative—as time progresses, the ratio of mobilizing frames decreases. If there is no sign before the Pearson’s r, the relationship is positive; that is as time progresses the ratio of mobilizing frames increases.

*T-test:* To determine if there are differences in the number of catchphrases per episode by news station, t-tests are conducted because the independent variable, the news station, is nominal-level and the dependent variable, the total number of catchphrases per episode is interval-level. The differences are deemed significant and not due to chance if the alpha-value for the t-test is below .05.
Findings

To examine the possibility of a relationship between the ratio of mobilizing frames present in a news program and the progression of time of which the program airs, a Pearson correlation was performed. Table one presents the results.

Table 1. Correlation between the progression of time of the News Program and the Ratio of Mobilizing Frames from September 17, 2001 - March 17, 2003 (n=98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Date of News Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ratio of Mobilizing Frames</td>
<td>.461*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

df= 96, *p<.001

Among the 98 news programs in the sample, a significant correlation (r = .461, df = 96, p<.001) between the date of the news program and the ratio of mobilizing frames was observed. The correlation was positive and moderate. With an r² of .2125, 21.25% of the variability in the ratio of mobilizing frames in a news program can be explained by the progression of the timeline.

To examine the possibility if a difference in the prevalence of mobilizing frames, t-tests were used to compare mean ratio of mobilizing frames in FOX News’s program Special Report with Brit Hume with that of NPR’s news program “All Things Considered.” The group means, standard deviations, and t-tests for overall span of time leading to the 2003 invasion in Table four:

Table 2. T-tests Comparing the Mean Ratio of Mobilizing Frames of Fox News to the Mean Ratio of Mobilizing Frames of NPR News. September 17, 2001-March 17, 2003. (n=98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fox News</th>
<th>NPR News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=49)</td>
<td>(n=49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome Measure</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of Mobilizing</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* two-tailed p-values, df=96

Table two demonstrates that significant differences in the mean ratio of mobilizing frames by news program exist (t=6.48, p<.001). FOX News programs, with a mean ratio of .33,
have a significantly higher ratio of mobilizing frames than does NPR news, which has a mean ratio of .04. This data begins to explain the differences between the two networks content. FOX News utilized specific catchphrases, associated with the misperceptions Americans have, eight times more than NPR. FOX News used mobilizing frames in 33% of the segments aired. This data shows that during “Special Report with Britt Hume,” FOX News devoted 1/3 of it air time to mobilizing the American people to go to war; this also does not include catchphrases used in non-Iraq stories and Iraq-Neutral stories. To better understand the relationship between the progression of time, the Content of FOX News and NPR and the variation of ‘mobilizing’ prevalence, news segments from the first four months after 9/11.

In 2001, starting at Issue 12 and ending at Issue 28 in December, all of the issues of TIME Magazine devoted a high volume of there articles to ‘terrorism’. Sixteen out of Seventeen magazines reported on terrorism; among the magazines covering ‘terrorism’ twelve received cover stories. TIME Magazine devoted 94 major articles in the remaining months to cover terrorism. In 2002, TIME published 52 magazines, 50 of them dedicated stories to ‘terrorism’. That year major military actions in Afghanistan were well underway. One hundred and fifty three major articles were dedicated to this issue of ‘terrorism’ with 25 articles targeting Osama Bin Laden, Afghanistan, and Al Qaeda; surprisingly however, 31 articles were dedicated to Saddam Hussein and Iraq. These two regions amounted to over 30% of TIME Magazine articles in 2002. Of all 78 issues TIME devoted 16 major articles to religious ideology spanning Jihad, Armageddon, and a new Crusade; all of which denote holy wars. This information is an interesting development; however, the data also suggest something much more profound.

In the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, 12 of the 13 TIME’s covered a specific target in the “War on Terror”. Of the thirteen articles nine mentioned the “war on terror”, there was eight cover stories, all of which focused on Saddam or attacking Iraq. Of the 44 major articles 32 either targeted Saddam or Iraq, or used any type of wording to link Saddam Hussein and Iraq to 9-11, ‘terrorism’, or “the war on terror”. TIME mentioned Osama Bin Laden twice during this time frame. On March 18, 2003 the day that major military actions began in Iraq, TIME Magazine had a cover story with a picture of a bomb going of in the night sky in Baghdad.

Conclusions

The call of Brookfield, coupled with the findings in this research exemplifies the need of an ideological detoxification. Adult education in media literacy is extremely vital to the perceived rational of U.S. foreign policy. Living in a democracy, government cannot inter into unilateral military engagements and expect to achieve its objective without the will of the people. The political matrix between government agenda, the owning class of media, media institutions, and the public are directly related to the experience. Since World War II the news media have expanded extensively and have become dependent on corporate and government financial support which in return rely heavily on the television; (Ryan 1991). Concurrently, U.S. society has become increasingly media-driven (Ryan 1991). According to the works of Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), television sets in U.S. households are turned on for an average of seven hours each day. Even by conservative estimates, individual Americans spend about two and a half hours a day—almost half of their available waking leisure time—watching television. Over the course of a year, two and a half hours a day adds up to more than 38 solid days of television viewing Croteau and Hoynes (2000). Therefore, Americans spend more than 1/12 of their year sitting in front of the television. This research has unfolded some telling information regarding
media’s ability to shape perception and behavior that supports the rational the as informed citizen’s of a democracy we must be media literate.

References


