

Impact of Television News on Public Opinion about the Iraq War:  
An Assessment of Second-Level Agenda Setting and Framing

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### Abstract

This study examined whether second-level agenda setting and framing effects existed during the Iraq War from March, 2003 to October, 2004. News stories about the Iraq War on *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News* were selected. A total of 1,201 news paragraphs were drawn for content analysis. Public opinion polls were collected for public perceptions in different news attributes about the Iraq War. Results demonstrated that news about the Iraq War was more episodic than thematic. There were more positive than negative frames the war news about Iraq. Results also found news attributes about the Iraq War similar with poll results indicating that second-level agenda setting and framing were at work. The implications of the results and suggestions for future research were discussed.

## Statement of Problem

The present study examines whether this second-level of agenda setting and framing effect existed during the Iraq War from March, 2003 to October, 2004. This study analyzes news attributes and frames covered by three U.S. television news networks. Then we compare the attributes and frames of news with results from national public opinion polls about the public's perceptions of the Iraq War.

This study employs second level agenda setting theory and framing analysis as the theoretical frameworks to analyze news coverage of the War in Iraq. News coverage of war from the U.S. perspective seems to be legitimizing the administration's policy and emphasizing patriotism for the U.S.. Given the findings of Iyengar and Simon cognitive attributes (second-level agenda setting) emphasized by the news media regarding the Iraq War would be also more episodic than thematic in nature. Affective attributes (framing) in news coverage of the Iraq War would be more positive than negative. Following the assumption of agenda setting research, there are more episodic news agendas than thematic, episodic agendas will be considered more important than thematic ones by the public. The attributes and framing of agendas are assumed to affect the public's construction of the views on the Iraq War. In this regard, the following hypotheses guide this study.

H1: News coverage about the Iraq War will be more episodic than thematic in nature.

H2: News coverage about the Iraq War will be framed as positive more often than it will be framed as negative.

H3: Positively framed news coverage of the Iraq War will be more likely than negatively framed news coverage to account for public opinion about the war.

## Method

The coverage of the Iraq War in three major television network news programs was examined by conducting a content analysis. News stories about the Iraq War on *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News* were selected. These news programs are aired in the same time spot (5:30-6:00 p.m. CST). For the sake of comparison of the same news program types, *CNN* and *FOX* news were excluded from the analysis since the channels have no corresponding news programs in the same time spot with the other three news networks.

Two trained graduate student coders analyzed all news stories about the Iraq War from March 1, 2003 to October 31, 2004, from the month of war to the day before the 2004 presidential election. Using the Vanderbilt Television News Index and Abstracts, the coders were asked to visit the Vanderbilt News Archive Web site and conducted a search of news transcripts using the keyword "Iraq War" which yielded 670 stories. The Vanderbilt news abstracts provide the summary of a news story within which a reader can find indications of the cognitive and affective aspects of news attributes.

The unit of analysis is the paragraph. To measure cognitive attributes of the news about the Iraq War, we utilized a concept prominent in second-level agenda setting and framing literature.

Public opinion about the Iraq War was measured using national polls taken by various U.S. organizations between April 1, 2003, and November 30, 2004, to measure subsequent agenda setting and framing effects of news coverage- March 1, 2003-October 31, 2004 -on public opinion.

## Summary of Findings

News about the Iraq War in March 2003, the beginning month of the war, focused on war plans and diplomacy. After March 20, the Iraq War absorbed virtually all network news time. In addition to heavy coverage at the beginning of the war, there was a good deal of attention paid to war intelligence and U.S. casualties in June/July, 2003, and criticism on the war plans in April, 2004.

News coverage about the Iraq War on three news networks demonstrates a similar pattern in its amount of coverage over time. Of the three news networks, *NBC* covered a larger number of news stories about the Iraq War and was more positively framed than *CBS* and *ABC*. However, news coverage of the three news networks shows a steady decline over time. This similarity among news programs in coverage pattern allowed us to combine the data for consideration of the study's hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that news coverage about the Iraq War would be more episodic than thematic in nature. Television news viewers were provided the next episode in the development of the war. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that news coverage about the Iraq War would be framed more positively than negatively. This hypothesis received partial support. Of the 1,201 total news paragraphs about the Iraq War, 337 (28.1%) were framed as positive or advantageous to the U.S. while 227 (18.9%) were framed as negative or disadvantageous to the U.S..

Hypothesis 3 asserted that positively framed news coverage of the Iraq War would be more likely than negatively framed news coverage to account for public opinion about the war. Seven chi-square tests suggest framing was at work at the affective level. Therefore, this test moderately supported hypothesis 3.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined what cognitive attributes the news about the Iraq War presented and how the news framed the war, and how this framing affected public opinion about the war using second-level agenda setting and framing research as theoretical backgrounds. The content analysis suggests that there is more positive than negative frames in affective attributes of the news about the Iraq War. Although five out of nine cognitive attributes are more negatively than positively framed, overall frequencies on positive framing outweigh negative framing (337 vs. 227). The support for H2 which predicted more positive news than negative news in Iraq War coverage, therefore, needs a further interpretation.

Along with the findings, more research is needed to elaborate the current study by examining public perceptions from a survey that examines media exposure and its link with public opinion about the war. In this light, the analysis of the relationship between media coverage and public opinion polls in this study has a limitation that prevents the generalization of the results. The current study did not include the audience's evaluation of attribute importance in its analysis. To validly measure salience of attributes among the public, a survey asking publics' attribute importance will be needed. Future research should also endeavor to build a causal model to explain a linear or reciprocal relationship between news coverage of the war and public perceptions.

This study is an addition to second-level agenda setting and framing by examining the power of media that constructs pictures in our heads. The news media covering the Iraq War created public meaning by reconciling dispute on the war through positive rather than through negative frames on news themes.