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The media's effect on presidential approval during the Iraq conflict

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THE MEDIA'S EFFECT ON PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL
DURING THE IRAQ CONFLICT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Ryan Bradley Medders

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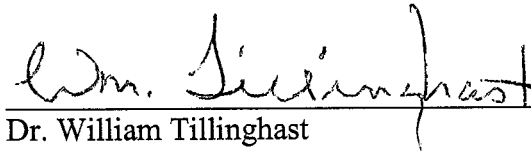
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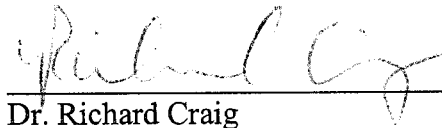
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ABSTRACT

THE MEDIA'S EFFECT ON PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL DURING THE IRAQ CONFLICT

by Ryan Bradley Medders

This thesis addresses the news media's influence on public opinion leading up to, during, and after the Iraq conflict. It examines the agenda-setting, priming, and framing functions of the news media during this period. This study content-analyzed the media's agenda and the public's agenda, as determined by the Gallup Poll, to establish what effect the news media had on public opinion, especially in regard to approval of President George W. Bush. The media's agenda was found to be highly correlated to the public's agenda, especially for the Iraq issue. A descriptive analysis of the news media indicated the media primarily expressed the Iraq story in an episodic frame. A regression analysis of Gallup Poll data also showed the president's job performance approval was boosted by an increase in the public's approval of his handling of the Iraq issue.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents,
Darryl A. Medders and Kathryn J. Medders.

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INTRODUCTION

Public opinion is often a critical element in the governance of a democratic society. It can be used to justify policy shifts or to enhance political power. During times of national crisis, public opinion can be an even more effective tool in a politician's arsenal. But it is also an avenue for the public to communicate with its leadership. It functions as a barometer of the public's appraisal of government action. It also guides political leaders in crafting campaign strategies during election years. By its very nature, public opinion is an ongoing dynamic process that shifts over time as it is measured. Understanding how it coalesces and changes over time is key to correctly interpreting it.

As the war with Iraq heated up between 2002 and 2003, the American public frequently had its pulse taken by every major news organization. Before the beginning of the second war in the Persian Gulf, the country was almost split evenly in its support for military action. Yet soon after President George W. Bush decided to engage Iraq militarily, support for the war, seemingly overnight, began to rise. In the first 10 days of the war, a *New York Times/CBS* poll found that 70% of the American people approved of the president's policy on Iraq, representing a 19-point increase (Nagourney & Elder, 2003). Other polls also indicated that President Bush's job performance approval rating had jumped by about 20 points to 73%, his highest ratings in almost a year (Bush – Job Ratings, n.d.). Just one month prior, a *New York Times/CBS* poll indicated that the president's approval rating had slipped 10 points from January to its lowest level since before the September 11 attacks (Tyler & Elder, 2002).

Several theories of mass communication can be employed to determine what impact, if any, the news media had on the president's shifting job approval. The priming theory, however, suggests that this is the result of intricate interplay between public opinion, the media, and the president. Priming, in this specific context, is the effect that media content has on subsequent behavior or judgments that are related to the primed content (Roskos-Ewoldsen, David, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Beverly, & Carpentier, 2002). Political priming refers to the effect that media coverage of issues has on audiences and public opinion in evaluating political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Closely related to agenda-setting, priming suggests that the salience of an issue in the media, especially on broadcast television and in national newspapers, shifts the weights used by the public to appraise the president's job performance. The more prevalent an issue is in the media, the more easily the issue comes to mind. When asked to evaluate the president's job performance, priming suggests that the public will use criteria that are the easiest to access. The origins of priming are in the academic field of psychology, involving influences in both memory recall and association (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999).

The shift in presidential approval during the Iraqi conflict might reveal further factors that have an impact on priming and consensual public opinion. In these days after September 11, 2001, our society has been maintaining a sort of constant vigilance, ever on the lookout for suspicious people and events. This increased awareness and the president's insistence that Iraq and Saddam Hussein were implicated in the global war on

terror make the Iraqi conflict an exceptional and interesting test case for priming and agenda-setting effects.

This study will test the agenda-setting and priming theory against another real-world situation, the 2003 war in Iraq. By examining news coverage of the Iraqi issue and analyzing public opinion data, this study hopes to answer the following questions: 1) Did the media's agenda coincide with the salience of foreign policy and economic policy among the public?; 2) Did the public's agenda affect its evaluation of President Bush before, during, and after the so-called main combat operations had concluded?; and 3) Did the public's support for the president shift? And, if so, did the public's evaluation of issues affect this shift?

The agenda-setting function of the media was examined by conducting a content-analysis of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN evening news transcripts to reveal the amount of news coverage devoted to Iraq and other national issues between August 2002 and August 2003. The Gallup Poll data addressing the most important issues facing the country was correlated to the coverage about Iraq, terrorism, and the economy. To test the priming theory, Gallup Poll data on overall presidential approval was regressed against the president's performance in handling foreign and economic policy. The results of this study will provide another opportunity to test the priming theory in a real-world situation. In addition, this study utilized the research into agenda-setting and priming effects conducted by Iyengar and Simon (1993) during the Gulf War as a guide whenever possible. It should be noted that, because of the passage of time and the availability of

substantively different data and polls, this will be a partial replication of Iyengar and Simon's 1993 study.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of political priming, in general, relies on mass media to emphasize specific issues to produce salience among the public (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Scheufele, 2000; Kim, Sheufele, & Shanahan, 2002). Priming suggests that individuals use shortcuts or recall information that comes to mind easily to make evaluations of leaders and issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Individuals generally turn to the mass media for their information. This is especially so when they seek information about national politics since they don't usually have direct access to political leaders (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Mass media are also a chief resource for national political information. What issues the media talks about and how frequently the media features those issues have a direct impact on people's evaluation of a political leader (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Therefore, the agenda-setting theory is an important precursor to priming effects.

Agenda-Setting

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study on election coverage of the 1968 presidential campaign broke important ground in agenda-setting research. One of the first studies of its kind, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a strong correlation between the media's agenda and what the voters said were important issues during that campaign. Their research indicated that the prominence given to issues during the campaign by the media was strongly related to what its audience believed to be important in the campaign. This conclusion was judged to be free of individual political bias because the voters' issues reflected a composite of those covered by the mass media. The issues were cited without

regard to the specific candidates in the presidential race, suggesting to McCombs and Shaw (1972) that political preference did not enter into audience selection. In fact, even among those who had already decided on a party or candidate, the issue agendas were more likely to coincide with all the news rather than news just about their party or candidate. Yet the matter was relevant in later questioning how the media's agenda was set.

The role of agenda-setting in the mass media appears to suggest that the media exercise a powerful effect over their audience. In fact, studies show that the agenda-building process is moderated by various factors including journalistic values, real events, issue obtrusiveness, political actors, and even audience feedback (Lang & Lang, 1981; Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993; Wanta & Foote, 1994). Of particular relevance, Wanta and Foote (1994) noted that presidents have varying degrees of control and input in building media agendas.

During President George H. W. Bush's first 80 days in office, he influenced the media's agenda on subjects relating to social issues and international crises. Yet Wanta and Foote (1994) found that the President's agenda typically coincided with the media's, rather than leading it, and suggested that his impact on the news media was limited. They attributed this pattern to reactions to real-world events and the president's effectiveness at "agenda-surfing, simultaneously riding the waves of a story within the original news cycle" (Wanta & Foote, 1994, p. 446). In a similar fashion, Brosius and Keplinger (1990) found that the media responds to the public's agenda as the public simultaneously responds to the media's agenda. In their study of German television and problem

awareness, the public's agenda contained static items year-round while the media introduced several issues over shorter time periods. As the media, in its news judgment, highlighted problems it felt merited attention, the public's awareness of those issues increased and vice versa. Brosius and Kepplinger (1990) noted that the direction of the agenda-building process was dependent on the type of issue.

Yet agenda-setting can have a significant impact on an individual's awareness of issues. Wanta and Hu (1994) noted that an individual's increased perceived credibility of media enhanced one's reliance on it for information. The extent of reliance on the media then leads the individual to increase or decrease exposure to that information source. A subsequent increase in exposure leads the individual to become highly susceptible to agenda-setting effects (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Agenda-setting effects are constrained by perceived credibility, reliance, and degree of exposure (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Watt, Mazza, and Snyder (1993) found that the most unobtrusive issues garnered the largest agenda-setting effects. Those issues that are not prominent in daily life or which lack viable alternative sources of information produce the strongest effects. Therefore, the mass media's greatest impact on the public's agenda is dependent on its ability to provide credible information about issues that are outside the public's general knowledge.

The effects of agenda-setting vary depending on the individual consuming the media. Although agenda-setting was found to be immune from political preferences in the 1970s, it is possible that today's niche media marketplace might have some impact on the general composite agenda proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The media's agenda is not an all-powerful influence on the audience, nor is the media solely

responsible for agenda-building. Nevertheless, agenda-setting can have robust effects especially if the media is perceived to have high credibility, is relied upon often, and features issues that are unobtrusive.

Priming

The classic definition of priming suggested that “by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Agenda-setting, therefore, sets the groundwork for the potential priming effects suggested by Iyengar and Kinder (1987). Studies have determined that an agenda-setting effect must be present for priming to take place (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Effective agenda-setting introduces the salient issues that will later serve as criteria for priming evaluations of political actors. The shift between issues in the media’s agenda may result in individuals changing the standards they use to evaluate political issues and actors.

The Role of Accessibility

The priming theory in mass communication borrows notions of accessibility from the field of psychology (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Most people don’t have the time or the capacity to pay attention to every detail as it’s presented in the news. To compensate for this, psychology researchers suggest that people tend to employ selective attention and take shortcuts in recalling information (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Sherman, Mackie, & Driscoll, 1990; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). Priming in mass communication takes that concept one step further by integrating salience as a result of agenda-setting with

accessibility (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kim et al., 2002). Further research has indicated that primed content activates thoughts and similar information or related schemata through the news media (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Domke, McCoy et al., 1999; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). In one study of passive priming, Sherman, Mackie, and Driscoll (1990) noted that even primed words could activate prime-relevant evaluations.

In a laboratory study analyzing the priming effect on presidential performance, Miller and Krosnick (2000) noted that the accessibility of issues did not mediate the priming effect. By measuring the response time of primed participants, Miller and Krosnick (2000) found that people's evaluations of presidential performance are not based on the issues that come to mind more readily. Instead, they suggested that the national importance of issues, or the media's agenda-setting role, was more responsible for shifts in presidential evaluation. Their results contradict the prevalence of accessibility as a mediator in priming in the fields of psychology, political science, and mass communication.

Political Knowledge, Interest, and Exposure

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) noted robust effects of priming in their laboratory experiments. By manipulating mock television news broadcasts to include stories that favored defense issues or economic concerns, the researchers found immediate shifts in evaluations of presidential performance. Yet they suggested that the strongest effects resulted from repeated, episodic exposure to primed issues. Iyengar and Kinder also noted the importance of attributing responsibility for a given problem to the president. Other mediating factors found included involvement in public life, partisanship, and the

presentation of plausible problems (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). They concluded that priming played an important role in the outcome of elections and in determining presidential power.

Krosnick and Kinder (1990) conducted the first study to investigate the role of priming in evaluating presidential performance outside the laboratory. They examined how public opinion changed for a president at an individual level, exploring a new dimension to the development process of presidential popularity (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Their study centered on a highly controversial event in the 1980s during President Ronald Reagan's administration. In 1986, it was learned that an American envoy was sent to Iran to open a dialogue and to also exchange arms (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). It appeared that arms were being traded for American hostages being held captive in Lebanon, but, in fact, the money raised in the sales was diverted to the Contras who were fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Coverage of the story went from zero lines on the front page of *The New York Times* before the story broke to filling 350 lines just one month after (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Reagan's presidential approval rating fell from 70% to 45% during a three-month period in an *ABC/Washington Post* poll (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

Krosnick and Kinder (1990) found that a citizen's prior view and partisanship played an important variable in determining the media's priming effects (see also Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Those individuals who had supported the president before the revelation bore negligible priming effects. Those who had opposed the president before the revelation were more likely to be primed by the media coverage. Nevertheless,

priming played an important role in the public's evaluation of the president. In fact, Krosnick and Kinder's study found that two-thirds of their participants were affected by media priming. Their findings found that political novices, those who pay little or no attention to politics in the news, were most affected by priming, (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Political experts suffered only abstract effects from priming. These conclusions contradicted earlier research that found equal effects among novices and experts (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Krosnick and Kinder (1990), however, concluded that the less knowledgeable one is about politics, the more susceptible one would be to the effects of agenda-setting and primed issues. Novices would need to rely on the media to fill in the information gaps to enable them to make judgments (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). The implications of this new research for political discourse would be profound. Krosnick and Kinder (1990) claimed that "change over time in popular approval – and thus the waxing and waning of presidential power – may depend on the citizens who know the least" (p. 510).

Yet these early survey findings are in direct conflict with later research into the individual level attributes of priming effects. In particular, political knowledge was found to play an important role in positively mediating an individual's response to primes in laboratory and survey-based studies (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Analysis of the 1991 Persian Gulf Conflict provided Krosnick and Brannon (1993) with especially relevant data that indicated political knowledge, exposure to the news, and interest in the news regulated shifts in presidential approval. Contrary to Krosnick and Kinder's (1990) findings, Krosnick and Brannon

(1993) noted that individuals who were highly knowledgeable about politics, were least exposed to the news media, and expressed a low interest in the war were most likely to be affected by media priming. The difference between the two findings was a result of analyzing political knowledge, interest, and exposure simultaneously as opposed to just knowledge (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). The results of a simultaneous analysis suggested to Krosnick and Brannon (1993) that accessibility and schema was a significant factor in priming.

Successful retrieval of information requires that individuals possess well-ordered cognitive maps. Individuals who can process new information into these maps efficiently, therefore, can also retrieve them efficiently. Krosnick and Brannon (1993) noted that individuals who were highly knowledgeable about politics possessed these efficient cognitive maps. Alternately, those who don't have these maps would not be able to recall the primed issues and stories as easily, thereby diminishing any priming effect. Krosnick and Brannon (1993) also suggested that individuals with low interest and low exposure to the media are more likely to take in the big picture presented (see also Pan & Kosicki, 1997). Those with higher interest and exposure would be expected to absorb peripheral details, to maintain an on-line evaluation, and to constantly update it as new information is processed (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Those maintaining on-line evaluations, therefore, are less impacted by new bits of information. Krosnick and Brannon (1993) concluded that "shifts in presidential popularity and power seem to be driven by citizens who are highly knowledgeable about politics but relatively inattentive to political news" (p. 181).

The Role of Time

The nature of media priming requires that the agenda-setting function of the mass media align specific issues in an individual's awareness as more important than others. Researchers have confirmed that agenda-setting accomplishes this goal by featuring an issue or an issue attribute more frequently than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kim et al., 2002). In the 1991 Persian Gulf conflict, for example, Iyengar and Simon (1993) found that media coverage of the crisis had saturated the media's agenda, receiving more coverage than any other issue during the operation. Similarly the public's attention became focused on the conflict as the most important problem facing the nation (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). In fact, the number of people who saw the conflict as the most important national problem was more than those nominating the economy, deficit, and drug issues combined (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). This hydraulic increase and decreasing pattern is found in both agenda-setting and priming effects (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). Iyengar and Simon's analysis showed a corresponding shift in evaluative criteria of the president both before and during the Gulf War.

Pan and Kosicki (1997) noted that the media's agenda can be dominated by issue regimes. An issue regime is a megastory that largely dominates news coverage and squeezes out other stories in the process (Pan & Kosicki, 1997). An issue regime is the most salient and is also the dominant issue in assessing the most important problem facing the public. Pan and Kosicki argued that issue regimes are often dominated by elite interpretations, or big messages, such as the economy is in a poor condition (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). These big messages produce valences that affect individual processing

of the information. Pan and Kosicki suggested these issue regimes and their correspondent valences impact the presidential evaluations by influencing the direction of public opinion. For instance, elite interpretations of presidential handling of the economy may be the “underlying force that moved people toward either a positive or negative direction of their evaluations” of the president (Pan & Kosicki, 1997, p. 24).

As the issue regime dissipates, however, the priming effect disappears as well (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Goidel, Shields, & Peffley, 1997). Goidel et al. (1997) found that, although priming effects are intense, they are only short-term. After the Gulf War coverage subsided, the issue of the economy quickly rose to become the next issue regime (Pan & Kosicki, 1997). The president’s job performance was equally affected by the issue regime’s shift since the public’s evaluative criteria had shifted to economic concerns (Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Goidel et al., 1997). Therefore, the priming effect of the media is a temporary condition. Determined by issue regimes that suppress other issues in a hydraulic effect, the primary message delivered by the media is transitory and situational, relying heavily on context (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997; Goidel et al., 1997). Yet some research has indicated that the priming effect can be extended beyond its natural lifetime.

Allen, O’Laughlin, Jasperson, and Sullivan (1994) suggested that priming was a tool used to create a spiral of silence, or a suppression of dissent based on perceptions of overwhelming support for the president in the first Gulf War. Specifically they took note of the language of war, or jargon, used on CNN and NBC during the conflict. By framing the war in sanitized terms and along technological lines, the media primed

evaluations of the military in episodic frames by displacing political or moral concerns of the war (Allen et al., 1994; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). They argued that, although the initial boost in the president's approval ratings was the result of media priming, the high ratings were sustained by a spiral of silence (Allen et al., 1994). The authors noted that a combination of priming, framing, and the spiral of silence theories better explain the sustained, consensual support the president received after military action began in the Gulf War (Allen et al., 1994).

The Role of Interpersonal Communication and Trust

Priming does not take place in a vacuum. The media are but only one conduit that may affect the public's assessment of important issues. Even the media, itself, is made up of multiple channels, each with its own set of values and agendas. For instance, in addition to news content, other media forms have demonstrated an ability to register priming effects. The television show, *The West Wing*, about a fictional White House was shown to have primed positive evaluations of both Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and enhanced confidence in the government (Holbert et al., 2003). The positive portrayal of the fictional president in the television show encouraged similar evaluations of his real-life counterparts.

Certain non-media channels of communication, however, are more intrusive on the priming effect than others. Interpersonal communication is an important external mediator of the priming effect (Mendelsohn, 1996). Interpersonal communication has the ability to either enhance or dilute the agenda-setting effects for salient issues (Wanta & Hu, 1992). By increasing the salience of non-media issues, interpersonal communication

can decrease the perceived importance of the media's agenda (Wanta & Hu, 1992). An increase in non-media issues can also result in the appearance of new salient issues in an individual's agenda, which might affect primed evaluations. Mendelsohn (1996) found that voter evaluation of candidates in a 1988 Canadian election was primed by the media to concentrate on issues of character. Yet those individuals who engaged in political discussions were primed to focus on the Free Trade Agreement, which was under consideration at the time (Mendelsohn, 1996). Interpersonal communication can act as a buffer in electoral politics that increasingly focus on candidates and their character, rather than issues (Mendelsohn, 1996).

Miller and Krosnick (2000) suggested that trust in the media is another important moderator of the priming effect. If the function of agenda-setting relies on credibility, reliance, and exposure (Wanta & Hu, 1994), then it makes sense that trust in the media source will moderate the priming effect (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Studies show that this proposed relationship is accurate and central to the priming of presidential evaluations (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; McGraw & Ling, 2003). As Miller and Krosnick (2000) stated:

Our evidence that trust does play a moderating role suggests that we should instead characterize the process of priming as similar to persuasion, whereby some citizens choose to use the information they glean from media coverage as long as they trust its source. (p. 312)

Overview

Current research has demonstrated that priming clearly plays a role in shifting public opinion in determining presidential approval. The agenda-setting function of the

mass media serves to promote issue salience among the public, bringing specific issues to their attention. Those salient issues are generally used as the most available criteria to evaluate presidential performance. Priming can be moderated by political knowledge, interest, and exposure to the media. However, to what degree each aspect plays a role in the individual-level priming process has been under some debate. Priming is sensitive to time and generally exerts a short-term influence on evaluations. Specifically, priming of an issue is most effective during an issue regime when the big message invariably suppresses other evaluative criteria. Interpersonal communication, in the form of political debate, can enhance or dilute the media's agenda-setting and priming effects.

Priming research in mass communication is a fairly recent theoretical domain. Developed in the 1980s by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), priming relies on agenda-setting to produce effects and borrows notions of accessibility from cognitive psychology as explanation. Perhaps its relative youth is why current research leaves many individual-level questions left unanswered. Specifically, the questions of how political knowledge, issue interest, and exposure to the media moderate priming effects have not been answered with convincing or satisfying data (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Accessibility is a key theoretical feature of priming. Yet the most current media priming research suggests accessibility does not play a significant role in forming evaluations of the president (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Future study to investigate the individual-level effects and the role of accessibility in evaluation would go far in producing a more cogent and unified theory of media priming.

Framing

The origin of framing in the media has its roots in many different fields of academia. Chief among these is the field of sociology, where Goffman (1974) first pioneered the use of frames as a system of symbols through which one can understand or interpret mediated messages. In Goffman's analysis, frames are a convenient short-hand for setting a scene. Using a strip, or "an arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity," (Goffman, 1974, p.10) can add much more information to an exchange. For example, only listening to a short exchange between two people would make deciphering their meaning or intent troublesome. Yet if a strip is invoked to set the scene, such as an employee asking for a raise, then the meaning of the exchange can become greatly enhanced. Specifically, Goffman's strips play a major role in mediated messages where a lack of context can render the depiction of social scenes utterly useless.

Framing in the news media uses these strips to relate stories to the public, to make explaining news events easier. Tuchman wrote that "an occurrence is transformed into an event, and an event is transformed into a news story" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 193). News stories are just occurrences that are imbued with meaning by the act of relating them to an audience. The news media play a role in adding value to otherwise normal occurrences. The act of placing stories in a strip, or a context, enhances the received meaning. As Tuchman (1978) noted, "The news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality, for, as we have seen, the public character of news is an essential feature of news" (p.193).

For the purpose of this study, the type of frame employed by the news media is essential to understanding its significance. Iyengar (1991) argued that the use of certain frames on television news, in particular, has a great impact on the political actors and institutions in a society. Specifically, Iyengar and Simon (1993) identified two frames that are best to explain the content of television news. First, he identified episodic framing. This frame represents coverage that revolves around a concrete event. Episodic framing generally produce good pictures that are better suited to television news. Iyengar and Simon, for instance, found that most episodic frames were represented by single individuals suffering from a public issue such as poverty. Episodic frames can also represent disasters or crime. In essence, however, the episodic frame centers on the event itself. This reporting is also reflective of on the scene reporting that generates spot coverage. However, Iyengar and Simon also identified thematic framing in television news as coverage that attempts to explain or analyze public issues. Often, thematically framed television news reports give background information that utilizes multiple levels of analysis. Television news coverage, Iyengar and Simon (1993) pointed out, frequently employs the episodic frame type because of the visual nature of television.

Theoretical Framework for Study

This proposed study of priming effects on presidential approval during the Iraq War is based on Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) definition of priming. Iyengar and Kinder suggested that the salience of an issue as set by the news media results in a shift in the evaluative criteria when determining presidential approval. In other words, if Iraq policy or economic policy was perceived to be the most important problem facing the United States, then President Bush's overall performance should have been evaluated based on that accessible, and thus weighted, criterion. In addition, McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting function of the mass media will be employed to determine those issues that might be primed in presidential evaluation. Determining the impact of primed issues on presidential evaluation requires both the agenda-setting theory and the priming theory to operate in tandem. The salience of Iraq policy and economic policy and the importance of those issues in national public opinion should correlate to the public's approval of the president's handling of that issue. If those ingredients fail to correlate, then one would have to turn to other theories such as the spiral of silence, the rally around the flag effect, or persuasive effects to understand the president's surge in public approval.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

This study relied on a content analysis of network television evening news and a secondary analysis of polling data available from the Gallup Poll. A content analysis is the most appropriate method of discerning a relationship between the agenda-setting function of the media with the public's agenda. A content analysis should clearly describe the total number of stories dealing with issues such as Iraq, the economy, and terrorism across time. Thus a content analysis will provide evidence of the salience of these issues in the media during the sample period. Furthermore, priming relies on the ease with which an issue comes to mind and how that issue facilitates evaluations. Therefore, agenda setting, which suggests that the most salient issues in the media become the most salient issues in the public's agenda, is an important precursor. The presence of agenda-setting and a shift in the weight assigned to the president's performance on the issue of Iraq or the economy would suggest a basis for priming. Statistical analysis of the Gallup Poll's polling data was used to determine the presence of a priming effect on overall presidential approval by the media. This method has been used in previous real-world tests of agenda-setting and priming such as in Iyengar and Simon's (1993) study of the first Gulf War. In addition, content analysis will be conducted on news stories related to Iraq to determine whether an episodic or a thematic frame dominated network news coverage of Iraq. Finally an analysis of selected stories related to Iraq will provide a context for three analyses.

Agenda-Setting

Data Types

The three major broadcast television networks' and CNN's evening newscasts were chosen to reveal the media's agenda because they will provide the largest possible sample of television viewers. If present, priming and agenda-setting should be more noticeable among media with larger audiences rather than smaller isolated audiences. Transcripts of *ABC World News*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *CNN's NewsNight* were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. The Archive has been recording and summarizing every network evening newscast since 1968. The Archive's transcripts included a summary of each show's segments and its start and end times. Also, the transcripts included the names of the persons involved, the names of the anchors and reporters, and a complete listing of the broadcast's reports. The Gallup Poll's data was gathered from The Gallup Brain website, where all data including actual questionnaires are included. The Gallup Poll's survey data is available only by paid subscription or a 30-day free trial. Specifically, the following questions were used: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" Since the Gallup Poll asked this as an open-ended question, the following response types were collapsed for the purpose of this study: Fear of War and Iraq; Economy, Unemployment, Taxes, Corporate Scandal, Wage Issues; Health, Education, and Welfare; Religion and Morality .

Definition of Categories

News reporting within the sample period was categorized by the prevailing theme and content of television reports. If a story was devoted to one or more established categories, then that story's minutes were equally divided between the respective categories. The following categories were used to code television news stories:

1. Iraq: These stories deal with the United States' and the international community's discussion and actions relating to the issues of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein, domestic, foreign and Iraqi military preparations, and Iraqi politics and economy.
2. Terrorism: These stories deal primarily with general concerns about terrorism as it relates to the United States such as terror alerts, government actions to secure the nation, and federal investigations into terrorist activities at home and abroad. It will also include stories that deal with Al Qaeda and general efforts in the war against terror from the American perspective. For the purpose of this study, stories about anti-terrorism activities inside foreign countries that have no relationship to American efforts will be categorized as International. Also, September 11 remembrances are included in this category.
3. Economy: These stories deal with the economic study and development of the United States. Policy decisions, government actions, stock market performance, business profiles, taxes, unemployment, and general economic trends, forecasts, and reports are included in this category. Corporate scandal

and reform, as well as industry news, will be included. For the purpose of this study, this category will also include international trade that affects the U.S. economy.

4. Health Care and Welfare: These stories deal with the state of medical technology, health insurance, diseases, epidemics, abortion, prescription drugs, nutritional supplements, medical research, welfare, and social security. It also includes reports on government programs, policies, and legislation dealing with health and welfare.
5. Sports: This category will deal exclusively with stories on sports games, leagues, strikes, and scandals.
6. Science and the Environment: This category will deal with reports on space endeavors, technological discoveries, innovations, and computers as well as the environment. For the purpose of this study, all scientific reports related to health and health care will be excluded from this category.
7. Foreign Affairs (Non-Iraq): These stories deal with foreign affairs, international crises, international politics, diplomacy, and actions and conditions in foreign nations. For the purpose of this study, foreign economic news will be considered under this category.
8. Religion: These stories deal with religious organizations and issues both national and international.
9. Politics/Election: These stories deal with local, state, and national politics as well as elections.

10. Crime and Law: These stories deal with crimes, law enforcement, and legal proceedings.
11. Entertainment: These stories deal with the entertainment industry such as film, music, and television. It also includes celebrity news.
12. Natural Disasters: These stories deal with fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes and droughts as well as other natural phenomenon.
13. Other: This category will deal with stories that are not related to the previous 12 categories.

Furthermore, these stories were coded into one of the following three categories:

1. National: These stories will present an American perspective dealing with stories concerning the United States.
2. International: These stories will deal with news occurring overseas that does not primarily deal with the United States.
3. Regional: These stories deal primarily with a regional focus such as a state or local community.

Sample Period

The agenda-setting study will analyze a critical events timeline for stories reported during the 12 months between August 2002 and August 2003. Six critical events of the Iraq conflict and its buildup have been selected to be analyzed. With each critical event date, data was collected 7 days before and after the critical event. The critical events include the following:

1. Vice President Dick Cheney's speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars concerning terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq on August 26, 2002.
2. President George Bush's speech to the United Nations calling for action from the international community in regards to Iraq and weapons of mass destruction on September 12, 2002.
3. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 passed, calling for immediate and complete disarmament of Iraq on November 8, 2002.
4. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations presenting the case for war against Saddam Hussein, listing Iraq's attempts to build or develop weapons of mass destruction on February 5, 2003.
5. President Bush declares major military operations have commenced against Iraq on March 20, 2003.
6. President Bush declares major combat operations over with a Mission Accomplished banner behind him on May 1, 2003.

The critical events in this one-year time period cover the first build-up towards the war with Iraq beginning in August 2002, the commencement of combat operations in March 2003, and the beginning of the occupation in May 2003. These three sub-time periods act as markers to differentiate the coverage and the correlation between agendas and public opinion. This 12-month period should also limit any direct effects that events in 2001, such as the war in Afghanistan or the tragedy of September 11, might have on the data. In addition, analyzing newscasts and public opinion polls within a 12-month

period will also help to define and isolate shifts in the media's agenda. Finally, these critical event time periods represent eight months of aggregated coded data because some events cross over into subsequent months.

In addition, 13 survey dates were used from the Gallup Poll to ascertain what was considered the most important problem facing the country during the 12-month time period. Table 1 includes the dates and surveys that are used in addition to a summary of the previous four weeks' news events.

Table 1
Gallup Poll Dates and Four Week Histories for Agenda-Setting Analysis

Gallup Poll Date	Previous Four Week History
August 5-8, 2002 (N=1,007)	US soldiers shoot at Afghan wedding party. Pennsylvania coal mine flooded and workers rescued. Corporate management abuses decried.
September 5-8, 2002 (N=1,004)	West Nile Virus scare. Flooding in Central Europe. Al Qaeda members are sought. Cheney links weapons of mass destruction and terrorism to Iraq.
October 14-17, 2002 (N=1,003)	President Bush delivers speech to the UN demanding the disarmament of Iraq. Washington DC sniper deaths increase.
November 11-14, 2002 (N=1,000)	Congress authorizes action against Iraq. UN Security Council passes Resolution 1441 threatening Iraq with serious consequences.
December 5-8, 2002 (N=1,002)	UN weapons inspectors return to Iraq first time in four years.
January 13-16, 2003 (N=1,000)	Approximately 200,000 American troops ordered to the Gulf. Bush unveils tax cut plan. North Korea nuclear weapons program discussed.
February 3-6, 2003 (N=1,001)	UN Weapons Inspectors discover undeclared empty chemical warheads and release report critical of Iraq's disarmament. Bush says he is ready to attack Iraq without a UN mandate.
March 3-5, 2003 (N=1,003)	Massive peace demonstrations conducted around the world. Iraq begins destruction of Al Samoud missiles. UN resolution to authorize the use of force against Iraq fails in the Security Council. Shuttle Columbia exploded on return to Earth.
April 7-9, 2003 (N=1,018)	U.S and British forces invade Iraq. Lynch rescued from hospital in Nasiriya. US forces invade Baghdad.
May 5-7, 2003 (N=1,004)	Fighting in Iraq continues and Baghdad falls. Major combat operations are ended. SARS resurges in Asia.
June 12-15, 2003 (N=2,064)	Domestic terrorism alert is raised to Orange. Iraqi reconstruction is debated. Terrorists conduct car bombings in Riyadh. UN lifts Iraqi sanctions. The US and British deny distorting intelligence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.
July 7-9, 2003 (N=1,006)	Combat continues in Iraq against Baathist insurgents and foreign terrorists.
August 4-6, 2003 (N=1,004)	Saddam Hussein's sons die in a fire. U.S. combat deaths reach same number as first Gulf War. U.S. General says insurgents waging a guerrilla campaign.

Description of Analysis

The content analysis of the network newscasts will consist of samples collected based on a text analysis of stories sampled seven days before and after six critical events between 2002 and 2003, taken from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. All stories will be coded under one of the 13 categories listed above and included in the analysis. The unit of measurement for this analysis will be in minutes. The total minutes of each category will be summed and divided by the total number of minutes in that month to determine its proportion of coverage.

Agenda setting requires that the issues reported on in the news influence the public's own agenda. Therefore, this study used a bivariate rank order correlation analysis to distinguish a basic correlation between the Gallup Poll's survey responses and the content analysis of the television networks. The top 10 issues reported by Gallup for each month and the top 10 categories of news coverage will be ranked to verify whether a statistically significant correlation exists between the media's agenda and the public's agenda. News categories used to code the broadcasts of the television networks were collapsed so as to better match the collapsed responses in the Gallup Poll. The following categories were combined in the content analysis: Sports, Entertainment, Natural Disasters, and Other. This study then sought to test the correlation between Iraq coverage and those nominating Iraq as the most important problem facing the nation over time. The study utilized a Spearman correlation analysis of the percentage of minutes devoted to Iraq coverage in the television news media per month and the public's ranking of Iraq

and Fear of War per month. A positive correlation that was statistically significant (p level less than .05) would confirm the presence of agenda setting by the media.

Priming

Data Type

Polling information from the Gallup Poll were used to determine whether the president's approval ratings shifted because of variations in the perception of the president's handling of Iraq and the economy. The Gallup Poll survey data was obtained from the archives of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. This data was made available by the California State University Office of the President. The following questions were used from the Gallup Poll's questionnaires: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?;" "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling ... the situation with Iraq?;" and "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling ... the economy?." Demographic information that includes education, gender, party identification, and race were also collected.

Definition of Categories

The Gallup Poll data were re-coded for the purpose of this study. When describing their attitudes towards Bush, survey respondents who answered "Don't Know" or "Refused to Answer" were excluded from the analysis. Dummy variable categories of "0" and "1" were used to record the answers of approve and disapprove, respectively, so the categorical data could be treated as continuous variables for use in correlation and multiple regression analyses.

The following codes were used to categorize answers to the Gallup Poll's demographic questions:

Education:

- 0. None to Some College
- 1. College graduate

Gender:

- 0. Male
- 1. Female

Race:

- 0. White
- 1. Non-White

Sample Period

The Gallup Poll data was drawn from four time periods in which the questions of job approval, the president's handling of Iraq, and the President's handling of the economy were asked in the same survey. The following poll dates and four week histories are included below:

Table 2
Gallup Poll Dates and Four Week Histories for Priming Analysis

Gallup Poll Date	Previous Four Week History
December 9-10, 2002 (N=1,009)	UN weapons inspectors return to Iraq first time in four years.
January 3-5, 2003 (N=1,000)	North Korea nuclear weapons program is debated. Senator Trent Lott under fire for Strom Thurmond comments.
Jan. 31- Feb. 2, 2003 (N=1,003)	Bush unveils \$674 billion tax cuts. Hussein's regime under international pressure
March 15, 2003 (N=1,007)	Secretary of State Colin Powell makes speech at UN regarding Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. Build up to Iraq war begins.
March 24-25, 2003 (N=1,008)	Iraq invasion begins.
March 29-30, 2003 (N=1,012)	Iraq invasion continues.
April 16, 2003 (N=2,011)	Iraq invasion continues.
July 20, 2003 (N=1,003)	Combat continues. Weapons of mass destruction search continues.
July 25-27, 2003 (N=1,016)	Combat continues. Weapons of mass destruction search continues.
August 25, 2003 (N=1,009)	Hussein's sons killed. California governor recalled. Terrorist attack on UN HQ.

Description of Analysis

This analysis was conducted by regressing the president's Iraq handling and economic policy performance scores (independent variable) against the president's job approval rating (dependent variable). Education level, gender, race, and party identification were used as control variables. Based on Gallup Poll data, this analysis should then show whether the primed content, or rather the media's agenda, increased or decreased the importance respondents placed on the president's overall approval rating. In other words, the analysis should demonstrate whether issue-related presidential performance considerations were primed in evaluating the overall performance of the president as a result of salience in the media.

Framing

Data Type

The study's third analysis used newscasts coded during the same sample period as that of the agenda-setting analysis. Each story about Iraq was coded for its dominant frame during the six critical-events timeline. Transcripts of *ABC World News*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *CNN's NewsNight* were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive to determine the type and frequency of frame used. In addition, a second set of data was used to conduct a textual analysis of selected stories. These stories' full transcripts were drawn from the Lexis-Nexis database available free of charge to San Jose State University students.

Definition of Categories

The following categories were used to code the television news broadcasts that aired between:

1. Episodic Frame: This category of news report primarily concerns coverage on specific events that is generally conducted on the spot.
2. Thematic Frame: This category of news report primarily focuses on political debates, possible consequences of the Iraqi conflict, and historical background. Thematic framing generally relies on multiple levels of analysis inside the reporting.

Description of Analysis

A descriptive analysis was performed to analyze the prevalence of frames used in Iraq-related news stories and was conducted to determine the predominant frame used in reporting on Iraq and the war across the sampled time period. This analysis utilized Iyengar and Simon's (1993) definitions of episodic framing and thematic framing. Iyengar and Simon's 1993 study of the Gulf War utilized National Election Study data that tracked over time the policy preference of its respondents in regards to military action in Kuwait. This policy preference was used to track the effect of episodic and thematic framing of the Iraq issue in the television news media. The National Election Study was unavailable for the new Iraq conflict at the time of this study, and the Gallup Polls obtained lacked a consistent measure of policy preference regarding the situation. Instead, an additional textual analysis of selected stories, two from each of the six sample time periods, are provided as perspective to the agenda-setting and priming results. This

purposive sample of stories was analyzed to illustrate the primary frame, the sourcing, and the stories' context.

Hypotheses:

Specifically, this study considered the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. An increase in the level of media coverage devoted to developments in the Iraq conflict will be associated with an increase in the number of respondents naming Iraq as the most important problem facing the country.

Hypothesis 2. The weight accorded the handling of Iraq in evaluating the president's overall performance will increase during and after major combat operations.

Research Question:

This study also considered the frequency and content of framing utilized by the television network in news stories related to the issue of Iraq.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Agenda Setting

The build-up to the war with Iraq was slow and deliberate. In the beginning of August, 2002, the Iraq issue was not even among the top five issues Americans considered to be the most important problems facing the nation. In fact, August's polling data showed that the issue only garnered concern among 8% of the public. Likewise, the four networks' combined television news coverage of Iraq and the build-up to war constituted only 10% of August's newscasts. Instead Americans were most likely to be concerned about the economy, the threat of terrorism, and the health, education, and welfare of the nation. The economy held almost 30% of the public's concern while nearly 20% were pre-occupied with terrorism.

August 2002 also marked the first official administration speech in laying the groundwork for war with Baghdad. Vice President Dick Cheney spoke at the end of August to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, suggesting a connection between terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq. Subsequent speeches in September and Congressional action on authorization for war in November barely pushed Iraq into a steady fourth place in the public's agenda. Yet the media began heavy coverage of these official actions, and Iraq constituted one quarter of the coverage for the month of September. It was not until January and February that those more aggressive speeches by officials such as U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and an extensive media reporting on the topic eventually made some impact on the public's agenda.

From January until May, the four television news broadcasters devoted significant coverage to the Iraq conflict. ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN saturated the airwaves with coverage of the buildup and execution of the war. Iraq-related stories accounted for 37% of January's coverage, 36% of February's, and culminated in a spectacular 80% of March. After the initial attack on Iraq and the subsequent seizure of Baghdad, news coverage drifted in April and May, from 30% to 27% of total minutes broadcast. The news outlets followed other stories during this time, especially other major news events. In February the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded upon its return flight to Earth. This tragic event garnered 30% of news minutes in the February sample period. Nevertheless the Iraq coverage remained the most reported on story between January and May on the four networks.

Public opinion, as measured by the Gallup Poll, increased its ranking of Iraq- and war-related concerns during this time period. Between November 2002 and January 2003, survey respondents naming Iraq and Fear of War more than doubled. Yet Iraq never managed to surpass the issue cited as the most important problem facing the nation throughout the entire sample period: the economy. Respondents to the Gallup Survey drove Iraq and Fear of War to 23% in January, 25% in February, 22% in March, and 15% in April. By May, however, the Gallup Poll registered a sharp drop down to 8% of respondents citing Iraq as an important problem facing the nation under the economy and health, education, and welfare. This ebb and flow of public opinion concerning Iraq is shown in Figure 1. A rise in media coverage of Iraq in January and February coincided with a rise in the public's concern about Iraq. Surprisingly, however, there is a slow

slump in the public's perception of Iraq as an important issue. Although the economy dropped more precipitously as an important problem between February and March among the survey respondents, it quickly recovered in April. Meanwhile, Iraq continued to decrease as an important public issue through May.

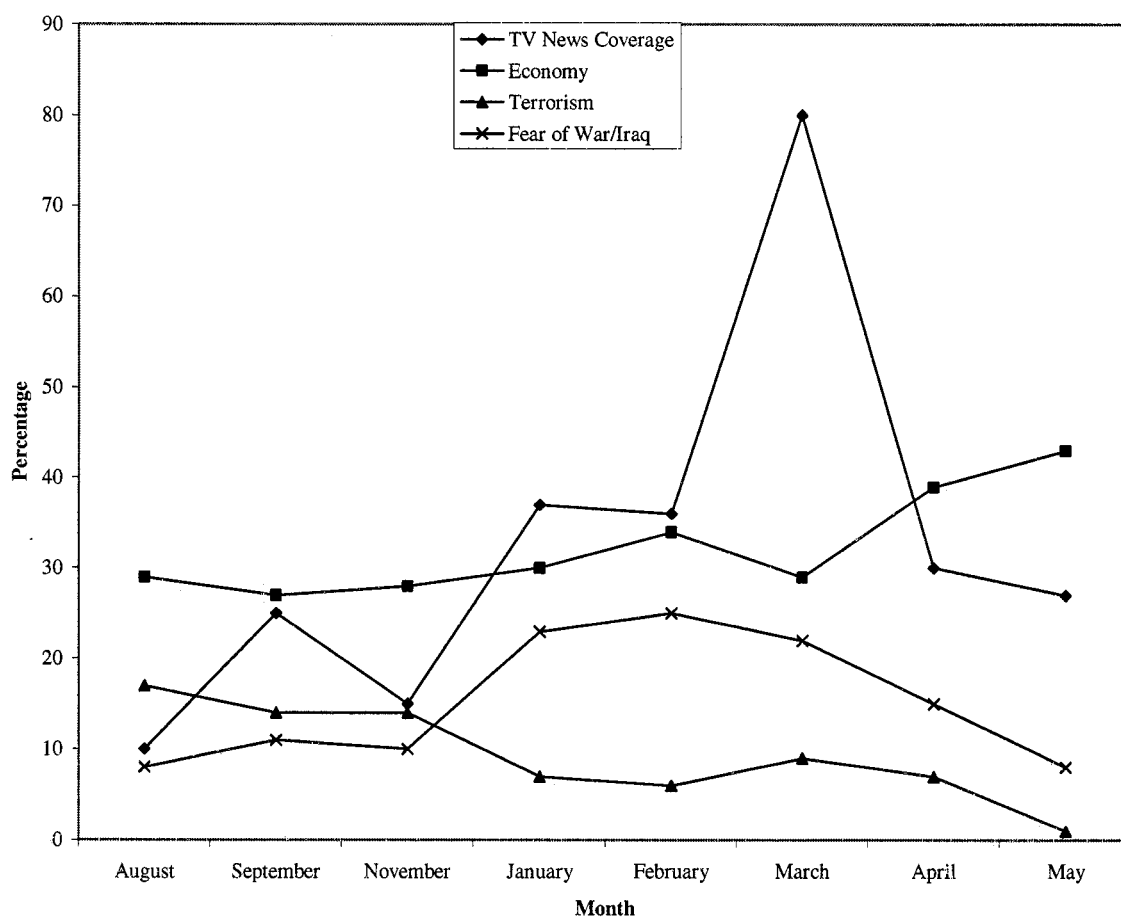


Figure 1. Trends in Iraq-related TV news coverage and most important problem survey. *Source:* The Gallup Poll, provided by the Roper Center Public Opinion Research.

The country's concern about terrorism appeared to take a different path. Less than a year after the attacks of September 11, the nation cited terrorism as the second most important problem facing the nation from August until November. Yet in January there was a dramatic reversal of concern away from terrorism and towards Iraq. Public opinion in January showed that only 7% of the nation considered terrorism to be the most important problem facing the country, in stark contrast to the 17% of August. The hydraulic pattern suggested by Iyengar and Simon (1993) in the Gulf War study of the senior President George Bush appeared to apply to public opinion concerning terrorism and Iraq. However, by April, both issues of terrorism and Iraq begin a sharp decline. This is matched by a similar decline in reporting on terrorism. The four networks devoted 6% of its coverage to terrorism in April and 3% in May.

Although the nation's attention appeared not to have strayed far from the economy, the television coverage of Iraq did increase the public's concern for the conflict as an important problem. The average proportion of coverage devoted to Iraq and the war was significantly correlated with the public's agenda. A two-tailed Spearman rho correlation test showed that the media's coverage of Iraq was positively correlated ($r = .80$). This strong correlation affirms Hypothesis 1. As coverage of the Iraq conflict increased, the number of respondents citing Iraq as the nation's most important problem also increased.

Table 3
Rank Order Correlation of Media Agenda and Public Agenda

	r_s	p level
August 2002	.73	.02
September 2002	.77	.01
November 2002	.41	.24
January 2003	.55	.10
February 2003	.32	.37
March 2003	.52	.12
April 2003	.62	.06
May 2003	.63	.05

Source: The Gallup Poll, provided by the Roper Center Public Opinion Research.

Note. Entries are Spearman correlations and significance levels for a two-tailed test. Bold entries are statistically significant.

However, the overall ability of the media to influence the public's agenda is less clear in this study. A Spearman correlation of the media's general agenda and the public's agenda per month revealed a disparity between the two agendas during 63% of the sample period. The data in Table 1 showed a statistically significant correlation for only three months of the sample time period. Specifically, the public and media agendas in August ($r = .73$) and September of 2002 ($r = .77$) and May of 2003 ($r = .63$) were positively correlated. This might be explained by the emergence of special, discrete news events during the uncorrelated months that significantly skewed the make-up of the news.

For example, there was a midterm election in November 2002 that coincided with an increase in coverage of politics in the media. That month's political coverage topped all other categories of news, including terrorism and Iraq, in average proportion of

minutes. In total, politics represented 23% of the media's agenda in November even though the actual election was held on November 5. The Gallup Poll surveyed the public between November 11 and November 14, 2002, nearly a week after the election was well over. Yet in the Gallup Poll, only 5% of the participants cited politics and elections as the most important problem facing the nation in November, putting it in eighth place.

In February 2003, media coverage of Iraq constituted 36% of the newscast, making it the leading category of news for the month. However, the *Columbia* tragedy struck that month as well, prompting all four broadcasters to devote significant coverage to the event. The *Columbia* story and other related science reports made up 30% of the newscast for February. Neither the safety of the shuttle fleet nor concern for the future of the space program was given much notice in the Gallup Poll's most important problem survey. The collapsed category of science and the environment consistently ranked last during all eight months that were sampled. In fact, the issues relating to science, space, and the environment garnered 1% in February, 0% in March, and 1% in both April and May.

One possible reason for this disproportionate response in public opinion is the very nature of discrete news events that dominate the media's agenda for relatively short periods of time (Wanta & Hu, 1994; Iyengar & Simon, 1987). Unlike the Iraq coverage which persisted at varying levels across the sample period in the media's agenda, these discrete news events last for shorter periods of time. In the case of the November election, political news maintained a lowly position in the media's agenda with only 4% and 3% of coverage for both August and September, respectively. The election shifted

attention into a higher gear for only November. Likewise, the media coverage for the space program and science in general varied between 0%-1% in January and March. The exception was the accident coverage in February. Therefore discrete events lack the repeated exposure necessary to filter into the public's own agenda. This is true especially for discrete events that are unobtrusive, as the public has little interaction with such issues and would perhaps be more influenced by a sustained exposure to them (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993).

It should also be noted that the economy plays an unusual role in agenda setting studies. As can be seen in Figure 1, concern over the economy was the leading problem of every polling date. It has been established that obtrusive issues, those matters that individuals have direct contact with on a regular basis, are less susceptible to the effects of agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Wanta & Hu, 1994). The economy is such an obtrusive issue. Furthermore, the data suggested that public concern about the economy remained high throughout the sample period; in fact it never once relinquished its hold as the number one problem facing the nation. The effects of corporate corruption, a recession, and the terrorist attacks in 2001 were still being discussed in the news. Fears of a worsening or barely recovering economy might have kept this concern front and center.

Priming

The agenda setting that was established for the Iraq issue in this study cleared the way for testing whether the news media might have primed the public's approval or disapproval of President George W. Bush's job performance. The second hypothesis

states that as the media increased coverage of Iraq and the public became more concerned with the developing situation in that country, the public would use it as a basis to change its opinion of the president. The weight afforded the public's opinion of the president's handling of Iraq, therefore, would alter the basis of its overall approval of the president's handling of his job.

The president's job approval numbers moved throughout the sample time period. President Bush began the time period with a 63% job approval rating in December 2002. The public's approval of the President's job performance grew to over 70% during the Iraq war. Yet his job approval ratings later slid down to 57% in July. These data are given in Figure 2. These polling numbers beg the question of what considerations accounted for the dynamic rise and fall of the president's ratings. The president's handling of the economy and his handling of Iraq are both important factors that could explain this shift. Furthermore, these performance ratings have shown to prime the president's overall job approval in the past (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). The second part of this study then attempted to tease out the influence of the economy and the Iraq issue on the president's overall approval.

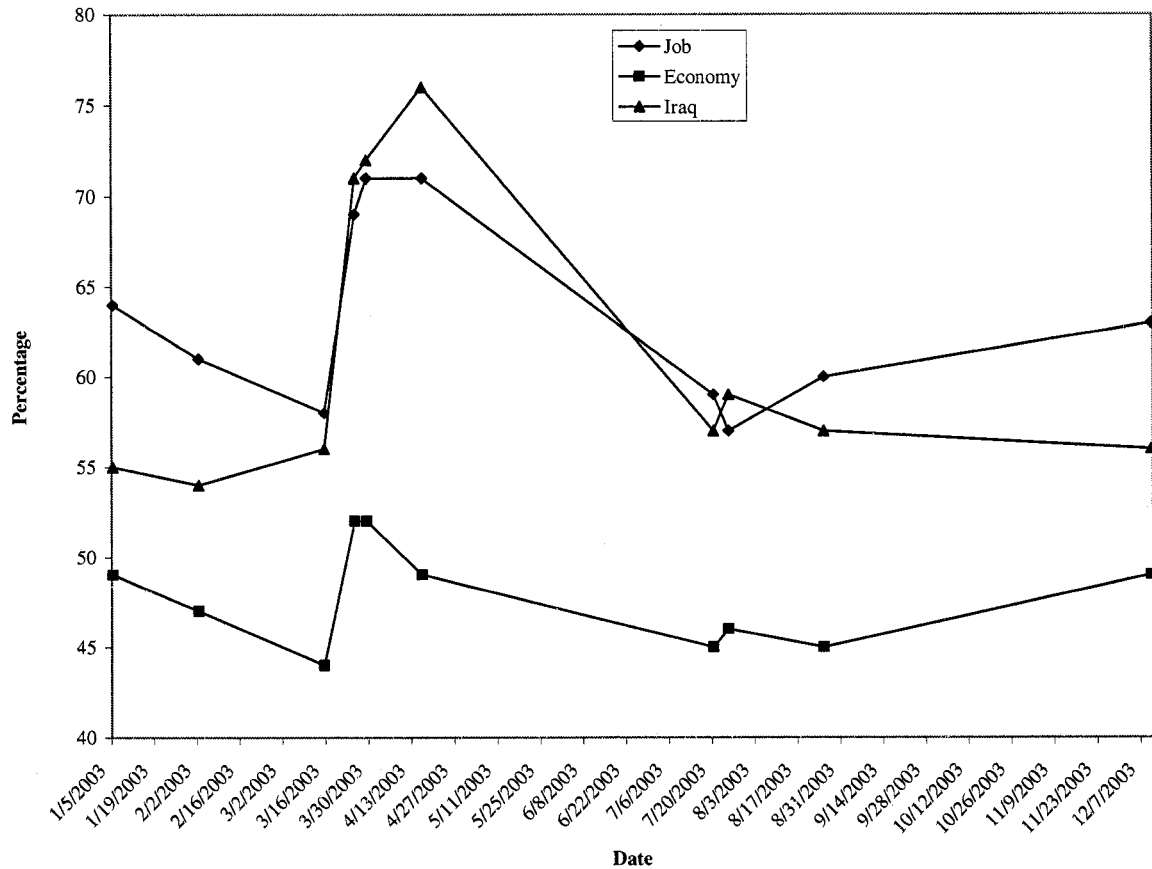


Figure 2. Approval ratings for President Bush.

Source: The Gallup Poll, provided by the Roper Center Public Opinion Research.

This analysis used Gallup Poll data from the archives of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, courtesy of the California State University Office of the President. An analysis was run on 10 dates ranging from December 10, 2002, to August 25, 2003, to establish the determinants of President Bush's job approval ratings. The priming theory suggests that the public will place greater weight on the president's handling of Iraq when constructing an overall impression of George W. Bush. The analysis confirms the priming theory.

Table 4 demonstrates that the President's approval ratings for each month were increasingly weighted by increases in Americans' approval of his handling of the Iraq issue. This data confirms the study's second hypothesis. As the Iraq war escalated, the public increased its approval of the president's overall performance as a result of similar increases in his Iraq performance.

A hydraulic effect is also seen in Table 2 as the conflict with Iraq moved forward. Similar to the agenda setting results, the hydraulic pattern saw the weight assigned to Iraq increase while diminishing another indicator. Specifically, the weight attached to his handling of the economy steadily decreased throughout this time period as the Iraq performance score increased. Although economic policy considerations played a statistically significant role in determining the president's job performance, the Iraq issue came to dominate the public's appraisal of him. Yet, with the exception of March 25, 2003, the president's handling of Iraq clearly diminished the impact economic policy considerations might otherwise have made. This trend continued through August 26, 2003, demonstrating the Iraqi performance measure's resilience. The president's job approval score went from 58% in March to 71% in April in part because of the good scores the president received on his handling of the situation with Iraq.

Framing

Although an appropriate measure could not be found in the Gallup Poll data to test a framing hypothesis, this study included a descriptive and textual analysis of the type of frame used in the television networks' Iraq coverage. It is hoped that this descriptive and textual analysis will bolster the understanding of the context in which Americans received news about Iraq. Framing is an important companion to the agenda setting and priming theories, as it adds more information to the exchange (Goffman, 1974).

Stories about Iraq were coded either as having an episodic frame or a thematic frame. The following definitions are used from Iyengar and Simon's (1993) study of the

first Gulf War. An episodic frame is the category of news report primarily concerning coverage of specific events that is generally conducted on the spot. Thematic frames primarily focus on political debates, consequences of action, and historical background. Thematic framing also generally relies on multiple levels of analysis.

Between August 2002 and May 2003, episodic frames accounted for 81% of all Iraq coverage. Thematic framing only accounted for 19% of Iraq coverage. This finding is not very surprising considering that television news, which generally requires compelling images, is more likely to rely on events to generate news (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Figure 3 shows the frequencies of both frames over the eight month time period.

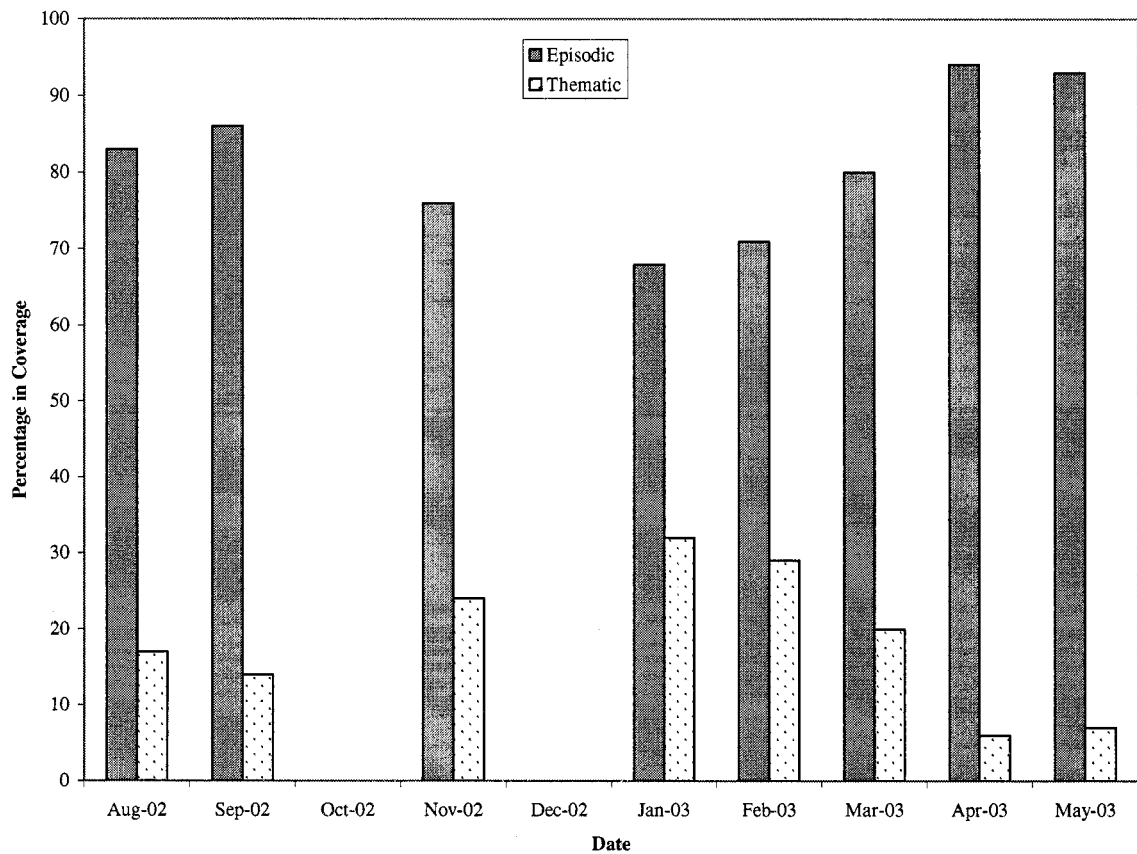


Figure 3. Episodic and thematic trends in Iraq TV news coverage.

Episodic frames peaked in April as the U.S. military secured Iraq's cities and began dealing with a violent insurgency. Thematic framing, however, peaked in January and February as the justifications and preparations for going to war hit its crescendo. As the United States administration increased its threats, television journalists began to report on the historical, political, and economic impact of war. Yet thematic frames still

accounted for only 29% - 32% of coverage in the January and February sample time periods. In contrast, broadcasters used an episodic frame for 94% of April's Iraq coverage. This frequency was to be expected as it is generally believed the nature of television news lends itself to episodic framing of news events rather than lengthier thematic framing (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

In August of 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney addressed the Veterans for Foreign Wars claiming that Iraq's Saddam Hussein then possessed weapons of mass destruction (Cochran, 2002). Without offering proof, the Vice President remarked that he had no doubt that Iraqi weapons were being gathered to attack America and its friends. ABC's World News with Peter Jennings broadcast this story on August 26, the day of Cheney's speech. The report pulled three quotes from the vice president and offered no counterpoint or fact-checking. The episodic frame was obvious in its on-the-spot reporting and reliance on official statements. ABC's straight episodic take on the event was tempered by CNN's thematic framing of the speech two days later. CNN's NewsNight issued one report that investigated what would happen after an invasion of Iraq (Koppel, 2002). Its report analyzed the political ramifications of deposing Hussein and the democratic blueprint that would be required for the liberated country.

Immediately following the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the President delivered a speech to the United Nations. He called upon the body to enforce its Security Council resolutions against Iraq but also promised to work with the United Nations. ABC News again provided an account using an episodic frame. Citing comments from world leaders, ABC News relayed praise from European Union officials and

condemnation from Iraqi ambassadors (Raddatz, 2002). NBC Nightly news, however, included a report on the political and historical background of the Iraqi conflict.

Employing a thematic frame, the report detailed the uneasy alliance between the Kurds of Northern Iraq and the United States (Francis, 2002). The report described the political and military relationship between the two and possible future coordination in the overthrow of Hussein.

CNN similarly engaged a thematic frame in its analysis of the military readiness of American bomber jets (McIntyre, 2002). Providing an overview of the capabilities and historical development of the B-2, the CNN report described how the bomber might be used in Iraq and how it had been used in Afghanistan. The report relied on a single anonymous source to confirm the capabilities of the jet. Using an episodic frame, NBC Nightly News later covered a United Nations resolution demanding the compliance of Iraq with its previous resolutions (Mitchell, 2002). The report mostly relied on quotations of the resolution itself and on several official statements from President Bush. The official vote tally was also stated.

The nature of episodic framing, both its reliance on spot coverage and on official comment, was never clearer than in CNN's coverage of Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations regarding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (King, 2003). One report relied solely on comments given by Powell and President Bush for the entire story. Expressions of certainty, alluded Iraqi connections to terrorism, and suggestions that public opinion was following Bush's lead ruled the report. To better explain Hussein's actions in this conflict, CBS News used a thematic frame to discern the

historical trends of his public actions (Andrews, 2003a). Analyzing his personality and past choices in domestic and international contexts, the CBS News report described a man whose ego and delusions ruled decisions

The pattern of Iraq news coverage was interrupted in March as the war effort built up and was finally initiated. ABC News reported an unsettling announcement by the Secretary of Homeland Security that Iraqi agents were now preparing to engage in terrorist strikes against the United States at home and abroad (Thomas, 2003). The report, using an episodic frame, cited FBI announcements about the threat Iraqi terrorism posed to Americans and the impending arrest of Iraqi sympathizers in the United States. CBS News reported a hybrid frame story the day before the invasion. It recounted a lost pilot in the first Gulf War and the military's determination to find him when the invasion of Iraq would begin (Andrews, 2003b). Blending historical review of the first conflict and of the pilot's mission with official statements from a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the report updated viewers on the continuing saga.

In April and May, episodic frames dominated the news coverage. Two reports by CNN and ABC best characterized the dependence on official sourcing and the event -- based nature of war and occupation. CNN's reported on an ammo dump that was accidentally blown up by American soldiers (Robertson, 2003). The explosion left many Iraqi civilians either dead or injured, and CNN's report centered on the military's explanation for the mistake as well as the Iraqi community's anger and frustration. ABC News delivered a report quoting Pentagon and State Department sources on the discovery

of what appeared to be a biological tractor trailer lab in Iraq (Raddatz, 2003). Citing expert testimony, the report relied solely on official government sources for the report.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This study has confirmed in a real world scenario again that the media help to set the agenda for the public and that the agenda then helps to set the determinants in judging the performance of the president. Specifically, the media's coverage of the Iraq issue helped to shift the criteria upon which the public rated the president. The data for this study suggests that the media play a smaller role than previous studies have found. The agenda setting function of television news and the subsequent priming action of these leading agenda items was relegated to a smaller role and to more specific issues. Specifically Iraq as an unobtrusive issue was more strongly correlated between the media's agenda and the public's agenda. More obtrusive issues, such as the economy, fared much worse. The tests conducted for this study failed to determine any significant correlation for these obtrusive issues in the media and the public. Although this was not the main focus of the study, it was a curious finding that reinforced the requirement that media agenda setting and priming work best with unobtrusive issues (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993).

This study began by asking why the president's job performance ratings improved after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The findings here suggest that the media's agenda setting function shifted the criteria by which the public rated the president. The president's job performance approval was boosted by an increase in the public's approval of his handling of the Iraq issue. Subsequently, the public decreased the weight assigned to the president's handling of the economy in determining his overall job performance.

In addition to the media's agenda setting power, the media also primarily expressed the Iraq story in an episodic frame. The frequency of episodic framing of the Iraq issue and the analysis of these frames suggest that the president was portrayed in an authoritative manner. As most of these stories presented the official comments and actions of the president, the coverage tended to leave George W. Bush in a fairer light. Although this analysis could not be tested statistically, it suggests a possible relationship between the information received by the public and the subsequent judgment in national polls. A more thorough analysis of episodic framing might also reveal more details about the consensus-building processes used by the nation. Further research into this question should be pursued.

An additional finding that should be studied further is the weakness of discrete news events in impacting the public's agenda. Although repeated or long-term exposure to news stories increased the likelihood of the media affecting the public agenda (i.e., Iraq), there are fewer of these types of stories that are followed in the news media today. From missing persons to accidents, the discrete news event is becoming a standard of the television news diet. It is even more evident for the fast-paced 24-hour news cycle of cable television. The impact of discrete news events on the agenda setting function was unclear in this study. Obsessive coverage of these events barely produced any changes in the public's agenda. Future investigation into the effect of discrete news events on agenda setting would greatly enhance the value of the theory, especially as this appears to be a solid trend for the future.

The limitations of this study prevented the exploration of certain key facets of agenda setting and priming. Specifically the role of trust, political knowledge, interest, exposure, and interpersonal communication in shaping the public agenda and developing primed issues is missing. This is a deficiency of conducting secondary analysis of existing polling data. A limitation of conducting a secondary analysis is that the data do not include in-depth questions that would be needed for a media analysis. While access to the Gallup Poll surveys provided a powerful resource, it lacked specific questions that would have shed light on these aspects of media effects.

Another area of concern that resulted from this study is the conflation of issues in the public sphere. From the textual analysis of the framed Iraq stories, it is clear that President George W. Bush and his administration purposively linked the issues of terrorism and Iraq. Whether condemning Iraq for harboring a member of Al Qaeda or charging that Iraqi terrorists threatened domestic security, several stories investigated in the framing analysis and reported on the networks carried an implicit association. All of those stories analyzed that repeated such claims did so using an episodic frame. This official journalism resulted in claims and allegations going unchallenged within the story. These statements were infrequently analyzed during the sample period studied. This can cause not only a methodological concern for researchers but also a more serious attribution concern for the public. Those who cited terrorism as the most important problem facing the nation might have done so out of concern for either Al Qaeda or Hussein's Iraq or both. The administration's conflation of the issues of Iraq and terrorism pose interesting challenges to the news media and public opinion.

This study successfully demonstrated that the news media have some impact on both the public agenda and shifts in the public's evaluation of the president. This finding reinforces the notion that the media are an important player in the health of democracy. As the nation learns about issues its individual citizens have little interaction with, the media broadens the scope of experience and creates an informed citizenry. The duty of the news media to exercise this power under this unique position is comparable to the lifeblood of democratic action. The media are part of a feedback system that monitors and limits the actions of business, culture, and government. When major issues such as the Iraq war brew in the national conversation, the media should be especially careful to execute its mission with thoughtfulness and awareness of its unique ability to set the course of our shared national future.

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APPENDIX

CODE BOOK

Please code each news story in the Vanderbilt University television archive summaries into four variables. Each summary should be marked for network originator, news category, location, and frame (only if the story deals with Iraq). Summaries should be categorized by its prevailing theme and content. If a story is devoted to one or more established categories, then that story's minutes will be equally divided between the respective categories.

Television Network:

1. ABC World News Tonight
2. CBS Evening News
3. CNN NewsNight
4. NBC Nightly News

News Categories:

1. **Iraq:** These stories deal with the United States' and the international community's discussion and actions relating to the issues of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein, domestic, foreign and Iraqi military preparations, and Iraqi politics and economy.
2. **Terrorism:** These stories deal primarily with general concerns about terrorism as it relates to the United States such as terror alerts, government actions to secure the nation, and federal investigations into terrorist activities at home and abroad. It will also include stories that deal with Al Qaeda and general efforts in the war against terror from the American perspective. For the purpose of this study, stories about anti-terrorism activities inside foreign countries that have no relationship to American efforts will be categorized as International. Also, September 11 remembrances are included in this category.
3. **Economy:** These stories deal with the economic study and development of the United States. Policy decisions, government actions, stock market performance, business profiles, taxes, unemployment, and general economic trends, forecasts, and reports are included in this category. Corporate scandal and reform, as well as industry news, will be included. For the purpose of this study, this category will also include international trade that affects the U.S. economy.
4. **Health Care and Welfare:** These stories deal with the state of medical technology, health insurance, diseases, epidemics, abortion, prescription drugs, nutritional supplements, medical research, education, welfare, and

social security. It also includes reports on government programs, policies, and legislation dealing with health and welfare.

5. **Sports:** This category will deal exclusively with stories on sports games, leagues, strikes, and scandals.
6. **Science and the Environment:** This category will deal with reports on space endeavors, technological discoveries, innovations, and computers as well as the environmental studies. For the purpose of this study, all scientific reports related to health and health care will be excluded from this category.
7. **Foreign Affairs (Non-Iraq):** These stories deal with foreign affairs, international crises, international politics, diplomacy, and actions and conditions in foreign nations. For the purpose of this study, foreign economic news will be considered under this category.
8. **Religion:** These stories deal with religious organizations and morality issues both national and international.
9. **Politics/Election:** These stories deal with local, state, and national politics as well as elections.
10. **Crime and Law:** These stories deal with crimes, law enforcement, immigration, and legal proceedings.
11. **Entertainment:** These stories deal with the entertainment industry such as film, music, and television. It also includes celebrity news.
12. **Natural Disasters:** These stories deal with fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes and droughts as well as other natural phenomenon.
13. **Other:** This category will deal with stories that are not related to the previous 12 categories.

Location:

1. **National:** These stories will present an American perspective dealing with stories concerning the United States.
2. **International:** These stories will deal with news occurring overseas that does not primarily deal with the United States.
3. **Regional:** These stories deal primarily with a regional focus such as a state or local community.

Frame (for Iraq stories only):

1. **Episodic Frame:** This category of news report primarily concerns coverage on specific events that is generally conducted on the spot.
2. **Thematic Frame:** This category of news report primarily focuses on political debates, possible consequences of the Iraqi conflict, and historical background. Thematic framing generally relies on multiple levels of analysis inside the reporting.