

Media and Propaganda—How British Newspapers Reported Iraq War in 2003

Yueyuan Zhu^{1, a}

¹Shijiazhuang Shimen Experimental School, Shijiazhuang 051430, China.

^airis9121@163.com

Abstract

The role of media during the war time usually raises controversies. Some people argue that the media works independently while others claim that they propagandize for the government's authorities. The reason can be stemmed from the political standpoint of four types of British newspapers, namely the Guardian, the Times, Daily Mirror and the Daily Telegraph. This essay employed content analysis as well as discourse analysis to explore this issue from a comprehensive perspective. By analyzing news sources, key words and selected sentences, it is suggested that the times firmly supported the war while the rest three newspapers hold ambiguous attitudes during responding the Iraq war in 2003. Although British newspapers might hold different opinions toward Iraq war in 2003, they eventually made a concession to follow the policy makers.

Keywords

Media, foreign policy, propaganda, Iraq war.

1. Introduction

The Iraq war broke out with the official declaration by multinational military forces at 20 March 2003. During the war time, the attitudes of British media changed accompanied with the situations and the progresses in the battlefield. The public opinion on whether Britain should participate in the action was debated at the beginning of the war. As the media had an important role in propaganda, this essay compares the attitudes in four selected British newspapers and analyzes the efforts that media made during the Iraq war in 2003. In addition, the limited influence of media is explored since the media were stuck in the political dilemma.

2. Literature Review

The media's role in wartime has always been a controversial subject and there are long-standing debates about whether the media have the ability to keep their independence in news reporting when facing pressures from the political powers in control (Robinson et al, 2009). According to Robinson et al (2010), there are three possible models of media performance during wartimes namely "elite-support, independent-negotiated and oppositional-critical". The hypothesis of this essay is that British newspapers tend to shape the public opinion in order to serve the purpose of the political party that they support. In regard to government policies during wartimes, one of the theories is that the government appears to raise people's feelings of patriotism and they set restrictions to the media criticism which might weaken the support of the general populace (Murray et al, 2008). Hiebert (2003) points out that the government tends to frame the war in a certain way that serves their interests, which may able to protect their authority. However, the media-state relationship has been changed over time, leading to a debate about whether media tends to follow the policy-makers or to defend their own autonomy. Wolfsfeld (1997) suggests that it has become widely accepted that the media tends to act as a "faithful servant" (p69) during the wartime by reporting elite perspectives with little

modification. In Gulf War 1991, media failed to report impartially, because of their fear of the government (Bennett and Paletz, 1994). The failure of U.S. journalists showed that media often follows government's politics. Furthermore, studies suggest that media have generally "served the military rather well" in wartime and have acted as a tool of government propaganda (Carruthers 2000: 271-2). Based on the research of the Cold War, Herman and Chomsky (1988) came up with a theory of propaganda model. They claim that independent journalism during the wartime is just an illusion. Even though journalists are sometimes critical, the possibility of journalists to negotiate and challenge policy-makers showed an apparent decline. Being challenged by the crisis of democracy in the twenty-first century, Schnell (2001) argues that due to the emphasis on ownership of the media and political standing, media has been represented political elites rather than the interests of the public.

However, Robinson (2004) claims that the media do not always follow the direction of policy-makers. Studies show that the media had a greater power and became more independence during the wartime. Although journalists often shows a favorable attitude on whom in power, as they sometimes report news from an aspect that might benefit the interest of policy-makers. (Moeller 2004), the media would not be blinded all the time. Entman (2009) agrees that the media does have the function of presenting the oppositions to political elites and as such not entirely loyal to political administrations. With media's efforts on anti-war or criticism reports, they may influence government's decisions. An early work of Hallin (2006) points out that "an independent, alert, and responsible press, together with a concerned citizenry" (p92), can influence the government with their reports and force the policy-maker to be more honest and forthright. For example, researchers suggest that during the Cold War, it was believed that the overwhelming oppositional reports from media led to the U.S. military's eventual failure. In the other word, their critical comments against the war influenced the outcome of government and the war (Robinson et al, 2009).

During the Iraq War 2003, media still strived for their freedom of expression and autonomy. Moeller (2004) states that the US media generally follow the epistemology employed by the administration, such as using the term "terrorism" in news reporting. By contrast, during most periods of wartime, the UK media appeared to be more independent than the U.S media. It is obvious that some British journalists still played rather autonomous roles in news reporting even when they were under strong pressures from politicians and the military (Tumber and Palmer, 2004). However, not all scholars agree with the opinions of Tumber and Palmer. For example, Bennett and Paletz (1994), Carruthers (2000) argue that U.K. media coverage of the 2003 Iraq war was not critical enough. They think that British media lacked independence in the wartime and they were acting deferential to the government.

There are several previous researches focus on studies of the UK media's role in the Iraq War 2003, which covered not only print journalism but also broadcasting and radio. Brookes and Lewis (2004) draw attention to British broadcasting media. After taking programs into consideration, they claim that British television programs were basically influenced by the government foreign policy. Couldry and Doweny (2004) analyze seven British national newspapers' reports about Iraq War 2003 during the pre-war time. Their research focuses on newspapers' attitude about how the government justified the reason of launching the invasion of Iraq. They suggest that reporting styles and news content were influenced by the ownership and the political standings of the newspapers.

Generally speaking, it has shown that British studies on relations between news reporting and government policy have tended to focus either on television news reports or newspapers' reports during the Iraq War 2003. Although Couldry and Doweny (2004) analyzed national newspapers, their research just covered the pre-war time. The amounts of research which related to British media's role in Iraq War 2003 during the major phase of the war are not

sufficient. Hence, this paper focuses particularly on the period from March 20, 2003 to April 19, 2003, as these two specific dates are the beginning day and the ending day of the war.

3. Methodology

Aiming to clarify whether British news reports had effects on the political decisions during the Iraq war 2003, both content analysis and discourse analysis were employed in this research. The timeline of this study covers a specific time period, namely the 20th March of 2003 to the 19th April of 2003. Four types of newspapers—the Guardian, the Times, the Daily Telegraph and Daily Mirror, were selected as research subjects, which covered a range of reporting styles and political leanings. Among these newspapers, the Guardian and Daily Mirror are left wing newspapers while the Times and the Daily Telegraph are right wing newspapers. The hypothesis was that compared with right wing newspapers, left wing newspapers might have more sympathy for the weak social group due to their emphasis on the public interests.

According to Neuendorf (2011), quantitative content analysis makes summaries for the recorded messages relying on a scientific method. In content analysis, five key words were picked out as the first step in looking at 30 selected news stories in each newspaper. By counting the frequency of these words as they appeared in the context, conclusions could be drawn, for example, authors' attitudes towards the Iraq war 2003. At the same time, news sources played a vital role in news reporting as they were likely to support authors' opinion as well as shape the public opinion. News sources were grouped into two different categories: British military and Iraqi military. When taking sources into consideration, we were able to make an assumption that sources from the British military played a dominant role in making the audience informed about the process of the war. In this circumstance, newspapers are apparently molding readers' opinions from the perspective of the British government.

In order to study this issue in depth, discourse analysis was also employed in this research as it focuses on the structure and function of the language in use (Johnstone, 2008). Headlines were the initial messages news stories were trying to tell their readers. Five headlines were analyzed in each type of newspaper. More precisely, this paper also analyzed the headlines in the point of view of linguistic. It examined the headlines to find out what was hidden on purpose by journalists for various reasons. For instance, agencies that should be responsible to the issue described in the news story and factors contributing to the issue happened in the news story.

4. Findings

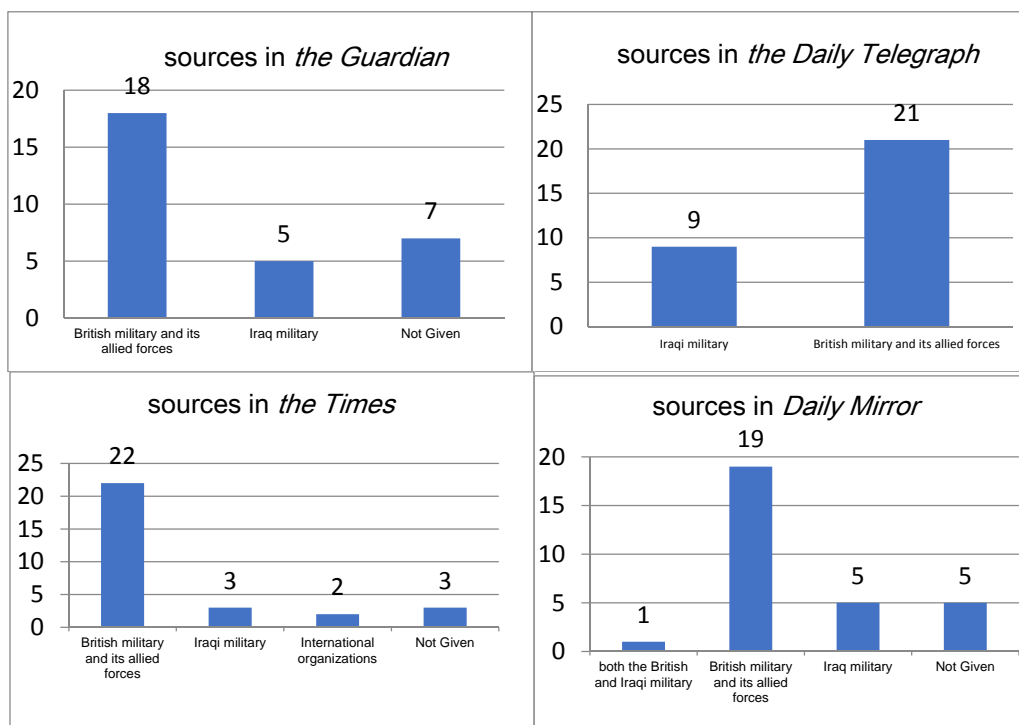
4.1. Content Analysis

4.1.1. News Sources

The flows of information can largely reflect the standpoints of newspapers since 'news is socially constructed' (Berkowitz, 1997, p8). By analyzing different news sources in four selected newspapers, the attitudes of each newspaper can be observed, which can give light on the role of media during the 2003 Iraq War.

In this study, 30 pieces of news stories are selected from each newspaper, and 120 pieces of reports in total. In Daily Mirror, 5 news stories did not have quotations of sources. As for the rest 25 news, the majority of sources (19) came from British military and also its allied forces. Only 5 news stories used sources from Iraqi military, one news story had sources from both the British and Iraqi military. In the Times, news sources in 3 stories were not available. 22 pieces of news present sources from British military and its allied forces. Three of news sources come from Iraqi military and two come from international organizations. In the Daily Telegraph, 21 pieces of information came from British military, while 9 from Iraq military. In the Guardian,

18 sources were obtained from British military and its allied forces and 5 sources were gained from Iraq military. The rest seven news stories failed to contribute on sources.

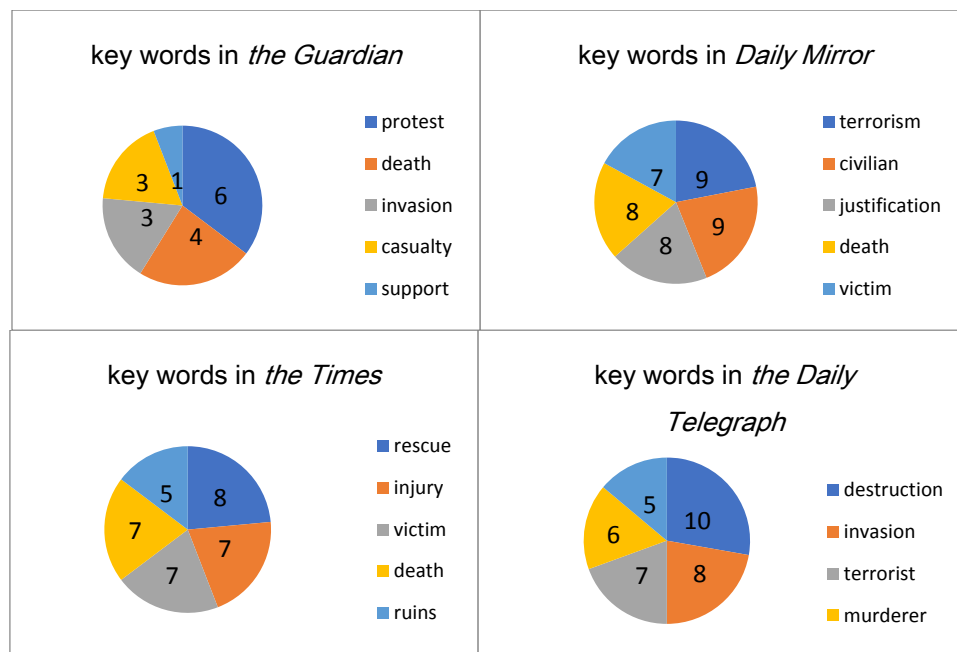


From the bars above, it is clear that sources from British military and allied forces occupied the main proportion. Sources from the Iraq, which is also an important participant in the war, are hardly found in the newspapers. Other sources, such as international organizations, are rarely presented during the news reports. Since the war broke out between three countries, therefore, sources should be obtained from them equally. The imbalanced sources may reveal the fact that the majority news reported the voices from Britain and USA. Ignorance of Iraq and voices from other aspects may give readers a partial image of the war or even mislead the readers. By analysing the news sources, the standpoints of four selected newspapers can be described as a megaphone of the British military and rallied forces rather than an impartial teller.

4.1.2. Key Words

Language is potent since it could influence the readers by the way of using words and depicting the events. Therefore, by analyzing the key words in the news stories, the intentions of the news can be discussed. The words appear most frequently in reporting can provide evidence of the possible intentions and inclinations of the newspapers.

In Daily Mirror, the five top frequently presented words are terrorism (9), civilian (9), justification (8), death (8) and victim (7). The most frequent key word in the Guardian is protest (6), and then followed by death (4), invasion (3), casualty (3) and support (1). As for the Times, 'rescue' appeared most frequently (8), then followed by injury (7), victim (7), death (7) and ruins (5). In the Daily Telegraph destruction (10), invasion (8), terrorist (7), murderer (6), democracy (5) are selected.



As a newspaper supported the labor, Daily Mirror had some opposite comments toward the government. The newspaper showed its sympathy to innocent civilians who are in suffering and pain. News are used to frame public opinions is also apparent during this certain time period. From the words, the Guardian reported about protest against the war and definite the military acts as invasion. The use of neutral word: casualty and strong word death also shows the guardian is not favor the military action. As for the Times, it described the war as ‘rescue’ at the beginning of war, which reflects its intention to support Blair. Plus, the ‘ruins’ was used to depict Iraq and stress the importance of ‘rescue’. In the Daily Telegraph, the negative words were mostly used in the news, which showed the unsupported attitude towards the war.

As Chomsky hold the idea that media serve the elites by manufacturing consent to the public, therefore the Times used ‘rescue’, ‘ruins’ to win support from the public. Although, the Guardian, Daily Mirror and the Daily Telegraph against the war, their protests were weak according to the words in news. From the language, newspapers that did not approve the war fail to clearly state their adverse attitudes. Their implications on influencing the decision of the government seem to be invalid. The role of newspapers in the war is weak compared with the power from the authorities. It is suggested that media fail to perform as a ‘fourth estate’ during the Iraq war in 2003 and the effects from the media are rather feeble.

4.2. Discourse Analysis

Example 1: Iraqi shot at me; Army chief in Iraq war returns to UK & Tells of bloody Sunday (April 8, 2003, the Guardian)

Iraqi troop was the active actor while the British troop was described to be the passive actor in the headline. In order to tell readers it was Iraqi brought violence and death, the news used this sentence

Example 2: Iraq conflict threatens Budget (March 29, 2003, the Daily Telegraph)

This headline hides the information of “whose” budget, which might cause misunderstanding. After reading the whole article, it can be known that this reporting focus on how Iraq war would cost UK budget, indicating the drawback of emerging this war. Therefore, this article shows a negative attitude to Iraq war.

Example 3: British troops surround the city in grip of Saddam’s militia. (March 30, 2003, the Times)

In this sentence, it is already complete to write 'British troops surround the city', however, the reporter used 'in grip of Saddam's militia' to further depicting the details of the city. Readers might have negative impression on British army as they may regard the military action as invasion. If 'in grip of Saddam's militia' is added, the readers may think about the plight of the citizens in that city, which appropriately expressed the word 'rescue'. This title was wrote to manufacture the consent of the war and tended to create better image for the British military.

From the analysis above, news in four newspapers was different but effects were similar. No matter what opinions they expressed, the final result was that the Iraq war was not halted by the media who against it. Attitudes of the newspapers changed according to the situations of British military forces in the battlefield.

5. Conclusion

According to the selected British newspapers, different literal contents as well as attitudes have been shown during reporting the Iraq war. Despite of the fact that the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph and Daily mirror had anti-war sentiments toward the Iraq war, they failed to constantly insist their standpoints and gradually became surrenders of policy makers. As for the Times, it served the Labour which was the ruling party during the war time. Therefore, the news in the Times was primarily supported the Iraq war and approximately performed as megaphone of the government. The role of British newspapers during the war did not perform as watchdog. In conclusion, the newspapers tend to shape the public opinion in order to serve the purpose of the political party that they support.

In addition, the limitations in this essay cannot be ignored. A short time period can not reflect the whole picture of the news reporting of Iraq war 2003. As the news stories about this issue has been keeping updated in recent years but the four selected newspapers provided a general understanding of the certain period and also the most important time period. The news samples did not include newspapers in Wales and Scotland, which also have research value when talking about British newspapers and propaganda. From this point of view, it still needs further research to understanding this subject.

References

- [1] Brookes, R., Lewis, J., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2004). The media representation of public opinion: British television news coverage of the 2001 general election. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26(1), 63-80.
- [2] Carruthers, S. L. (2000). *The media at war: Communication and conflict in the twentieth century*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- [3] Couldry, N. and Downey, J. (2004) 'War or Peace? Legitimation, Dissent and Rhetorical Closure in Press Coverage of the Iraq War Build-up' in S. Allan and B. Zelizer (eds) *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*. London: Routledge, pp266-282.
- [4] Entman, R. M. (2009). *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- [5] Hallin, D. (2006). *We keep America on top of the world: Television journalism and the public sphere*. London: Routledge.
- [6] Hiebert, R. E. (2003). Public relations and propaganda in framing the Iraq war: A preliminary review. *Public Relations Review*, 29(3), 243-255.
- [7] Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse analysis*. Malden, Cambridge: Blackwell.

- [8] Moeller, S. D. (2004). Media coverage of weapons of mass destruction., Centre for International and Security Studies at Maryland
- [9] Robinson, P., Goddard, P., & Parry, K. (2009). UK Media and media management during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. *American behavioral scientist*,52(5), 678-688.
- [10] Robinson, P. (2004). Researching US media-state relations and twenty-first century wars. *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, London: Routledge.
- [11] Robinson, P., & Taylor, P. M. (2010). *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq*. Manchester University Press.
- [12] Schnell, K. C. F. (2001). Assessing the democratic debate: How the news media frame elite policy discourse. *Political communication*, 18(2), 183-213.
- [13] Tumber, H., & Palmer, J. (2004). *Media at war: The Iraq crisis*. London:Sage.