AGENDA-SETTING THEORY AND
THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN
SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION
FOR THE IRAQ WAR

by

Michael J. Muin

An Abstract
of a research paper in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication
University of Central Missouri

April, 2011
ABSTRACT

by

Michael J. Muin

Media attention and framing of the issues of the Iraq War, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the attacks of September 11, 2001 suggests a correlation between media agenda-setting and public agenda-building. This paper will examine the media agenda-setting theory and its application to the coverage of the Iraq War, WMD, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, through various studies of news coverage and public opinion polls. In response to three core questions about the relationship between the amounts of coverage along with the framing of our issues to public opinion polls, this paper concludes that a strong correlation between media agenda-setting and public agenda-building did exist for these three issues.
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Political opinions, convictions, and behavior do not easily change in response to media, and even when they do, the link is often difficult to prove. This simple assertion concerning the limited effects of the media can be made, despite the assumption that mass communication is a powerful political force.

Since the early 1970’s, the belief that mass communication is a powerful force has gained strength, in part from studies that document a correspondence between the amounts of media attention an issue receives and the amount of public concern about the problem.

_The Seeds of Agenda-Setting_

Aware of this relationship between press coverage and public concern, researchers Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in their now famous Chapel Hill study, having studied the 1968 political campaign, arrived at a proposition that says, “people learn from the media what the important issues are.” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 176)

While McCombs and Shaw introduced agenda-setting as a media function with the 1972 study in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, this idea began much earlier. With _Public Opinion_ in 1922, Walter Lippman proposed that people aren’t able to deal effectively with the variety and subtlety of their environments. Most people are protected from their
own surroundings by elites. These elites, or media representatives, interpret the motives and beliefs of politicians. (Baran & Davis, 1995, 232)

Several decades later, Benard Cohen expanded this notion when he said, “The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about.” (Cohen, 1963, 13) His findings became the basis for what we now call the agenda-setting function of mass media.

McCombs and Shaw expressed Cohen’s theory by presenting their more thorough study in 1972. They interviewed registered voters during the 1968 presidential election and discovered what these people thought were the most important issues of the day. They analyzed local and national media coverage of the election, quantifying the relative attention given to such issues as public welfare, civil rights, fiscal policy, foreign policy, and the war in Vietnam. Further, they produced an aggregate from a smaller sample of the measurement of attention to the various issues. They found correlations between public ordering of issues and media coverage and concluded this provided evidence of media agenda-setting. (Neuman, 1990, 160-161)

*Iraq, WMD and al Qaeda*

Just as researchers in the past have applied agenda-setting to the war in Vietnam and the Watergate cover-up, some thirty-plus years later, the Iraq war has given communication researchers a most compelling case with which to apply McCombs and Shaw’s agenda-setting theory. The buildup in the media of issues related to Iraq, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and their relation to the attacks of September 11, 2001,
along with public consent, and more recently dissent over two wars in the Middle East suggest, a correlation between media agenda-setting and public agenda-building.

This paper will examine the media agenda-setting theory and its application to the coverage of the buildup and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through various studies of news coverage and public opinion polls. It will seek to answer three core questions about the Iraq War, WMD, and al Qaeda’s role in the attacks of September 11: Did the American press give more attention and prominence to pro-war advocates in the run-up to the war in Iraq? Did statements by President George W. Bush’s administration and repeated over and again in the media shape public opinion in believing certain misperceptions about Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda’s supposed partnerships in the attacks of September 11? Finally, as the voices of dissent to the war and its execution became more prominent and relevant in the mainstream press, have opinion polls shown a less favorable agreement with pro-war policy-makers and pundits? To all three of these questions, this paper hypothesizes an affirmative answer.
Nearly all public opinion polls show that the public consent before the Iraq War has reversed into public condemnation, and many of the notions about WMD and Saddam Hussein’s link to the al Qaeda terrorist group before the war have been proven to be unsubstantiated. To gain a grasp of the media agenda-setting and public agenda-building, this paper will first examine certain key statements of officials of the Bush administration in regards to the rationale for the invasion of Iraq, along with initial tracking of public opinion polling data, followed by statements in the media which echoed administration claims.

*War Card and the CBS/New York Times Poll*

While the marketing effort to gain support for an invasion of Iraq had been on-going for some time, it began to get into full-swing in the fall of 2002. As then White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card said, “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August,” in explaining why the Bush administration waited until after Labor Day 2002 to begin its heavy push to convince the public of the existence of Saddam Hussein’s WMD’s and ties to al Qaeda. (Bumiller, 2002, para. 4)

The phrase that began to make its way into speeches by administration officials around the one year anniversary of the attacks of September 11th raised the specter of an apocalyptic future.
In an interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer on September 8, 2002, then National Security Advisor to the President, Condolezza Rice, on the case for preemptive war said:

“We know that he [Saddam] has the infrastructure, nuclear scientists to make a nuclear weapon. And we know that when the inspectors assessed this after the Gulf War, he was far, far closer to a crude nuclear device than anybody thought, maybe six months from a crude nuclear device…There will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”

(Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 8)

Echoing his advisor, the president himself made an assertion of the threat posed by Saddam’s WMD program less than a month later on October 7, “America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.”

(Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 8)

These statements and others during this period would mark the beginning of a high concentration of what the Center for Public Integrity called “false statements,” in their 2008 report titled, “Iraq—The War Card: Orchestrated Deception on the Path to War.” The report cited 935 “false statements” made by President Bush and seven of his top advisors about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his link to al Qaeda in the two years following September 11th, 2001. (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 1)

The statements tracked in the report spiked in September 2002, the same month the president sent his war resolution to Congress to authorize the use of force in Iraq. The volume of statements then dropped in the following months to a low of 20 in December 2002, following the authorization of the president’s war resolution in October, according to the report. (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 13)
As the number of “false statements” rose and fell and then rose again at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, so too did public perception about whether Iraq had WMD, suggesting a strong case for media agenda-setting and public agenda-building. For example, when the number of “false statements” spiked in September 2002 to more than 60, according to The War Card report, so too did public opinion polls that showed respondents who agreed that Iraq does have WMD. Conversely, in December 2002, when the number of “false statements” dropped to 20 (an 11-month low for the period of September 2002 through July 2003), so did the percent of respondents who agreed Iraq has WMD. (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 13) In both cases, results of the CBS/New York Times poll showed a corollary relationship to the quantity of “false statements.”

The CBS/New York Times poll asked the following question five times (from February 2002 to April 2003), “Do you think Iraq probably does or probably does not have weapons of mass destruction that the U.N. weapons inspectors have not found yet?” When this question was asked in September 2002 during a high concentration of “false statements,” 79 percent of respondents answered “probably does.” When asked in December 2002 when the number of “false statements” dropped, 75 percent of poll respondents answered “probably does.” (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 4)

During the period when two of the most crucial arguments for the war were made (the president’s State of the Union address on January 28th and Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the U.N. Security Council on February 5th), both the number of “false statements” by administration officials and public opinion agreeing that Iraq has
WMD reached their highest levels, according to the War Card report. The number of “false statements” about Iraq, WMD, and ties to al Qaeda reached their pinnacle in February 2003, with 140 such statements, according to the report. Likewise, respondents of the CBS/New York Times poll who answered that Iraq “probably does” have WMD reached 85 percent in February 2003, the highest percent for that poll. (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 4)

**Crucial Arguments Disputed**

Both the president’s State of the Union speech and Powell’s presentation to the U.N. contained statements which represent the most disputed of any administration claims about WMD and Iraq.

With President Bush’s State of the Union speech on January 28, 2003, two critical arguments were made in that speech that had previously been discredited—aluminum tubes and the now famous “16 Little Words.”

Of the aluminum tubes, Bush said, “Our intelligence sources tell us that [Saddam] has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 9)

However, just three weeks prior on January 9, the Director General to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Dr. Mohamed El Baradei reported to the U.N. Security Council that, “The aluminum tubes sought by Iraq in 2001 and 2002 were not directly suitable” for uranium enrichment. Months earlier, experts at the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. State Department came to the same conclusion.
As for the “16 Little Words” at the State of the Union address, Bush said, “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

The intelligence behind this statement also had been discredited, this time by the CIA and was actually taken out of a previous speech by the president in Cincinnati in October 2002, yet still found its way into the State of the Union address in January the following year. (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 10)

The false statements made by then Secretary of State Colin Powell during his presentation at the U.N. Security Council are too many to note. However, the mention of two key statements to signify the tenor of his statements, a recap of post-presentation media coverage, as well as corresponding polling data would be necessary to show how the seeds of agenda-setting are sewn and eventually grow into public acceptance.

In his presentation, Powell, without mentioning his name, references the account of Inb al-Shaykh al-Libi, an al Qaeda commander the FBI thought had been tortured by the Egyptians for intelligence. Powell tells of how bin Laden wasn’t able to develop chemical or biological agents in Afghanistan, so, according to intelligence reports from al-Libi, he looked elsewhere. “Where did they go? Where did they look? They went to Iraq,” explains Powell. And Saddam’s regime provided “help in acquiring poisons and gases.” (Corn & Isikoff, 2006, 187)

The CIA had its doubts about the al-Libi interrogation reports and according to CIA analyst Paul Pillar, who specializes in terrorism issues, al-Libi was not actually claiming that the Iraqi training was real, only that it was something he heard about from
others. In fact, in January 2003, the CIA had produced a classified update on the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda that said al-Libi had not been in a position “to know if any training took place.” Powell was basing a key part of his argument for war on a source the CIA had, only days earlier, discounted. (Corn & Isikoff, 2006, 188)

A second statement made by Powell at the U.N. presentation was one involving another human source, codenamed “Curveball,” whom U.S. intelligence officials had never spoken to and was discredited by German intelligence officials. Nonetheless, Powell offers his proof when he says:

“We have first-hand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels and on rails. Our conservative estimate is that Iraq today has a stockpile of between one hundred and five hundred tons of chemical weapons agents…[Saddam] remains determined to acquire nuclear weapons…What I want to bring [to] your attention today is the much more sinister nexus between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network…Ladies and gentlemen, these are not assertions. These are facts, corroborated by many sources, some of them sources of the intelligence services of other countries.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 6)

Given that U.S. intelligence officials had never spoken to “Curveball,” the CIA’s chief of covert operations in Europe, Tyler Drumheller was shocked when Powell referenced “Curveball.” He said, “My mouth hung open when I saw Colin Powell use information from Curveball. It was like cognitive dissonance. Maybe, I thought, my government has something more. But it scared me deeply.” (Corn & Isikoff, 2006, 189)

It wasn’t just the source of the weapons factories, but the existence of the actual “biological weapons factories on wheels and on rails” were later discredited as well. David Kay, head of the Iraq Survey Group (a CIA-led team sent to Iraq after the invasion to search for WMD) told a congressional committee in October 2003, “When you look at
these two trailers, while [they] had capabilities in many areas, their actual intended use was not for the production of biological weapons… [They] were actually designed to produce hydrogen for weather balloons.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 15)

A British member of the group echoed Kay’s opinion about the mobile biological vans when he had visited Baghdad the previous July. Hamish Killip said, “The equipment was singularly inappropriate for biological weapons…You’d have better luck putting a couple of dust bins on the back of the truck and brewing it there.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 15)

Eventually key statements in the presentation were discredited, and in a 2004, Senate Select Committee conclusion reviewing Powell’s U.N. address, they said, “Much of the information provided or cleared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for inclusion in Secretary Powell’s speech was overstated, misleading, or incorrect.” (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 22)

Of course, one wouldn’t have known that had one read the following day’s newspapers or listened to the punditry on television. Many articles could be cited to highlight the general warm reception to Powell’s presentation in the media. Two examples, however, highlight the general tone of a media echo chamber the day after Powell’s address to the U.N.

Richard Cohen of the Washington Post wrote, “The evidence [Colin Powell] presented to the United States—some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail—had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn’t accounted for its
weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool—or possibly a Frenchman—could conclude otherwise.” (Cohen, 2003, para. 2)

Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas had this to say, “Speaking to the U.N. Security Council last week, Secretary of State Colin Powell made so strong a case that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein is in material breach of U.N. resolutions that only the duped, the dumb and the desperate could ignore it.” (Thomas, 2003, para. 1)

It goes on and on, from columnists to headlines of major U.S. newspapers, lauding the speech as an overwhelmingly convincing case that Iraq has WMD. The *Columbia Journalism Review* reviewed six major newspaper’s editorial pages during a six-week period between Powell’s speech and the beginning of the Iraq War on March 19, 2003. These newspapers were *The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Washington Post, USA Today, The New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

The editorial of the most conservative newspaper among these—*The Wall Street Journal*—asserted that the war was “above all about American self-defense.” Of Powell’s presentation, they wrote it was “persuasive to anyone who is still persuadable.” The paper tried connecting Iraq and al Qaeda by calling Hussein and Osama bin Laden “brothers under the skin,” and wrote, “Mr. Bush has declared a ‘war on terror’ and Saddam’s Iraq is terrorism with an address.” The editorial page also speculated that Hussein may have been behind the October 2001 anthrax attacks. (Mooney, 2004, 29)

According to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *Chicago Tribune* editorials held similarly pro-war views, rarely criticizing the president’s administration, while directing attacks against its opponents like the “hysterical French.” Their editorials
argued that by acting as an “axis of appeasement” toward Hussein, U.N. nations had
brought an unnecessary war upon themselves. (Mooney, 2004, 29)

Echoing Bush administration claims, The Washington Post called the war “an
operation essential to American security” even before Powell’s presentation. Following
the presentation, they endorsed Powell’s WMD and al Qaeda claims, even though they
had previously been skeptical about al Qaeda connections. The paper concluded that
Powell offered “a powerful new case” that Hussein was in cahoots with a branch of al
Qaeda. (Mooney, 2004, 29)

The biggest flaw the Columbia Journalism Review explained was how all six of
these major newspapers responded to Colin Powell’s speech. According to Mooney
(2004), “At best, the presentation should have been taken to represent one side in a
continuing U.N. debate about Iraq’s weapons capacities—exactly how international
papers like the Guardian (U.K.) reacted to it. After all, that paper noted, U.N. inspectors
[Hans] Blix and [Mohammed] ElBaradei had their own analyses, which often conflicted
with Powell’s.” (Mooney, 2004, 33)

A Brookings Institute study by Stephen Hess revealed a stark movement of
newspaper editorials overall from more “dovish” before the speech to more “hawkish”
after the Powell speech. In the study of the 25 largest circulation newspapers in the
country, Hess saw a shift toward President Bush’s position on the war for nine papers,
and away from the president for four newspapers. (Hess, 2003, para. 1)

Before Powell spoke, 47 percent of these papers were of a more "hawkish"
persuasion, 53 percent were more "dovish." While the cable TV networks had promoted
the president’s position throughout the buildup to the war, newspapers had typically been more cautious in their approach to the Iraq question. After Powell's speech, the "hawks" commanded 72 percent of the editorial positions while the "doves" had 28 percent. (Hess, 2003, para. 5 & 6)

So, what effect did these two seminal moments—the presidents’s State of the Union speech and the Powell presentation at the U.N.—along with a now more “hawkish” print media—have on public opinion polls? The day after the Powell presentation and a week after the president’s speech, an ABC News/Washington Post poll found that when asked, “Do you think that the United States has or has not presented strong evidence showing that Iraq …?” (ABC News/Washington Post, 2003, 6-7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think that the U.S. has or has not presented strong evidence showing that Iraq (see below)?</th>
<th>Has</th>
<th>Has</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has chemical and biological weapons?</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is trying to develop nuclear weapons?</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has provided direct support to the al Qaeda terrorist group?</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are percentages
Charts may not equal 100 due to rounding

Source: ABC News/Washington Post, 2003, 6-7

As we see, language used in administration speeches, interviews, press briefings and subsequent media coverage is one powerful means to shape the public’s construct of events and information. As Donald Kinder states, “Frames seek to capture the essence of an issue. They define what the problem is and how to think about it; often they suggest what, if anything should be done to remedy it.” (Kinder, 1998, 1) It can be clearly stated that the administration was adept at shaping the public’s opinion about Iraq and al Qaeda.
Prior to the start of the Iraq war, the ability of President George W. Bush and his administration officials to bring about public consent for a military engagement in Iraq has caused many to examine the function the media have in questioning its government prior to a war. The president’s decision to go to war with Iraq was based on the premise that the U.S. must stop a potential threat. Previously, though, there was no act of aggression against the United States or its allies by a foreign government or a state-sponsored group, and specifically, none proven to be sponsored by Iraq. Additionally, the act of war was not approved by the United Nations Security Council. To convince the American public that a war with Iraq is necessary would seem to be a tremendous challenge given these circumstances. The propagation of the notion that Iraq was developing WMD and it had a link to al Qaeda proved further challenging when the U.S. occupied Iraq and there was a lack of evidence to substantiate either claim.

Though the justification that Iraq was developing WMD and had ties to Al Qaeda was prevalent and existed in administration statements for some time, several other justifications were provided. According to a study from the University of Urbana-Champaign, there were a total of 27 rationales provided for going to war in Iraq, all floated during the period of debate about invading Iraq. All but four of the rationales originated with members of the president’s administration. The study, “Uncovering the Rationales for the War on Iraq: The Words of the Bush Administration, Congress and the
Media from September 12, 2001, to October 11, 2002,” tracked more than 1,500 statements and news stories. The rationales in the study included—war on terror, prevention of the proliferation of WMD, lack of weapons inspections, removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Hussein is evil, violation of international law, and in order to make Iraq an example and gain favor in the Middle East—among others. All these aided in convincing a fearful nation from the attacks of 9/11 that war was necessary. The goal of removing Saddam from power was the end goal, and, as the study notes, this was an early rationale occurring often just five months after the attacks of September 11.

(Largio, 2004, ii-iii)

While the American public was supportive of removing Hussein from power, the majority wanted U.N. Security Council approval first, as shown from a Chicago Council on Foreign Relations poll in June 2002. Sixty-five percent said the U.S. “should only invade Iraq with U.N. approval and the support of its allies”; 20 percent said “the U.S. should invade Iraq even if we have to go it alone”; and 13 percent said “the U.S. should not invade Iraq.” (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002, 27)

While the majority of Americans were not ready to act unilaterally against Iraq at this time, they still believed Iraq had WMD and Saddam was supporting al Qaeda. In a CNN/USA Today poll two months later in August 2002, 55 percent thought Iraq “currently has weapons of mass destruction,” and 39 percent thought Iraq is “trying to develop these weapons but does not currently have them.” (CNN/USA Today, 2002, para. 4) So in August 2002, an overwhelming 94 percent believed Iraq has or is trying to develop WMD, despite immediate evidence to the contrary.
When posed another way a month later in September 2002, the Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks (PIPA/KN) poll found that an overwhelming majority of Americans think Iraq already had the capability to use WMD against U.S. targets. Asked, “Do you think that Saddam Hussein does or does not have the capability to use chemical or biological weapons against targets in the U.S.?” 79 percent said that he does. (Kull, 2002, 6)

Regarding al Qaeda, Kull cites a September 2002 poll by *Newsweek* which asked, “From what you’ve seen or heard in the news…do you believe that Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq is harboring al Qaeda terrorists and helping them develop chemical weapons, or not?” Seventy-five percent said yes. (as cited in Kull, 2002, 6)

Less than a year removed from the aforementioned polls, a majority of Americans believed in the mission in Iraq as the Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks (PIPA/KN) found. A strong majority, 68 percent, in May 2003, agreed that “the U.S. made the right decision…in going to war with Iraq.” (Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, 2003, para. 1)

Polling data such as these raise the questions, when initially so many Americans had reservations about unilateral engagement with Iraq, why then would they be so willing to agree that their government made the right decision in invading Iraq? Did their views about Iraq change according to the media they consumed and press’ stance on Iraq? Or were they led to believe certain false premises that made war more reasonable and consistent with earlier held beliefs?
Surely, the statements by the president in his 2003 State of the Union speech and Powell’s presentation at the U.N. were pivotal moments influencing public opinion. Certain premises would have justified going to war with Iraq, such as if WMD had been discovered in Iraq or a plausible link of Saddam and al Qaeda would have been established or if world public opinion supported the war in Iraq. Had any of these premises been proven to be true, it would have in some way legitimized war efforts. None of these premises, however, have been verified, either before the onset of the war or since.

These premises, based upon false statements, of course, do not occur in a vacuum. Official voices of opinion and information are disseminated through media channels and in theory the media conducts analytical judgment about whether the information and opinions are legitimate and accurate and therefore, newsworthy. Lacking this analytical judgment, the role of the media falls short of its role in the agenda-setting model and simply serves as a platform for government messages to exist and flourish in the public sphere. This is never more evident than in a content analysis of television news programming leading up to the war in Iraq. In the run-up to the Iraq War, the mainstream media relied almost solely on official voices without a balanced analytical judgment in discovering whether information and opinions were legitimate and accurate.

The FAIR Study

How much news is consumed and which sources and types of news one consumes will impact how one perceives opinion and information. One media watchdog group set
The FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting) study called, “Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent” discovered that opponents of the war were markedly underrepresented on newscasts in the three weeks following the first U.S. bombing of Iraq. The media watchdog group FAIR’s three-week study [March 20, 2003 (one day after the bombing in Iraq) to April 9, 2003] looked at 1,617 on-camera sources speaking about Iraq from the news programs “ABC World News Tonight”, “CBS Evening News”, “NBC Nightly News”, CNN’s “Wolf Blitzer Reports”, Fox’s “Special Report with Brit Hume”, and PBS’s “Newshour With Jim Lehrer.” (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 2)

FAIR coded sources by name, occupation, nationality, position on the war and the network they appeared. For the coding of ‘position on the war,’ if sources stated a position in favor of the war or were affiliated with a government or group with a pro-war stance, they were coded as pro-war. “Nearly two thirds of all sources, 64 percent, were pro-war, while 71 percent of U.S. guests favored the war. Anti-war voices were ten percent of all sources, but just six percent of non-Iraqi sources and three percent of U.S. sources. Thus viewers were more than six times as likely to see a pro-war source as one who was anti-war; with U.S. guests alone, the ratio increases to 25 to 1.” (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 4)

Aside from a lack of balanced sources overall, the study also found that voices from official sources, such as current and former government employees, dominated
newscasts. Sixty-three percent of all sources and 52 percent of U.S. sources alone were current or former officials. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 5)

Analyzing only U.S. sources, which accounted for 76 percent of all sources, the FAIR study found that more than two out of three (68 percent) were either current or former officials. Networks varied with their coverage of official sources, with CBS having the highest percentage at 75 percent and NBC having the lowest at 60 percent. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 6)

It was mostly military voices which dominated the airwaves during FAIR’s study period, as 68 percent of the U.S. official sources were current or former military officials and 47 percent of all U.S. sources, official or otherwise, were current or former military officials. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 7)


While the FAIR study found just three percent of U.S. sources that expressed opposition to the war, dissent in the country and around the world was apparent. Large anti-war demonstrations were held in the country and world with several polls showing a much larger opposition to the war than the media portrayed. In a poll from Bulletin’s Frontrunner on April 7, 2003, 27 percent of Americans claimed to be opposed to the war. According to the FAIR Study, the Frontrunner poll showed that while more than one in four opposed the war in the U.S., an even higher percentage opposed the war around the globe. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 17)
An international poll by Gallop International at the end of 2002 showed that when asked “Are you in favor of military action against Iraq?” a mean of 53 percent of respondents in 39 countries said “under no circumstances” were they in favor of a military action against Iraq. When asked the same question, twenty-one percent of U.S. respondents said they were in favor of military action against Iraq “under no circumstances.” (Gallop International, 2003, 574)

Of course, you wouldn’t know this from watching U.S. network broadcasts as just six percent of all sources were from countries other than the U.S., Britain or Iraq. Among all other country representation on network broadcasts, 48 percent were either officials of governments that criticized the war or others who voiced criticism. The most vocally opposed voices of U.S. war policy came from France, Germany and Russia. Overall, 16 appearances were given by these countries, accounting for one percent of all guests with nine appearances by government officials. Sixty-three percent of non-Iraqi Arab sources from foreign countries were opposed to the war, according to the FAIR study. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 15)

While all networks relied heavily upon official voices and pro-war advocates, there was slight difference among network news outlets. “NBC Nightly News” contained the smallest percentage of U.S. official sources (60 percent) and the largest percentage of anti-war U.S. sources (4 percent). The outlet with the highest percentage of officials who were U.S. sources (75 percent) and the lowest total number of anti-war voices (one source who was Michael Moore from his Oscar speech on March 24) was “CBS Evening News.” Fox’s “Special Report with Brit Hume” allowed fewer U.S. official sources (70
percent) than CBS and more anti-war guests (3 percent) than PBS or CBS, but they also had more pro-war guests (81 percent) than any other network. CBS was next with 77 percent and NBC had the lowest percentage (65 percent) of pro-war sources. (Rendall & Broughel, 2003, para. 28-29, 32)

The FAIR study shows that American television viewers were indeed given a one-sided debate about the justifications for what was perceived as an imminent war. Of course, perhaps we receive what we demand. Two months before the FAIR study, a poll by ABC News asked whether the news media should support or question the government’s war effort, 56 percent said support, 36 percent said question. This contrasts sharply with views held outside of a time of war where results are inversed and only 25 percent agree that the media’s main obligation is to support what the government does and 58 percent say it is to question the government’s activities (13 percent say it depends on the subject). (ABCNews.com, 2003, 2)

*Fact-Based vs. Opinion-Based Journalism*

Naturally, journalism plays into this paradigm of supporting or questioning one’s government. Since news coverage is more than the presentation of facts and includes opinion, agenda setting can flourish when high doses creep into “news,” particularly so in television journalism. A study of American media coverage in the months shortly following the September 11th attack revealed increasingly high levels of opinion or punditry coupled with uncritical reporting of U.S. government statements the longer issues of war dominated newscasts and print publications. Conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism with Princeton Survey Research, the study did find however,
that newspaper coverage was far more fact-based than television news, and that television
news was far less likely to include criticism of the government than were the print media.
(Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 9)

The study analyzed a sample of 2,496 stories about the World Trade Center
attacks and the war on terrorism from various media forms during three periods following
the attack of September 11th looking at four newspapers (The New York Times,
Washington Post, Cleveland Plain Dealer and the Fresno Bee), two news magazines
(Time and Newsweek) four nightly news broadcasts (ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS), the
three main network morning shows, the Sunday talk shows, three weeknight talk shows
(“Larry King Live,” “Charlie Rose” and “Hardball” with Chris Matthews), “Nightline,”
and relevant segments of three prime time network news magazines (“Dateline,” “20/20”
and “60 Minutes II”). The study also examined two cable nightly newscasts (Fox’s
“Special Report with Brit Hume” and CNN's “NewsNight with Aaron Brown”). The
study focused on three periods in 2001, September 13-15, November 13-15 and
December 10-12 and the closest weekend Sunday shows and news magazines during the
dates. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 13)

The first phase, September 13 – 15, began with the day the television media
returned to regular news programming. The coverage focused on four themes—the
potential war on terrorism, the September attacks and rescue efforts, personal connections
stories, and citizen, community and state response. (Project for Excellence in Journalism,
2001, para. 22)
The second phase of the study, examined two months later, November 13 – 15. The Northern Alliance was making major gains in the north. The Taliban was fleeing the Afghan capitol of Kabul, and the press coverage focused on the action in Afghanistan, the war on terrorism in general and the international response. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 23)

The third phase of the study examined December 10 – 12 when the Taliban had fled Kandahar to the mountains around Tora Bora. Focus of U.S. military operations were on the hunt for Bin Laden, and other al Qaeda leaders. News coverage focused on Afghanistan, the fight against terrorism generally, and continuing community and civic response to the September attacks. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 24)

Initially, according to the study, solid sourcing and fact-based journalism prevailed in the media culture as 75 percent of reporting by all media studied was a straight account of events. As the story moved to the war in Afghanistan, the levels of analysis and opinion increased while fact-based journalism gradually slipped from 75 percent in September to 63 percent in November and December. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para 2)

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage by Type, All Media, 2001</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are percentages

Charts may not equal 100 due to rounding

*Source:* Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para 6
Early fact-based reporting may be one explanation why broader public approval of the press was up during this period for the first time in 15 years, according to a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. When the study was conducted in November 2001, it showed that Americans began to see the press as “accurate, professional, moral, caring about people and patriotic”—after years of decline. As a result, circulation of newspapers and television news ratings increased. A shift had occurred among public opinion as a series of Pew studies showed that from early September, before the attacks, 46 percent said the press protects democracy to November when the figure jumped to 60 percent. Also telling, but perhaps contrarily so, was the percentage of Americans saying the press stands up for America, which jumped from 43 percent in early September to 69 percent in November. (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2001, para. 3)

While popular support for the government during wartime makes journalists jobs’ of being critical more difficult, it is hard to serve the public if the public doesn’t like the way it is being served. During wartime the news media tend to receive plenty of criticism if the perception is they are not supporting the war, meaning they are reporting bad news from the battlefield or pointing out war policy flaws. Even if the coverage may be accurate, anti-media feelings coupled with patriotic fervor can constitute a public backlash.

What was happening in the early month or two of reporting after September 11th, as indicated by the Project for Excellence in Journalism study, was that American audiences were initially receiving more thorough, fact-based journalism and their long-
held opinion of the media changed quite suddenly. By the time these opinions about the media were being reported in November in the Pew survey, the qualities which Americans tended to say they most often liked about the media were when it was timely, comprehensive and informative. Indeed the media were timely, comprehensive and informative during the initial period following September 11th, but what we see from the Project for Excellence in Journalism study was that fact-based reporting began to slip in television and newspapers and this hadn’t quite caught up with public opinion in the Pew survey.

*Television vs. Newspaper Journalism*

According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism study, in the early days after September 11th, as noted, coverage tended to be considerably fact-based in both television and newspapers. Each statement pertaining to the war on terrorism during the study period was assessed as being either 1) a fact; or 2) a piece of analysis attributed to reporting; or 3) an un-attributed opinion or speculation. The study looked at newspaper and television together and separately. The figures for all media types (Table 2 above) further separated opinion and speculation, but the newspaper and print-specific analysis (Table 3 & 4) did not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coverage by Type, Newspaper, 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punditry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are percentages
Charts may not equal 100 due to rounding

*Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para 20*
While 75 percent of all media types were categorized as fact in September (Table 2), an overwhelming 85 percent of the stories pertaining to the war on terrorism in newspapers concentrated on the facts (Table 3). Figures for newspaper journalism dropped over the next four months, but still remained at a higher level at its lowest point than television journalism (Table 4 below) during any period. Though straight punditry without reporting remained steady and low during this period in newspapers, analysis that was attributed to reporting jumped 10 percent at a time when military operations in Afghanistan began to intensify. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 20) This gives further rise to the FAIR study in which a large majority of analysis was being done by military and government officials during the start of the Iraq war and trended toward war-supporting punditry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4 Coverage by Type, Television, 2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punditry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures are percentages
Charts may not equal 100 due to rounding

Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001, para. 24

With television journalism, fact-based reporting seemed to rise and fall depending upon the story being covered. As the Taliban fell in November, factual reporting fell to under half of the stories (Table 3), with 46 percent versus 64 percent in September. Speculation grew about whether the Taliban’s retreat was real, what would unfold next and if al Qaeda would fall too. Factual reporting returned to above half of television stories (56 percent) when the hunt for bin Laden increased as journalists and analysts
were more reluctant to speculate when and where the leader was hiding. (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001 para. 24)

A number of reasons have been cited in the study to explain why there was such a shift from September to December in fact-based versus opinion-based reporting in newspapers and on television. Following the period of shock the nation was understandably experiencing from the attacks, journalists were less inclined to speculate until they could gather substantiated information. Of course, the story initially was domestic, as the attacks were on American soil. Sources were readily available for comment with their experiences at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon. As the story moved to Afghanistan, sources used for fact-based reporting were not made readily available and often restricted by a secretive Pentagon. With sources and facts hard to come by, the press filled the void of a public eager for information on the situation with analysis, opinion, and speculation.

Beyond the initial coverage following September 11th, the trending in the later months following September 11th toward substituting analysis, opinion and speculation for factual reporting would become the hallmark of mainstream press coverage in the months and years to come when covering terrorism and the Iraq War.

With the media’s reliance on substituting opinion-based journalism for fact-based journalism, narratives arose about the attacks, al Qaeda, Iraq and WMD. Those narratives soon became the story of 9/11 and a foundational narrative by which the news agenda could be established on an ongoing basis. Nothing was clearer than the two most critical rationales for the war in Iraq: WMD in Iraq and links between Iraq and al Qaeda.
CHAPTER 4
PUBLIC MISPERCEPTIONS

To further understand what misperceptions persisted in the public’s mind, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted a series of polls with the firm Knowledge Networks (KN) from January through May 2003—as we’ve seen this was a particularly key moment in the run-up to the war. The research group later redesigned the question set for polls conducted from June through September of the same year for a total nine-month series with 8,634 respondents. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 570-71)

Additionally, PIPA/KN conducted a poll three years after the invasion of Iraq in May 2006 to determine how the public’s perceptions had changed.

The first set of polls in 2003 sought to explore the frequency of three key misperceptions: (1) since the beginning of the war, U.S. forces have found WMD in Iraq; (2) Saddam Hussein was working with al Qaeda; and (3) world public opinion was in favor of the U.S. going to war in Iraq. The first two points will be addressed using additional public opinion polling data and relevant statements from administration officials.

*Weapons of Mass Destruction*

On this first issue, it is clear the majority of the American public believed Iraq possessed WMD. Several major polls before and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq affirm this misperception was common among Americans. In September 2002, one PIPA/KN
poll found that an overwhelming majority of Americans (79%) thought that Iraq already has the capability to use weapons of mass destruction against U.S. targets. (Kull, 2002, 6)

It’s no wonder how these misperceptions existed for the public at large. The administration had made repeated claims for months prior to this poll and other polls that Iraq did, in fact, already possess WMD. The first statement of this level of certitude came from Vice-President Dick Cheney.

In a speech delivered to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Vice-President offered the following assessment of Saddam’s WMD capabilities:

“There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. And there is no doubt that his aggressive regional ambitions will lead him into future confrontations with his neighbors—confrontations that will involve both the weapons he has today, and the ones he will continue to develop with his oil wealth.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 3)

Later revealed in the book, The One Percent Doctrine, Ron Suskind writes of the deputy director in charge of the Directorate of Intelligence, Jami Miscik’s reaction to Cheney’s speech to the VFW. She revealed that the speech hadn’t first been sent to the CIA, as the president did with speeches concerning intelligence. According to Suskind’s book, Misik said of the speech, “He said Saddam was building his nuclear program. Our reaction was, ‘Where is he getting this stuff from? Does he have a source of information that we don’t know about?’” (Suskind, 2006, 168-169)

Cheney’s speech in August 2002, nonetheless, set the tone of certainty the administration would use to market and sell the war to a fearful American public, still
reeling from the attacks of September 11th, just one year prior. The White House press
secretary, Ari Fleisher, in response to a question asking if there was any new evidence
that the threat from Saddam Hussein’s WMD program was getting worse, said, “There is
already a mountain of evidence that Saddam Hussein is gathering weapons [of mass
destruction] for the purpose of using them. And adding additional information is like
adding a foot to Mount Everest.” (Cerf & Navasky, 2008, 3)

The following month, in September 2002, just prior to Congress’ vote to authorize
the use of force in Iraq in October, to drive home the point, the president made the
following statement in his radio address on September 28, 2002:

"The Iraqi regime possesses biological and chemical weapons, is
rebuilding the facilities to make more and, according to the
British government, could launch a biological or chemical attack
in as little as 45 minutes after the order is given. The regime has
long-standing and continuing ties to terrorist groups, and there
are al Qaeda terrorists inside Iraq. This regime is seeking a
nuclear bomb, and with fissile material could build one within a
year." (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para. 9)

However, just three weeks prior, then CIA Director George Tenet told the Senate
Intelligence Committee that there was no National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq’s
WMD and one had not been done in years because it was thought to be unnecessary.

Further, no one at the White House had requested a NIE on Iraq’s WMD program.
(Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008, para 15)

Despite some warnings that there was not sufficient evidence of Iraq currently
having WMD, the administration continued to push this belief to the American public.

Certainly, arguments challenging this belief were too often dismissed or ignored by
pundits and the press. Or, as documented in the FAIR study, countervailing sentiments
were either disregarded or marginalized. In their place, administration claims were allowed to go unchallenged by both the press and political opponents more often than not. As Jamieson and Waldman note, “Those who control the language control the argument, and those who control the argument are more likely to successfully translate belief into policy.” (Jamieson and Waldman, 2003, xiv)

Respondents to a Time/CNN poll answered overwhelmingly in the affirmative (77%) in March 2003 to the question, “Do you think the U.S. will or will not find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?” (Polling Report, 2003) Following the invasion, however, this belief among the public continued for some time though no solid evidence was uncovered of WMD or a WMD program.

In March 2003, the question was reframed and posed by PIPA/KN as whether the U.S. has or has not “found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction” and 34 percent said they had with 7 percent saying they did not know. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 572)

Poll figures did drop somewhat from March to September 2003 (Table 5) to the same question asked at four intervals during the first year of the war. In June of that year, the press began discussing the absence of WMD for the first time and figures dropped 11 percent from March, giving rise to the agenda-setting theory and the effect of the press on public opinion, now working against much of the misinformation it originally relied so heavily on from the outset of the selling of the war. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 584)
Some Americans also mistakenly believed that Iraq used WMD during the Iraq war. When asked whether “Iraq did or did not use chemical or biological weapons in the war that had just ended,” 22 percent of respondents in May 2003 said it had and the figure dropped slightly with the same question asked in August-September to 20 percent. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 573)

Even when the question was framed as though the U.S. had not yet found WMD, as with the NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll in May 2003, a majority of Americans (60%) believed “that the U.S. will find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.” (Polling Report.com, 2003)

Clearly, some Americans had misperceptions that WMD were discovered in Iraq and that Iraq used WMD in the war. These misperceptions do not occur without prompting, as false statements, along with one’s source of news, played a vital determination of whether one supported the war or not.

According to a composite of PIPA/KN polls conducted from May through September 2003, 73 percent of those who believed the U.S. found WMD did support the
war. Among those who rightly believed the U.S. had not found WMD, only 41 percent supported the war. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 577)

The same composite poll showed similar results for those who had the misperception that Iraq had used chemical and biological weapons against the U.S., with 64 percent saying they were supporters of the war. Among those who did not have the misperception that Iraq used weapons against the U.S., only 48 percent were supporters of the war. (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003, 578)

Comparing the polling conducted by PIPA/KN in October 2004 and again some three years after the initial invasion in 2006 provided revealing results about WMD and the agenda-setting role in influencing public opinion. A report titled, “Americans on Iraq: Three Years On” released by PIPA/KN in March 2006 found that for the first time since the question was asked, a majority of Americans (58%) said Iraq either “had some limited activities that could be used to help develop weapons of mass destruction, but not an active program” (42%) or “no WMD activities at all” (16%). This was up nine points from the October 2004 poll asking the same question. In October 2004, 49 percent of respondents answered one of these two options. (Kull, 2006, 4)

At the same time 41 percent of respondents still maintained that Iraq either “had actual WMD” (23%) or a “major program for developing them” (18%) in 2006. The figure was down for this question, though, from 49 percent just 17 months prior. (Kull, 2006, 4)
The results are revealing in that more respondents toward the end of 2004 were beginning to come to the reality that prior to the U.S. invasion, Iraq either had a “limited WMD program” or “no WMD activities.” These results trend concurrently with the discussion beginning to get louder and more prevalent in the mainstream media around this time and continuing into 2006 that the primary rationale for the war—the threat of Iraqi possessed WMD—was overstated and misleading.

For example, an initial report by the CIA’s Iraq Study Group (ISG) began to make its way into press reports. The ISG suggested that Saddam Hussein did not possess stockpiles of illicit weapons at the time of the U.S. invasion in March 2003 and had not begun any program to produce them. The report, released in October 2004, from the CIA’s top weapons inspector in Iraq, Charles Duelfer, said Iraq’s WMD program was essentially destroyed in 1991 and Saddam ended Iraq’s nuclear program after the Gulf

### Graph 1

**Perceptions of Pre-War Iraq: WMD**

Is it your belief that, just before the war, Iraq had:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Actual WMD</th>
<th>Major WMD Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>03/06</strong></td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10/04</strong></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Limited WMD Activities</th>
<th>No WMD Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>03/06</strong></td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10/04</strong></td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Americans on Iraq: Three Years On, 2006, 4*
War in 1991. Duelfer further stated that there was no evidence of mobile biological weapons capabilities. (CNN.com, 2004, para. 2 & 27)

Of the programs, the Duelfer report said Saddam decided to give up his weapons programs in 1991, but tried to conceal his nuclear and biological programs as long as possible. When Saddam’s son-in-law Hussain Kamal defected in 1995 with information about those two programs, the Iraqi dictator gave those up too, the report indicated. (CNN.com, 2004, para. 28)

While Iraq's nuclear program was well-advanced in 1991, said Duelfer, it "was decaying" by 2001, to the point where Iraq was—if it even could restart the program—“many years from a bomb." (CNN.com, 2004, para. 29)

Lending further credence to these increasing discussions in the press was an addendum to the Duelfer report released during the middle of the PIPA/KN polling period. In April 2005, Duelfer wrote, “After more than 18 months, the WMD investigation and debriefing of the WMD-related detainees have been exhausted. As matters now stand, the WMD investigation has gone as far as feasible.” (MSNBC.com, 2005, para. 2-3)

Reports such as these began to make their way into more and more media stories and in conjunction seep into American’s consciousness. Although it took a while, public opinion began to revert from consent to opposition of the war in Iraq, as Americans began to realize WMD’s were non-existent in Iraq.

Released in August 2006, a CNN poll now found 60 percent of Americans opposed the U.S. war in Iraq; the highest number at the time since polling began on the
subject. It also found that now only 36 percent were in favor of the war—a figure half of what respondents said at the peak of support at 72 percent. (CNN.com, 2006, para. 1-3)

This trend continued with this same CNN poll when Americans were asked this question, “Do you favor or oppose the U.S. war in Iraq?” Figures for those who opposed the war moved slightly up and down from 2006 to 2008, reaching a pinnacle of 68 percent in opposition in November and December 2007 and again reaching that milestone in each of the months of April, May, and June 2008. (Polling report.com, 2008)

Occurring concurrently with opposition to the war was the challenging and subsequent discrediting by the American press and public of another of the major rationales for the invasion of war—Iraq’s ties to al Qaeda.

*Links between Iraq and al Qaeda*

Unlike WMD claims which were overt, much of the Bush administration’s claims that there was a link between Iraq and al Qaeda were implicit. However, as the date grew closer for Congress’ vote to authorize war in October 2002, the claims grew bolder, despite evidence to the contrary. Again, there can be a direct connection from administration claims to news reports to public opinion polls supporting these claims. As these claims were dissected and disproved in the media, public opinion swung in the opposite direction, further suggesting an agenda-setting role of the press.

At least initially, through White House press briefings, speeches, and interviews by administration officials and parroted through mainstream press channels, the tone of the debate about whether there was a link between Iraq and al Qaeda remained an implied one. For instance, Iraq and al Qaeda would often be named in the same paragraph or the
same sentence of a press briefing, speech or interview, not always tied directly together or to say that Iraq was responsible for the attacks of September 11th, but instead to leave the press and the public with the notion that there was some symbiotic relationship between the two. Especially common was the use of tying Iraq, WMD, and the potential of another terrorist attack such as the one on September 11th sponsored by a country such as Iraq.

Just one week after the attacks, there was information ignored by the administration as to the lack of a link between Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda. A memo on September 18, 2001 sent from Chief Counter-Terrorism Advisor Richard Clarke’s office to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice titled, "Survey of Intelligence Information on Any Iraq Involvement in the September 11 Attacks" found no "compelling case" that Iraq had either planned or perpetrated the attacks of September 11th. Arguing that the case for links between Iraq and al Qaeda was weak, the memo pointed out that bin Laden resented the secularism of Saddam Hussein's regime. Finally, the memo said, there was no confirmed reporting on Saddam cooperating with bin Laden on unconventional weapons. (9/11 Commission Report, 2004, 334)

Other instances disputing initial claims about Iraq links to al Qaeda came from intelligence and agencies outside the administration’s sphere of influence. Responding to a request from the Deputy Secretary of Defense on January 24, 2002, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs stated, “So far we have discovered few direct links (between Iraq–al Qaeda).” (Deputy Inspector General for Intelligence, United States Department of Defense, 2007, 12)
Two weeks later a *New York Times* article cited several American intelligence officials at the CIA who claimed they had no evidence that Iraq has engaged in terrorist operations against the United States in nearly a decade. The agency officials also were convinced that Saddam Hussein had not provided chemical or biological weapons to al Qaeda or related terrorist groups. (Risen, 2002, para. 1)

However, one barrier to get the facts straight was the American public’s initial belief that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the attacks of September 11th. A Time/CNN poll conducted just two days after the attacks found that 78 percent of respondents said it was either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the terrorist attacks. (Polling Report.com, 2001) Additionally, a CNN/USA Today Gallop Poll of September 14-15, 2001 also had respondents blaming Iraq for the attacks as 73 percent blamed Iraq either a “great deal” or a “moderate amount.” (Polling Report.com, 2001)

Despite no evidence to suggest a connection between Iraq and al Qaeda, this link began to be implied shortly following September 11, 2001. Just two months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice went on NBC’s “Meet The Press” when the following exchange with moderator Tim Russert took place:

Russert: If we are, indeed, successful in Afghanistan in eliminating Osama bin Laden and rooting out al Qaeda, will the war on terrorism then turn to Saddam Hussein in Iraq?

Rice: The president has made very clear that this is a broad war on terrorism; that you cannot be supportive of al Qaeda and continue to harbor other terrorists. We're sending that message very clearly. Now, as to Iraq, we didn’t need September 11 to tell us that Saddam Hussein is a very dangerous man. We didn’t
need September 11 to tell us that he’s trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. There could be only one reason that he has not wanted U.N. inspectors in Iraq, and that’s so that he can build weapons of mass destruction…. He is a very dangerous man. We have to deal with him on his own terms. We didn't need September 11 to tell us that he's a threat to American security. (Washingtonpost.com, 2003, para. 11)

Indeed, the seeds of this misperception were being sewn early in the American consciousness. Persistent messages by the administration continued throughout the next several months and years to connect Saddam to September 11th. One key figure the administration attempted to use to link Saddam and al Qaeda was Mohamed Atta, a September 11 leader. Vice-President Dick Cheney appeared on “Meet The Press” in December 2001 and pushed the idea that Atta met with an Iraqi official in Prague in April 2001. Cheney said, “Well, what we now have that’s developed…was that report that’s pretty well confirmed, that he [Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in Czechoslovakia last April, several months before the attack.” (Pincus, 2002, para. 5)

Cheney’s claim was later discounted by both American and Czechoslovakian intelligence sources. A congressional report on the September 11th attacks released in the summer of 2003 stated, “The CIA has been unable to establish that [Atta] left the United States or entered Europe in April under his true name or any known alias.” (Deane & Milbank, 2003, para. 7)

In May 2002, FBI Director Robert Mueller III in explaining the extent to which the agency went through to find a link between Atta and an Iraqi intelligence official, “We ran down literally hundreds of thousands of leads and checked every record we
could get our hands on, from flight reservations to car rentals to bank accounts.” (Pincus, 2002, para. 7)

The president’s speeches didn’t directly say that Hussein was culpable in the September 11th attacks, but there was a consistent juxtaposition of Iraq and al Qaeda to hint of a link. In a March 2003 speech, Bush said:

“If the world fails to confront the threat posed by the Iraqi regime, refusing to use force, even as a last resort, free nations would assume immense and unacceptable risks. The attacks of September the 11th, 2001, showed what the enemies of America did with four airplanes. We will not wait to see what terrorists or terrorist states could do with weapons of mass destruction.” (Deane & Milbank, 2003, para. 8)

Two months later declaring the end of major combat in Iraq on May 1, Bush again linked Iraq and the attacks of September 11th, when he said “The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began September the 11, 2001—and still goes on. That terrible morning, 19 evil men—the shock troops of a hateful ideology—gave America and the civilized world a glimpse of their ambitions.”

In the same speech later, Bush added:

“The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We’ve removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more. In these 19 months that changed the world, our actions have been focused and deliberate and proportionate to the offense. We have not forgotten the victims of September the 11th—the last phone calls, the cold murder of children, the searches in the rubble. With those attacks, the terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States. And war is what they got.” (Deane & Milbank, 2003, para. 10)

Again, as we see in the polling data, rhetoric from the vice-president and president has consequences. Even as late in the discussion as August 2003 in a
Washington Post poll conducted August 7-11 of that year, 62 percent of Democrats, 80 percent of Republicans, and 67 percent of Independents still suspected a link between Saddam Hussein and September 11th. In the same poll, eight in 10 Americans said it was likely that Hussein had provided assistance to al Qaeda, and a similar proportion suspected he had developed weapons of mass destruction. (Deane & Milbank, 2003, para. 25)

However, as the violence in Iraq grew more and more intense over the next several years along with increasing evidence that no longer supported administration claims about ties of Iraq and al Qaeda, public support for these false claims waned in polling data. The following graph illustrates how these claims began to be regarded in the PIPA/KN polling.

**GRAPH 2**

**Perceptions of Pre-War Iraq: Links to al-Qaeda**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October 2004 (10/04)</th>
<th>March 2006 (03/06)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly involved in 9/11</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantially supporting al-Qaeda</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly involved in 9/11</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantially supporting al-Qaeda</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Connection</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had minimal contacts</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Connection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had minimal contacts</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Americans on Iraq: Three Years On, 2006, 5

While this graph doesn’t show significant movement over this particular seventeen month period (from October 2004 to March 2006), it does show a clear
distinction from the 2002 and 2003 periods as opinions were being altered—a period when public opinion was overwhelmingly supporting the claim that Iraq and Saddam Hussein had ties to al Qaeda. The graphs above indicate this clear shift as more than four in ten (41%) respondents were saying Iraq had either “no connection” or “had minimal contacts” to al Qaeda in October 2004. This figure jumps to 47 percent agreeing with either of these two statements by March 2006. (Kull, 2006, 5)

This shift is further apparent throughout this period as public opinion polls continue to reverse in 2006 and beyond from earlier support of positions that Iraq and al Qaeda maintained a strong relationship prior to the attacks of September 11th.

A CBS News/New York Times poll conducted August 17—21, 2006 found a majority of respondents (60%) answered ‘No’ to the question, “Do you think Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?” (Polling Report.com, 2006)

Showing the obvious shift, these are markedly different responses from the August 2003 Washington Post poll mentioned above where 62 percent of Democrats, 80 percent of Republicans, and 67 percent of Independents still suspected a link between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11th. (Deane & Milbank, 2003, para. 25)

Media Complicity

So, how does this shift happen? A single false statement carries little or no weight in the public’s sphere of influence. One answer to explain how the public can be influenced and how agenda setting occurs is saturation and repetition. The saturation and
repetition of certain issues can come from information that both public officials dispense and media outlets repeat without thorough analysis, context or correction.

A content analysis appearing in a 2006 issue of the *International Communication Gazette* sought to examine the saturation of certain issues at White House press briefings and in three media outlets and their relationship to agenda-setting functions. The study focused on five key issues laid out by President Bush in a radio address on March 22, 2003. In his speech, Bush presented his rationale for the war focusing on (1) Iraq’s having weapons of mass destruction; (2) the need to remove Iraq’s ‘outlaw’ or illegitimate government; (3) Saddam Hussein’s support for terrorism; (4) the goal of freedom for the Iraqi people; and (5) the formation and use of a coalition of American and other forces to wage the war. (Christie, 2006, 525)

The analysis was conducted during two separate two-month time periods. The first period (April 1 – May 31, 2003) was during the initial week’s reporting of the war and at a relatively high period of U.S. public support for the war. The second period, (April 1 – May 31, 2004) exactly one year later, was chosen because it was during a time of lowered public support for the war. (Christie, 2006, 525)

Transcripts from daily White House press briefings, along with daily front-page stories in *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and daily evening ABC-TV news transcripts were chosen to compare saturation results.

A total of 501 front-page newspaper stories mentioning Iraq along with 57 ABC-TV World News Tonight broadcast transcripts, and 38 White House daily briefing
documents (all such briefings during the two-month period) were analyzed during the period of high public support in 2003. (Christie, 2006, 526)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale Issue</th>
<th>NY Times</th>
<th>Wash. Post</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>White House briefings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WMD</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlaw (regime)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Framing Rationale for the Iraq War: The Interaction of Public Support with Mass Media and Public Policy Agendas, 2006, 528*

The most important information from this initial analysis is that four of the five rationales President Bush provided in his speech were covered extensively during the period of high public support. Also of note are the relatively few mentions of the war rationales by the ABC-TV newscasts.

A total of 408 front-page newspaper stories mentioning Iraq—nearly 100 fewer than in 2003—along with 58 “ABC World News Tonight” broadcast transcripts, and 28 White House daily briefing documents (all such briefings during the two-month period) were analyzed during the period of low public support in 2004. (Christie, 2006, 527)
While virtually all rationale issues across all mediums dropped or had minor gains from 2003 to 2004—with the notable exception of terrorism and coalition in the Washington Post—the issue with the greatest argument for the administration setting the media’s agenda is the WMD issue. This issue dropped from White House briefings from 23 to 7, as it became clearer no stockpiles of WMD were being discovered. Corollary, each media outlet’s coverage of the issue dropped significantly. (Christie, 2006, 530)

As we can see from this content analysis and particularly summary Table 8 above that an issue such as WMD had a clear relationship between White House briefings and media coverage. This is especially true of the front-page stories from the two leading
newspapers of record in the U.S.—The New York Times and the Washington Post. During the period of high public support in 2003 (Table 6), there is a congruence of policy maker’s statements and media coverage, again indicating media agenda-setting.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

Through various content analysis studies, administration statements, media coverage, and numerous public opinion polls presented, the hypotheses proposed in the introduction are indeed accurate and all three of the questions posed can be answered to some degree or another in the affirmative.

To the question asking “whether the American press gave more attention and prominence to pro-war advocates as the war in Iraq began,” it can be answered ‘yes.’ The FAIR study, entitled, “Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent,” shows through a content analysis of six major television networks and news channels that opponents of the war were markedly underrepresented on newscasts in the three weeks following the first U.S. bombing of Iraq—a key period in shaping public opinion and gaining support for war efforts. For example, the FAIR study found that, “Nearly two thirds of all sources, 64 percent, were pro-war advocates, while 71 percent of U.S. guests favored the war. Anti-war voices were ten percent of all sources, but just six percent of non-Iraqi sources and three percent of U.S. sources. Thus viewers were more than six times as likely to see a pro-war source as one who was anti-war; with U.S. guests alone, the ratio increases to 25 to 1.” Noteworthy to this point is that a significant number of the anti-war voices were Iraqi sources arguing against a U.S. led invasion of their country. These would hardly be the voices best suited to convince an American public fearful from the attacks of September 11th that war was not necessary.
The disparagement between media representation of opinions and actual public opinion were not reflective of initial polling about the war at the time. Large anti-war demonstrations were held in the country and according to a poll from Bulletin’s Frontrunner on April 7, 2003, 27 percent claimed to be opposed to the war. While viewers were given this mostly one-sided debate as the war began, public opinion was not as fully behind the war as initial public opinion shows. However, as the litany of pro-war proponents presented their support for the war with little opposition, support for the war grew to meet what viewers were seeing in the media—a clear representation of media agenda-setting.

To the question asking “whether statements by the Bush administration and repeated in the media shape public opinion in believing certain misperceptions about Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda”, it can be answered ‘yes.’ The ideas that Iraq possessed WMD and Iraq had ties to al Qaeda were common beliefs and statements by the Bush administration and pro-war advocates in supporting the invasion and occupation of Iraq, both before and after the war began. The repetition of these by the Bush administration and echoed in the media could accurately be perceived as a cause of public opinion polls that showed a strong agreement that Iraq possessed WMD and Iraq had ties to al Qaeda—if not immediately, then surely over time as these notions were amplified and repeated through media channels.

Statements by the Bush administration and those repeated in the media was the focus of the report by the Center for Public Integrity called “Iraq—The War Card: Orchestrated Deception on the Path to War.” The report cites 935, what they termed,
“false statements,” made by President Bush and seven of his top advisors about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his link to al Qaeda in the two years following September 11th, 2001.

As the number of “false statements” rose and fell and then rose again at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, so too did public perception about whether Iraq had WMD, suggesting a strong case for media agenda-setting and public-opinion building. For example, when the number of “false statements” spiked in September 2002 to more than 60, according to The War Card report, so too did public opinion polls that showed respondents who agreed that Iraq does have WMD. Conversely, in December 2002, when the number of “false statements” dropped to 20 (an 11-month low for the period of September 2002 through July 2003), so did the percent of respondents who agreed Iraq has WMD. In both cases, results of the CBS/New York Times poll showed a corollary relationship to the quantity of “false statements.”

The CBS/New York Times poll asked the same question five times (from February 2002 to April 2003), “Do you think Iraq probably does or probably does not have weapons of mass destruction that the U.N. weapons inspectors have not found yet?” When this question was asked in September 2002 during a high concentration of what the War Card report called “false statements,” 79 percent of respondents answered “probably does.” When asked in December 2002 when the number of “false statements” dropped, 75 percent of poll respondents answered “probably does.”

During the period when two of the most crucial arguments for the war were made (the president’s State of the Union address on January 28th and Secretary of State Colin
Powell’s presentation to the U.N. Security Council on February 5th), both the number of “false statements” by administration officials and public opinion agreeing that Iraq has WMD reached their highest levels. The number of “false statements” about Iraq, WMD, and ties to al Qaeda reached their pinnacle in February 2003, with 140 such statements, according to the report. Likewise, respondents of the CBS/New York Times poll who answered that Iraq “probably does” have WMD reached 85 percent in February 2003, the highest percent for that poll.

As noted in the Project for Excellence in Journalism study, media efforts made at covering the attacks of September 11th initially began considerably fact-based. However, as time passed, the Fourth Estate trended toward commentary and opinion. With that, began a period in which media outlets substituted opinion-based journalism for fact-based journalism. Without clear evidence on a particular subject, certain narratives inevitably arose about the attacks, al Qaeda, Iraq and WMD. Those narratives soon became the story of 9/11 and a foundational narrative by which the pro-war advocates could funnel their perspectives to news outlets and an agenda could be established on an ongoing basis for the next several years of the war.

To the question, “as the voices of dissent to the war and its execution had become more prominent and relevant in the mainstream press, have opinion polls shown a less favorable agreement with the pro-war policy makers and pundits?” can also be answered in the affirmative.

Reports such as the CIA’s Iraq Study Group (ISG) suggested Saddam Hussein did not possess stockpiles of illicit weapons at the time of the U.S. invasion in March 2003
and had not begun any program to produce them. The report, released in October 2004, from the CIA’s top weapons inspector in Iraq, Charles Duelfer, said Iraq’s WMD program was essentially destroyed in 1991 and Saddam ended Iraq’s nuclear program after the Gulf War in 1991. Duelfer further stated that there was no evidence of mobile biological weapons capabilities. As these reports became more and more prevalent in mainstream press stories, public opinion began to reverse.

A CNN poll in August 2006 found 60 percent of Americans opposed the U.S. war in Iraq; the highest number at the time since polling began on the subject. It also found that only 36 percent were in favor of the war—a figure half of what respondents said at the peak of support at 72 percent. The poll had increased levels of opposition in the following years when it reached its pinnacle with 68 percent saying they opposed the U.S. war in Iraq in November and December 2007 and again the same level of opposition in each of the months of April, May, and June 2008.

To understand the government, media, and public opinion culture in which the narrative of certain beliefs about Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda were able to exist, we must return to Bernard Cohen’s conclusion he proposed some 45 years ago when studying a different media and societal era to see if the agenda-setting theory is still as accurate now as it was then.

Cohen said, “The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about.” (Cohen, 1963, 13)
While there is still merit to this statement, in the 24-hour-a-day, 7 days-a-week media culture which currently controls much of political messaging; it’s now easier to send repetitive messages that resonate through the media echo chamber to shape public opinion. This echo chamber creates conditions that allow groups to disseminate messages which can, in fact, “tell its readers what to think.”

Without a thorough media analysis about whether information and opinions are accurate and trustworthy, public opinion can easily be manipulated by political operatives or other special interests working toward a shared goal of message manipulation. It is true the media tell us what issues to think about and which are relevant for discussion. It is becoming increasingly more accurate that the public is also told what to think about those issues.
REFERENCES


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