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Foreign policy and the framing of the 2003 Iraq War in elite Swedish and US newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the framing of the Iraq War in the elite newspapers in Sweden and the USA during the official war period, 20 March–1 May 2003. The content analysis revealed significant cross-cultural differences in the framing of the war in terms of tone, frames and use of sources. The differences in framing were consistent with the characteristics of the national political environment and foreign policy stances in each country.

KEY WORDS • cross-cultural framing of conflict • Iraq War coverage
• news framing • Swedish press • US press

Mass media play a critical role in modern warfare. At the same time, media face a number of challenges in war reporting. On one hand, they are expected to act as watchdogs, to verify the accuracy of the facts they receive and publish, and to provide the information that people need in order to be free and self-governing. On the other hand, the media must also be sensitive to public opinion. They have to rely on information from official sources and they are never completely independent from prevailing notions of what is in the national interest (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Boyd-Barrett (2004) suggested that war coverage tends to be one-sided. The media are likely to cover war from the point of view of the country of origin and thus tend to reflect the positions of the government and its foreign policy elites.

If war reporting is generally one-sided, then media coverage of a war should be different in countries involved in the war and in countries neutral or critical of the war. The situation is complicated, however, when public opinion is divided or when a single point of view of a particular country's

foreign policy elites may be lacking. Following Bennett's indexing model (2004), in such situations journalists have to decide the extent to which such divisions should be reflected in the war coverage.

Furthermore, it is not only the perceived national political interest, as interpreted by a particular country's political elites, which matters. The political environment as well as the media system taken as a whole can also influence the news media coverage of war (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The heavy reliance on official government sources will have both direct and indirect influence on the media's coverage of politics and society in general, as well as of war and peace in particular (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Thus, theoretically, the media would be constrained by national political interests and the views of the political elite in their coverage of wars.

The news framing of the official period of the 2003 Iraq War offers an important and interesting case study of how national political consensus constrained media framing. Since the war was such an important event, it is not surprising that several studies regarding its media coverage have already been published (Aday et al., 2005; Nord and Strömbäck, 2006; Rantanen, 2004; Tumber and Palmer, 2004). However, with some exceptions (Dimitrova et al., 2005; Ravi, 2005) there are few studies comparing how news media in different countries covered the war. This gap in the literature is unfortunate since comparative studies can enhance our understanding of the extent to which mass media are constrained by the national political environment in different countries (Esser and Pfetsch, 2004; Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to examine the news framing of the 2003 Iraq War in a country that was highly involved in the conflict – the USA, and in a country that was not involved and was critical of it – Sweden. These countries also belong to different models of media and political systems. In the following we propose that these different models and the unique political environment in each country influenced the media framing of the 2003 Iraq War. Focusing on the early war period also enables future scholars to conduct comparative content analyses with later time periods when the official government views, especially in the USA, changed.

Framing theory

An appropriate theoretical framework for this cross-cultural analysis is framing. While there is no universally accepted definition of framing, which has become a popular mass communication theory in the past 15 years (Bryant and Miron, 2004), the term generally refers to 'the way events and

issues are organized and made sense of' (Reese, 2001: 7). Frames can be shaped by political actors, by the media, or be part of a broader cultural outlook. One of the most often cited definitions of media framing is provided by Entman (1993: 52), according to whom framing means 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'.

Frames are the result of multiple, partially overlapping, factors. Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for instance, postulate that there are three broad determinants of frames: cultural resonance, sponsor activities and media practices. Other factors include the strategic communicative actions by political actors, journalistic norms and routines, individual schemas of reporters, political ideology and culturally rooted interpretations and outlooks (Reese et al., 2001). Regarding the importance of strategic communicative actions by political actors, framing research supports the notion that national political elites impact media framing. According to Entman's 'cascading network activation model', the political administration, other elites, the media, as well as the public, all contribute to the development of news frames, but not to the same extent. Entman (2004: 12) also argues that what passes through the cascade tends to be 'highlights packaged into selective, framed communications'. Additionally, news frames that are culturally congruent are most influential on public opinion, and what defines culturally congruent frames is that they employ 'words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say *noticeable, understandable and emotionally charged*' (Entman, 2004: 6, emphasis in original).

Empirical research has shown that the dominant political environment can lead to different news framing of similar events. One example of this is the coverage of two similar incidents in the 1980s: the destruction of Korean Airlines Flight 007 by a Soviet fighter jet and the downing of Iran Air Flight 655 by a US ship. Even though the two events were similar in nature, the US media framed the KAL incident as a moral issue while the Iranian air incident was presented as a technical problem; the framing was closely related to the official line of the US administration (Entman, 2004). The same tendency was shown in a study of the NATO air strikes in former Yugoslavia, where Yang (2003) found that the NATO involvement was framed as 'humanitarian aid' for the Kosovo-Albanians in the mainstream US media whereas it was framed as an 'intervention' by the top two Chinese newspapers.

Thus, framing is influenced by the national political context in which journalists operate. If there is agreement about an issue in the political environment, framing becomes invisible. As Norris et al. (2003: 12) note,

'In one-sided cases, the conventional news frame is likely to be so strong and all-pervasive that politicians, journalists, and the public within the community will probably be unaware of this process and media coverage will be relatively uncontroversial.' The cultural resonance of each frame gives it its credibility and power (Van Gorp, 2007).

Another characteristic of frames is that they endure over time. An important frame in the coverage of war is the so-called prognostic frame. Prognostic framing has been discussed in the context of social movements as proposing future arrangements for the current situation (Benford and Snow, 2000). It focuses on the question of what should be done about a problem and can include a broader discussion of alternative outcomes. In the case of the Iraq War, the prognostic frame may be manifested by promoting a particular outcome such as democratic rule in the country.

National political elites' impact on war framing

As mentioned previously, the USA and Sweden took vastly different foreign policy positions regarding the 2003 Iraq War. The USA led the 'Coalition of the Willing' for the military action in Iraq. Even though the war received some opposition within the USA, a majority in Congress supported President Bush's decision to go to war. There was more vocal opposition against military action prior to 2003 and before the Bush administration succeeded in persuading (without solid evidence, as it turned out in hindsight) the public to think that there was a link between Saddam Hussein, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), and the September 11 terrorist attacks (Entman, 2004; Kern et al., 2003).

In Sweden, political leaders and the public at large opposed the war. Five of the seven parties in Parliament were more or less critical of the US decision to go to war and claimed that it was a violation of international law. The remaining two parties did not express much support for the war either, but they did not argue that the war was a violation of international law. As for public opinion, the first poll taken after President Bush had declared that the USA would attack Iraq if Saddam Hussein did not step down from power showed that the vast majority of the Swedish adult population (81%) was against or somewhat against the war while only 17 per cent were in favor or somewhat in favor of the war (*Dagens Nyheter*, 21 March 2003: A09). In contrast, a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll conducted after President Bush's 17 March 2003 address on US television revealed that 64 per cent of Americans approved of how he was handling the situation in Iraq while 29 per cent disapproved, and 70 per cent strongly supported or somewhat supported

going to war with Iraq. In other words, public opinion in the USA was largely supportive right before the war started.

If news framing is indeed impacted by the official foreign policy of a country as well as dominant public opinion, we can expect that the news coverage of the 2003 Iraq War in the USA will be more favorable than the news coverage in Sweden, reflecting the support for and opposition to the war in each country. Thus, we propose our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The tone of news coverage will be more negative in elite Swedish newspapers than in elite US newspapers in their coverage of the 2003 Iraq War.

News sources and war framing

One important framing mechanism is the use of sources in news reporting. News media generally rely on official sources and are especially dependent on information from government and military sources during wartime (Carruthers, 2000; Pfau et al., 2004; Tumber and Palmer, 2004). Regardless of whether the government tries to control the flow of information by restricting access to the war zone, instituting a pool system of reporters, or through embedding (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005; Pfau et al., 2004), the media still have to rely on government and military officials for information. Brown (2003: 55) argues that a high level of interdependence exists between the government, the military establishment and the media during times of war. In fact, he postulates that these three entities are interdependent 'to a degree that has yet to be recognized by the public, leaders, and scholars'.

US journalists in general tend to be heavily dependent on their official sources, and when no dispute about a foreign policy issue exists, they let the official sources set the media agenda. This consequence has been documented by Hallin, among others, in his study of the media coverage of the Vietnam War (Hallin, 1986). It is also at the heart of Bennett's indexing hypothesis (Bennett, 2003, 2004). When there is consensus among the elite sources, the likelihood that journalists will investigate an issue and push for answers is rather low. As a result, there is heavy reliance (or over-reliance) on official government and military sources and the media agenda is often set by government officials rather than by journalists or editors (Bennett, 2003, 2004; Entman, 2004). The limited research in Sweden shows less reliance on official sources and no consensus as to who sets the media agenda (Palm, 2002; Sahlstrand, 2000; Strömbäck and Nord, 2006). Based on these differences, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: In their coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, elite US newspapers will rely on official sources more frequently than elite Swedish newspapers.

What specific framing differences can be expected beyond the use of sources and differences in tone? Prior research has already documented some significant differences in war framing between Coalition and non-Coalition media and also found other cross-national differences (Aday et al., 2005; Dimitrova et al., 2005; Ravi, 2005). Following this line of research, we expected that journalists in Sweden and the USA would employ frames congruent with the political environment in their respective countries and that the 'selective, framed communications' about Iraq will vary significantly between the elite Swedish and US newspapers.

Our initial exploratory study examined one elite newspaper per country – *The New York Times* in the USA and *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden – and found significant differences in the framing of the war. The results showed that the elite US newspaper was more likely to employ military conflict and prognostic frames than its Swedish counterpart. In contrast, the elite Swedish newspaper used the responsibility for the war and anti-war protest frames more frequently than the US paper. The first study was limited, however, because it included only one newspaper in each country. Therefore, that study could not answer the question of whether the influence of the national political environment was consistent for other print media. The only way to test the linkage between national political context and war news coverage is to examine whether the differences between countries are greater than the differences between newspapers within countries. Building on our earlier findings, we wanted to examine whether the differences in media frames would hold true if we extended the number of newspapers per country. The current study also allows us to examine the relationship between dominant political environment and national media framing. Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: In their coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, elite Swedish newspapers will use responsibility for the war and anti-war protest frames more frequently than elite US newspapers.

Hypothesis 4: In their coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, elite US newspapers will use the military conflict and prognostic frames more frequently than Swedish elite newspapers.

Methodology

To test the study's predictions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of the elite newspapers in Sweden and the USA. Two national dailies were selected from each country. In the Swedish case, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* were chosen for analysis. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*

were the respective US publications. The four newspapers were selected because they are widely accepted as the elite newspapers in each country and can be considered to be functionally equivalent.

The time frame selected for this study was the *official war period* – 20 March 2003 to 1 May 2003, when the US President announced the end of major military operations in Iraq. Thus, our analysis provides a baseline for future framing studies of the war as the military conflict continued and the views of the political elite shifted.

The unit of analysis was the individual news article. The selection of news stories was performed using online databases that archive articles from the national media. The LexisNexis database was used to retrieve the US news articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Similar databases, Presstext and Mediearkivet, were utilized to collect the articles from *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*.

We were interested in retrieving articles that dealt primarily with the war. Therefore, searches in both databases used the following key words: 'Iraq' and 'war'. An article was selected from the database if both key words appeared in the headline, abstract, or lead paragraph of the article. These key terms ensured that the major focus of the story would be the war. Only news articles were selected for analysis. Editorials, opinion pieces and correction notes were excluded, as were articles shorter than 160 words. Based on these criteria, we retrieved a total of 172 articles from *Dagens Nyheter* and 184 articles from *Svenska Dagbladet*. Due to the large amount of articles retrieved from the US newspapers, every sixth article was selected in order to make the number of articles from both countries comparable. As a result, a total of 236 articles from *The New York Times* and 154 articles from *The Washington Post* were included for analysis. Thus, a total of 390 news articles from the elite US newspapers and 356 from the elite Swedish newspapers form the basis for this study.

Several war-specific frames were developed based on prior studies and initial reading of the Iraq War news articles. Following Entman's definition, we conceptualized frames as salient textual cues that perform at least one of the following four frame functions: 1) promote a particular problem definition; 2) suggest a particular causal interpretation; 3) provide a particular moral evaluation; or 4) offer a particular treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). The frames were operationalized based on Tankard's guidelines (2001) about most common framing mechanisms used: headlines, subheads, leads, quotes, statistics and charts, and concluding paragraphs. Frames were detected if salient words, phrases, metaphors, thematic structures, or other framing devices (Pan and Kosicki, 1993) were used in the text of the news article, with

more prominent placement (e.g. headlines, lead paragraphs, pull-out quotes) carrying heavier weight.

The war frames relevant to this investigation were: 1) military conflict frame (emphasis is on the military conflict or military action, Coalition or Iraqi troops, military equipment and strategy); 2) responsibility frame (emphasis is on the party/person responsible for the event); 3) anti-war protest (emphasis is on existing opposition to the war, with war protestors or demonstrations against the war either in the United States, Sweden, or abroad); and 4) prognostic frame (emphasis is on broader discussion of the possible consequences of the event). The prognostic frame, for example, could be manifested by political, economic, or social consequences in the news story; it could involve discussion of the political consequences of the event (i.e. promoting a particular outcome of the event such as free and democratic elections in Iraq); the news story could also emphasize the desirability of an ethnically representative future Iraqi government (i.e. providing a moral evaluation); it could discuss the need for economic rebuilding of Iraq after the war and the methods to achieve that (i.e. treatment recommendation). The two coders were presented with specific examples of each frame during training.

Each frame was coded as a nominal variable on a presence/absence basis per news article. It was possible to have more than one frame about the Iraq War in the same article. Multiple frames within an article were treated equally. For example, if the article emphasized responsibility issues but also discussed anti-war protest, the coding scheme allowed capturing the salience of each frame. To capture prominence, the coders also determined which was the dominant frame in the news article.

Two coders were trained independently on the coding instrument. An online coding sheet was made available to both coders to facilitate the coding process from different countries. The initial training required revision of some of the variables and adding more categories to other variables. After careful revision of all definitions, one coder (native speaker) coded the Swedish sample while another coder was responsible for coding the US sample. Ten per cent of the US articles were randomly selected to measure intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability was calculated using simple agreement (Holsti's formula)¹ and established at .89 for all categories, ranging from .72 to 1.² For linguistic reasons, the intercoder check was conducted only on the English-language content. However, special precautions in the translation of the coding categories into Swedish were taken to ensure the validity of this cross-cultural content analysis (Peter and Lauf, 2002).

The other coding categories included article ID number, date of publication, publication name and specific mentions of political leaders, groups

or countries in the news coverage. In addition, type of sources cited (government official, military personnel, journalist, individual and terrorist group member) was also recorded.³ The categories for sources were not mutually exclusive and were coded on a yes/no basis per article. We were also interested in the tone of the war coverage. Following earlier studies (Dimitrova et al., 2005: 30), dominant story tone was defined as pro-war (positive toward the US position on the war); anti-war (negative toward the US position on the war); or neutral/mixed (neither clearly supportive of the war nor opposing the war).⁴

Our content analysis is limited by the selection of media outlets: we examined only the elite press in each country. While the elite newspapers are not representative of the media as a whole, they can provide an informative look at the 'prestigious' national press. Arguably, the elite newspapers also influence other news organizations and the policy makers in each country. However, we cannot draw any conclusions about the framing of the war in the tabloid or local/regional press.

Results

Following the procedures outlined previously, a total of 746 articles from the elite newspapers in Sweden and the USA were analyzed. To test Hypothesis 1, that the tone of coverage in the Swedish papers would be more negative than the tone of coverage in US papers, each article was coded for dominant tone: positive, negative, or neutral/mixed. The chi-square test shows support for Hypothesis 1 (chi-square = 28.13, $p = .000$, d.f. = 2). The elite US newspapers contained 43 positive stories (11%), which was more than the 8 (2.2%) contained by Swedish newspapers. As expected, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* also printed more negative stories (45, or 12.6%) than *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, both of which contained a total of 26 (6.7%) negative stories. It should be noted, however, that both countries' elite newspapers had predominantly neutral/mixed stories: 303 (85.1%) in the Swedish and 321 (82.3%) in the US case. Despite the statistical difference, most articles in both countries remained balanced.

The next set of comparisons examined the use of official sources (defined here as government and military sources) by the elite press in both countries. Hypothesis 2 stated that the elite US newspapers would be more likely to cite official sources than their Swedish counterparts. This hypothesis was supported for both government sources (chi-square = 15.59, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1) and military sources (chi-square = 85.79, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1). *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* relied more frequently on official government (44.4%) and military (45.6%) sources than the Swedish newspapers, where

the respective frequencies were 30.8 per cent and 14.3 per cent. This finding may be related to the fact that, in contrast with Sweden, the US military was heavily involved in the conflict.

Differences in the framing of the war were expected to reflect the political environment in both countries. Therefore, the third hypothesis predicted that responsibility and anti-war frames would be more common in the Swedish coverage than in the US coverage. To test Hypothesis 3, chi-square tests compared the use of responsibility frame (chi-square = 99.16, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1) and anti-war protest frame (chi-square = 18.70, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1). The differences between the Swedish and US media were statistically significant for both frames (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the military conflict and prognostic frames would be more common in the USA than in the Swedish war coverage. While the hypothesis was strongly supported for the military conflict frame (chi-square = 15.44, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1), it was not supported for the prognostic

Table 1 Sources cited in Swedish and US news articles

Type of source	Swedish articles $n = 356$ (%)	US articles $n = 390$ (%)	All articles $N = 746$ (%)
Government representative***	108 (30.8)	173 (44.4)	281 (37.7)
Military personnel***	51 (14.3)	178 (45.6)	229 (30.7)
Journalist	22 (6.2)	39 (10.0)	61 (8.2)
Terrorist group member ^a	3 (0.8)	0	3 (0.4)

Notes: Numbers in table represent actual count of articles that include the respective sources, with percentages in parentheses. Categories are not mutually exclusive so column totals should not equal 100

*** indicates statistically significant differences between Swedish and US articles at the .001 level, using chi-square tests

^a Chi-square could not be calculated due to the low number of observations

Table 2 War frames in Swedish and US news articles

Frame	Swedish articles $n = 356$ (%)	US articles $n = 390$ (%)	All articles $N = 746$ (%)
Responsibility frame***	100 (28.1)	9 (2.3)	109 (14.6)
Anti-war protest***	65 (18.3)	30 (7.7)	95 (12.7)
Military conflict***	94 (26.4)	156 (40)	250 (33.5)
Prognostic frame	115 (32.3)	152 (39)	267 (35.8)

Notes: Numbers in table represent actual count of articles that include the respective frames, with percentage of frames in parentheses

*** indicates statistically significant differences between Swedish and US articles at the .001 level, using chi-square tests

frame (chi-square = 3.60, $p = .058$, d.f. = 1), but approached statistical significance (see Table 2). It seems that all four newspapers dedicated similar amounts of space to discussion about the outcomes of the Iraq War early in the conflict, even though the specifics of the prognostic frame may have been different. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is partially supported.

We also examined whether any framing differences existed between the two elite papers in each country. As Table 3 indicates, *Dagens Nyheter* used the anti-war protest frame more frequently than the other elite Swedish paper. These differences were statistically significant (chi-square = 5.57, $p = .018$, d.f. = 1). On the other hand, the prognostic frame was significantly more common in *Svenska Dagbladet* (chi-square = 8.12, $p = .004$, d.f. = 1). There were no significant differences between the two Swedish newspapers across the military conflict and responsibility frames. The only statistically significant difference between the two elite US newspapers was found in the frequency of use of the anti-war protest frame (chi-square = 7.73, $p = .005$, d.f. = 1). The results show that the anti-war protest frame was employed more often by *The Washington Post* than is *The New York Times* (see Table 4).

Table 3 Framing differences between Swedish newspapers

Frame	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> $n = 172$ (%)	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> $n = 184$ (%)
Responsibility frame	55 (32.0)	45 (24.5)
Anti-war protest**	40 (23.3)	25 (13.6)
Military conflict	39 (22.7)	55 (29.9)
Prognostic frame***	43 (25.0)	72 (39.1)

Notes: Numbers in table represent actual count of articles that include the respective frames, with percentage of frames in parentheses

** , *** indicate statistically significant differences at the .01 and .001 levels respectively, using chi-square tests

Table 4 Framing differences between US newspapers

Frame	<i>New York Times</i> $n = 236$ (%)	<i>Washington Post</i> $n = 154$ (%)
Responsibility frame ^a	2 (0.8)	7 (4.5)
Anti-war protest***	11 (4.7)	19 (12.3)
Military conflict	101 (42.8)	55 (35.7)
Prognostic frame	86 (36.4)	66 (42.9)

Notes: Numbers in table represent actual count of articles that include the respective frames, with percentage of frames in parentheses.

*** indicates statistically significant difference at the .001 level, using chi-square tests

^a Chi-square could not be calculated due to the low number of observations

Discussion

The results presented here generally support our expectations rooted in framing theory that national foreign policy would be reflected in the war coverage. The significant differences in how the elite Swedish and US newspapers framed the 2003 Iraq War correspond to the dominant political environment in Sweden and the USA during the official war period. Even though we cannot test its influence directly, the results indicate that the voices of the national political elites may have contributed to differences in the tone of coverage between the two countries. Swedish foreign policy was clearly anti-war. Both opinion polls and political parties in Sweden expressed mostly negative views toward the war. The finding that the elite newspapers in Sweden contained more negative coverage of the war compared with the elite newspapers in the USA is likely to be reflective of the political opposition and support of the war in each country.

The overall political environment also provides a plausible explanation for the relatively rare coverage of anti-war protest and responsibility frames in the elite US newspapers. Since the President is commander-in-chief, there is a tradition of rallying behind the President during times of war. To criticize the official foreign policy or the war while military action is still going on is likely to be viewed as unpatriotic and unsupportive of the US troops. Thus, after a war has begun, the issue tends to move into the 'sphere of consensus' (Hallin, 1986). When the country is at war, critical and investigative journalism can, and often is, interpreted as not being supportive of the troops on the ground and the national political elites can often successfully argue that such reporting is unpatriotic. Thus, as noted by Japanese journalist Kuroiwa Ruiko, 'Newspapers should be anti-government during peace time, and chauvinistic during war time' (Wolfsfeld, 2004: 42).

It is important to look back at the historical context of our study. In early 2003, the US public opinion was clearly supportive of the war in Iraq and of the President's policies. By 2008, both political rhetoric and public opinion had changed while the military conflict still continues. Media framing is likely to have changed as well. The Iraq issue has also been politicized since the official war period in 2003, partly driven by and partly driving the shift in public opinion.

Some of the differences in war framing that we found can be explained by the heavy reliance on official sources. The US news coverage exhibited heavier reliance on official government and military sources than the Swedish coverage, which is related to the fact that the US government and military were involved in the war whereas their Swedish counterparts were not. As a result, the war reporting in the elite American newspapers

closely followed the official government line. This may lead to unintended consequences: namely, providing 'the administration with an opportunity to define the crisis on its own terms' (Bennett and Manheim, 1993: 335), as was the case in the Persian Gulf conflict. This is perhaps another reason why the anti-war protest and responsibility frames were rarely present in the US war coverage at the time. In retrospect, the US media failed to perform their watchdog function in 2003 but may be overcompensating by bringing up responsibility issues for the impact of the war on post-war Iraq today.

It seems that it becomes difficult for the media to act as watchdogs against the government and the military establishment when there is widespread support for war. When this is combined with efforts by the government to influence the news framing of the war, the result is likely to be war reporting that is highly constrained by the interpretations of national political interest.

This study provides support for the linkages between national political environment and news framing of war. Such linkages advance our knowledge of media framing in a cross-cultural context. Thus, our findings lend support to prior framing research about the macro-level factors that impact media framing. The results also suggest that heavy reliance on official sources impacts news coverage of war and amplifies the views of the government elite, a finding consistent with recent research on the 'war on terrorism' (Norris et al., 2003) and the Persian Gulf conflict (Bennett and Manheim, 1993) when all too often media cues followed government cues.

Conclusions

This study found significant differences in tone, war framing and use of sources in the coverage of the official period of the 2003 Iraq War between the elite Swedish and US newspapers. The possible consequences of such differences are that news media may reinforce or even increase divisions among world opinion about the war. More generally, war reporting may constrain audience interpretations and limit public debate by highlighting only certain aspects of war reality (e.g. military conflict) and by ignoring other aspects (e.g. anti-war protest). Such media framing may further engender different interpretations by national audiences. As a result, the public in one country may acquire different knowledge and attitudes toward the event when compared with the public in another country exposed to different media coverage.

Prior framing studies have shown that media frames affect audience frames (e.g. Pfau et al., 2004). The national news media may affect public

attitudes towards war and imply national consensus on issues by not offering opposing views. In theoretical terms, such one-sided coverage might function as 'consensus heuristic', which means that information regarding a certain issue may function as a clue to which viewpoints are valid or acceptable (Mutz, 1998). In this process, the media might trigger a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), deliberately or not.

Theoretically, the differences in war framing in the elite newspapers in Sweden and the USA also support the notion of 'contextual objectivity' (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003: 54) – objectivity that exists within a certain socio-political environment and is sensitive to the context in which journalists operate. If that is indeed the case, the whole premise of universal journalistic objectivity is undermined and becomes unattainable, unless, of course, the external political environment for all media remains the same.

This study is one of the few to compare the coverage of the official period of the 2003 Iraq War in a cross-cultural context. The study examined how the reality of war was constructed for Swedish and American audiences and confirmed that foreign policy constrained war framing. The differences found here underline the importance of the linkage between the political environment and how the media cover politically salient issues such as wars. In order to better understand this linkage future research should compare the media coverage of other issues in Sweden and the USA.

News media play an important role not only in informing the public, but also in impacting public opinion. That role is even more important during times of war. Modern warfare is fought not only with weapons, but also with words aiming to win the 'hearts and minds' of the people. Even though the media strive to achieve independence and balance in their war reporting, they may follow others' leads by relying too heavily on official government and military sources and by framing events in ways that are consistent with the national political environment. The present study shows that, indeed, the elite newspapers in Sweden and the USA framed the war in ways congruent with the national foreign policy and the positions of the political elites in each country.

Notes

- 1 Holsti's intercoder reliability (IR) formula was used as follows: $IR = 2M / (N1 + N2)$, where M equals the number of agreements between the coders, N1 is the total number of coding decisions made by Coder 1 and N2 is the total number of coding decisions made by Coder 2.

- 2 The lowest inter-rater agreement was observed for the category 'individuals as sources'; since this category was not central to the content analysis it was omitted from analysis. Perfect agreement was achieved for several other variables.
- 3 The category for 'journalists as sources' did not distinguish between domestic journalistic and foreign correspondents.
- 4 We coded each article for dominant tone (positive toward the USA position on the war, negative toward the US position on the war, and neutral/mixed – i.e. neither clearly positive or clearly negative toward the US position on the war). Of course, the tone variable can be measured differently. Aday et al. (2005), for example, used a scale variable (with 5 being most supportive and 1 being most negative toward the war) as a measure of bias in news content. However, employing a scale opens up more possibilities for disagreement between coders due to subjective judgment.

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