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# Embedding the Truth

## A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Objectivity and Television Coverage of the Iraq War

*Sean Aday, Steven Livingston, and Maeve Hebert*

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This article reports on a cross-cultural analysis of television coverage of the 2003 Iraq War that seeks to assess and understand the dimensions of objectivity in the news during wartime. A total of 1,820 stories on five American networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel [FNC]) and on the Arab satellite channel Al Jazeera were included in the study. The study assessed bias on two levels: tone of individual stories and the macro-level portrait of the war offered by each network. Results showed that at the story level, the overwhelming number of stories broadcast by Al Jazeera and the American networks other than FNC were balanced. Yet the data also revealed a strong bias in support of the American-led war effort at FNC and important differences in how the various networks covered the war. Also, broadcasters showed a war devoid of blood, dissent, and diplomacy, focusing instead on a sanitized version of combat. Overall, the study found evidence that the news norm of objectivity is defined in large part by culture and ideology more than events, as the norm would imply. The study also explored in detail the coverage of embedded reporters to assess their objectivity and compare their coverage to other types of reporters, especially “unilaterals” with whom they shared the battlefield.

**Keywords:** *framing; war coverage; embedded journalists; bias; television news; Al Jazeera*

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An independent press is critical to the functioning of a free society, perhaps most so during times of war. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black wrote in the Pentagon Papers case, “Paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell” (Sharkey 2001: 21). The role of the press envisioned by Black is that of a

watchdog, placing a check on governments that might otherwise pursue or wage immoral or unnecessary wars.

Implicit in Black's idealistic vision of the press' role during wartime is a requirement that it remain objective in its coverage even after the first shot is fired. Modern American journalism is, in theory, well suited to this role, being based as it is on the norm of objectivity and its defining requirement that journalists remain detached from the stories and people they are covering. The damage done by a biased press during war, Black suggests, would exceed a mere ethical lapse and potentially risk needless sacrifice of the country's citizens.

This study addresses the question of whether the broadcast media properly performed this "duty," as Black described it, during the recent Iraq War. Through an extensive cross-cultural analysis of the nightly news on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel (FNC), and Al Jazeera from the first night of the war to a few days after the fall of the statue of Saddam Hussein that marked the end of his regime, this study explores the question of press objectivity in wartime. Specifically, it asks, Was the press biased, and if so, what might account for that bias?

All of the networks analyzed here profess to adhere to a Western model of journalism that emphasizes the importance of reporting the news objectively. Yet in presuming an objective reality to be reported on in the first place, that norm would seem to preclude dramatic variations in how the same event is covered by different news organizations. We explore whether that was the case in Iraq or whether other factors, such as political ideology, news format, and culture seem to define objectivity.

The Iraq War provides a particularly compelling case study in addressing how objectivity is constructed in the news media for two reasons. First, multiple networks with different audience composition, cultural origin, and marketing niche—but claiming to practice a Western model of objective reporting—covered the war. This provides several levels of comparative analysis. Second, the war represented the first time that the U.S. military embedded reporters with fighting units,<sup>1</sup> a practice that some before the war worried would lead to heavily jingoistic coverage, particularly among American embeds. We can test the relative bias of embeds versus other types of reporters, including what the Pentagon referred to as "unilaterals," reporters who ventured independently into Iraq to cover the war.

### **Objectivity in the News: Theory and Practice**

The American press did not always practice objective journalism. The first generation of Americans—or at least those wealthy enough to afford the steep subscription rates for elite-driven newspapers—read a virulently partisan press. As Schudson (1978) points out, it was only with the advent of the Penny Press in the 1830s and the rise of a "Democratic Market Society" representing a cultural,

economic, and political shift from the elites to the common man that a popular press based on the value of detached, objective reporting developed in America.

As Schudson (1978) and Gans (1979) have argued in different ways, objectivity arose as a means of attaining journalistic credibility. That is, when appealing to a broader demographic than propertied and educated elites, the news media could no longer be partisan without alienating many readers. Objectivity and its central component, detachment, offered the press a strategy for expanding its market by balancing perspectives from at least two sides of an issue. Tuchman (1972) elaborated on this point, arguing that detached objectivity was a strategic ritual that not only preserved journalistic credibility with readers but also with superiors in the newsroom.

Yet the reality of press coverage during wartime is something quite apart from the adversarial, detached role that Black envisioned and that is practiced by modern journalists in other areas of reportage. Although antagonism between the media and the military is well documented (Aukofer and Lawrence 1995; Wilson 2001), it is only in two cases—one very long and losing war and recent post hoc coverage of Pentagon manipulation—that news about modern warfare took on even the semblance of a critical tone. Coverage of the Vietnam War, popularly understood to be the paradigmatic example of negative media coverage of an American war, did not turn critical en masse until after the Tet Offensive of 1968, when it became clear that the United States was not near victory despite upbeat progress reports from Washington (Hallin 1984).

Prior to that, war correspondents typically practiced patriotic journalism. For example, the most famous correspondent of World War II, Ernie Pyle, described being a “member of the team” while covering the U.S. army (Pyle 1979). And while several scholars have debunked as myth the assertion that William Randolph Hearst got America into the Spanish-American War, at the same time they point out that his chain of newspapers reveled in a strongly jingoistic Yellow Journalism during that conflict (Campbell 2000; Nasaw 2000). More recent, studies show coverage of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 also to be largely supportive of the U.S. mission there (Kellner 1992), especially CNN (Newhagen 1994). Given Schudson’s (1978) and Gans’s (1979) arguments about the relationship between objectivity and credibility, one might be inclined to assume confidence in media declines during war as the press abandons its neutrality. In fact, the opposite is true, as polls showed after the September 11 attacks and during the recent Iraq War (Gross, Aday, and Brewer 2003; Pew Research Center 2003).

One explanation for the supportive tone of media coverage during wartime could be that it simply follows events. For example, Hallin (1984) debunks the myth that the press had an oppositional bias against the Vietnam War by showing that coverage did not become negative until it was apparent the United States was stuck in a quagmire. Hallin argues that the press is rarely if ever oppositional

but rather an instrument of the status quo. Similarly, Entman (1989) argues that news becomes slanted not because of partisan bias on the part of reporters but rather because Western rules of objectivity lead the press to be beholden to elite, government sources.

Indeed, between Vietnam and the recent Iraq War, the main finding of scholars looking at war and foreign policy coverage is that the news tends to privilege official sources, especially those from the White House. Most notably, Bennett (1994) has shown that news coverage of war and foreign policy is indexed to the limited range of elite opinions, at least in the short run (but see Althaus [2003] for a contrary view). This pattern of uncritical coverage echoing rather than fundamentally challenging official (especially White House) views of military intervention has been found in news about the U.S. invasion of Panama (Dickson 1995) and the Persian Gulf War (see, for example, Entman and Page 1994).

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, journalistic objectivity has been a matter of frequent controversy, as the United States has waged two formal wars and is engaged by another measure in an ongoing war against terrorism. Everything from whether anchors should wear patriotic lapel pins to how much a network should show civilian casualties has been at issue.<sup>2</sup> Not just administration officials but journalists themselves have berated news organizations deemed not patriotic enough, with some suggesting that there is no place for detachment in wartime.<sup>3</sup>

Three important differences in the media environment of this period as compared with the first Gulf War—the presence of FNC and Al Jazeera, and the Pentagon's decision to embed nearly six hundred journalists with U.S. and coalition combat units during the Iraq War<sup>4</sup>—have altered and intensified the nature of this controversy. Briefly put, FNC was founded in response to what many conservatives in America felt to be a liberal bias in the mainstream media and currently attracts an audience more heavily made up of Republicans than other networks' audiences (Zogby International 2003). Al Jazeera is a satellite channel based on the BBC model that broadcasts internationally but whose audience is primarily in the Arab world.

The channels share two attributes: (1) they both claim to be objective and (2) they have both been frequently accused of biased reporting (McChesney 2002).<sup>5</sup> In the Iraq War, for example, FNC was often accused of being jingoistic in favor of America,<sup>6</sup> while Al Jazeera was accused of being virulently anti-American (Katovsky and Carlson 2003).<sup>7</sup>

Few studies have been done of the relative bias of each channel. Jaspersen and El-Kikhia (2003) compared Al Jazeera and CNN coverage of the Afghanistan war and found that the Arab channel employed more humanitarian frames than its American counterpart. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) analyzed coverage in the few months following the September 11 attacks and found FNC to be more proadministration than other networks. Recently, the Center

for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA; 2003) analyzed coverage of the Iraq War and found that FNC did not report substantively more positive stories than the three broadcast network newscasts. This study, however, is not an adequate measure of biased reporting, in that its unit of analysis is the overall newscast, not the story. In addition, a positive-negative scale is not an appropriate measure of bias because it implicitly (or explicitly in the case of the report) assumes that more negative coverage signifies an anti-American slant. In both the Project for Excellence in Journalism and CMPA studies, however, the data showed that the administration had a privileged role—and dissent was largely absent—across virtually all American news programs.

Finally, the embedding program raised concerns with some that news from the Iraq War would be even more jingoistic than usual and that reporters would in fact be “in bed” with the military.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the Iraq War, however, an even more restrictive policy of press management had been in place since the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. Whereas before then reporters had been allowed on the battlefield but had their copy censored by the military before publication, beginning with Grenada this policy of precensorship was replaced with one of precensorship in which the media were kept away from the battlefield and reduced to covering conflicts like the Persian Gulf War in carefully managed press pools far from the shooting (Sharkey 2001).

As much as the press and critics complained about precensorship, some feared embedding would be just another way to stage-manage war coverage. And indeed, Pentagon officials acknowledge that the program was designed in large part as a means of waging “information warfare” against Saddam Hussein. They felt it would be to their advantage to have independent observers on the ground to counter assertions by the Iraqis that U.S. and coalition forces had engaged in atrocities (Katovsky and Carlson 2003: 205). Pfau et al. (2004) found that embedded journalists produced more favorable coverage of the military and individual troops in the first five days of the war as compared with other reporters and coverage in other recent wars but that there were no differences in overall tone. Their study is of limited value, however, due to the short time frame studied. The study reported here represents the first comprehensive analyses of whether embedded reporters retained their objectivity or became more jingoistic than their unembedded colleagues throughout the war.

## Method

The null hypothesis in this study is that there should not be differences in relative bias between news organizations professing to adopt a Western model of objectivity, regardless of the type of newscast (e.g., network or twenty-four-hour), audience demographics (e.g., tilted toward one political ideology), or culture. That is, all news organizations adopting this model accept the premise

that there is an objective reality and their job is simply to cover that reality, not embellish or selectively report on it. Journalists do not believe they engage in the social construction of reality, although some scholars would disagree (e.g., Gamson et al. 1992).

Put another way, news organizations adopting a Western model of objectivity agree on two things: (1) that reality should be covered objectively and (2) that violations of this norm are wrong.

Hence, in this study we conducted a cross-cultural examination of press coverage of the Iraq War to assess the relative importance of news norms and culture in defining objectivity. We argue that an examination of bias in war coverage must examine coverage at two levels of analysis. First, it must look at coverage at the story level. It must examine the objectivity of individual stories and compare the overall body of work at various networks and, in this case, across cultures. Second, such an examination must look at the overall picture of the war offered by the various news organizations. For example, it may be that stories are objective but that a bias can be seen in the relative selection and avoidance of certain story topics. This is also where we might expect to see cultural and marketing differences. Two networks may each cover the news they choose to report on objectively but still choose to cover different things, thereby offering a much different portrait of the war to their respective audiences.

Data for this project were collected through videotaping of six networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, FNC, and Al Jazeera. The five American networks were taped twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week from March 20 through April 20. The hour-long nightly news on Al Jazeera was taped via satellite transmission for the same days. In a small number of cases, taping problems resulted in skipped programs. When possible, alternative newscasts from the same day on the same network were substituted.

For this study, we analyzed the nightly half-hour newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC; CNN from 5-5:30 p.m. and 6-6:30 p.m.; FNC from 6-6:30 p.m.; and the hour-long evening newscast on Al Jazeera. A total of 1,820 stories were included in this analysis (Table 1). A team of four graduate and three undergraduate student coders in a communication program at a major mid-Atlantic private university, plus an additional coder of Arab descent who holds a law degree and is fluent in Arabic, were trained and found to be reliable.<sup>9</sup> We were particularly careful to include an Arab-American coder to ensure that we could capture cultural nuances in coverage that might be missed by coders with less familiarity with Arab culture. This gives our coding an increased level of validity.

We included the 6-6:30 p.m. period on CNN, during which *The Lou Dobbs Show* is aired, because it afforded us the opportunity to examine potential differences in journalistic tone within, as well as between, networks. Dobbs is one of the only outspoken conservative anchors at CNN and has been more comfortable expressing his patriotism on air since the September 11 terrorist attacks

**Table 1**

Total stories analyzed by network

ABC	229
NBC	197
CBS	133
CNN 5:00-5:30	350
CNN 6:00-6:30	209
Fox News Channel	161
Al Jazeera	541
Total	1,820

than other anchors and reporters at the network.<sup>10</sup> Including his show as a comparison to not only the other networks, but also to his own, allows us to test whether news tone is shaped more by a network's institutional voice or by individual anchors.<sup>11</sup>

### Tone

Most of the variables we include in this analysis, such as main topic and speaker, are self-explanatory. "Tone," however, deserves further explanation. Often, this is measured in terms of positive-negative or favorable-unfavorable. Yet as discussed above, these operationalizations have difficulty serving as appropriate indicators for the concept they are trying to measure, in this case, bias. We argue that a better measure of bias for addressing the normative question of whether the networks covered the war objectively is one that looks for violations of the journalistic norm of detachment. Positive-negative coding schemes have difficulty telling us whether an individual story was biased, instead making the mistake of assuming a story that is "bad" for the United States is "anti-American" and one that is "good" for it is jingoistic. There is also an inherent cultural bias in this operationalization, as becomes clear when one tries to apply it to coverage from a non-U.S. channel like Al Jazeera. Similarly, the six item favorable-unfavorable global attitude measure used by Pfau et al. (2004) is an imprecise fit with the reality of news coverage. For example, what does it mean to say that a given story is closer to "foolish" or "wise," or "worthless" or "valuable"?

We feel it better to use a measure closely related to the phenomenon under study and therefore adopt an admittedly conservative assessment of whether the story deviated from professional standards of neutrality. Hence, we created a 5-point scale that assesses whether the story was basically neutral (coded as a 3), slanted toward support for the United States/coalition (coded as either a 4 or a 5 depending on severity), or more critical of the United States/coalition (coded as a 1 or a 2, depending on severity).<sup>12</sup>

As part of the training, we were careful to instruct coders that stories that were merely negative or positive vis-à-vis the U.S./coalition effort were not

necessarily biased. For example, just because a story says the U.S./coalition forces won a battle does not mean the story has a supportive slant. Similarly, merely reporting that civilians were killed is not critical toward the United States. The issue is whether the tone of the story goes beyond mere reporting of the facts.

Examples of procoalition slant could include opinionated assessments (e.g., “These troops are courageous”), value-laden critiques of opponents of the war (e.g., an FNC anchor called antiwar protesters “sickening”), use of the first person plural by reporters/anchors/analysts (e.g., “our troops,” “we are winning”). The last example is worth elaboration. A central component of journalistic detachment is avoiding use of the first person plural. FNC, however, consciously chose to abandon this principle, arguing that journalists do not need to be objective in wartime. For our purposes, we are not concerned with the ethical questions raised by FNC’s decision,<sup>13</sup> although in our conclusion we will discuss some important ramifications of that choice.

Examples of anticoalition bias could include value-laden phrases (e.g., “war of occupation,” “occupiers”) or focusing on civilian casualties in a way that seems to go beyond merely reporting the story straight. Extreme codes (1 for anti–United States/coalition and 5 for pro–United States/coalition) were reserved for egregious examples. For example, a 4 might be a story that merely uses first person plural, but otherwise reports the story straight. A 5 would be one that does that, perhaps quite a lot, and also has several other attributes such as use of “liberation,” or glorifying coalition forces in some way. A 2 would be a story that merely has an analyst saying the forces seem to be moving too quickly (without rebuttal); a 1 would be a story that says the Americans are “slaughtering” civilians.

Before turning to our results, it may be useful to reiterate the competing hypotheses we are testing.

*Hypothesis 1:* The null hypothesis—Being based as they are on the norm of objectivity, there should be

1. no difference in story tone between networks (or even, in the case of our CNN data, within networks) or across cultures; and
2. no difference in the overall portrait of the war, as measured by what is and what is not covered, between networks (or even, in the case of our CNN data, within networks) or across cultures.

*Hypothesis 2:* There is a difference in tone and/or overall portrait of the war and these differences can be attributed to culture and/or political ideology. Confirmation of this hypothesis could come in several forms, including the following:

1. When violations of neutrality in tone occur, they are in the direction expected by cultural differences. That is, American news organizations will tend to err on the side of pro-U.S./coalition sentiment (4 or 5 tone scores), and Al Jazeera will tend to err on the opposite side (1 or 2 on tone).

2. Differences in the overall portrait of the war, as measured by what is and what is not covered, will be in the direction predicted by culture or partisanship. For example, American news organizations, and especially FNC (and perhaps the *Lou Dobbs Show* on CNN) will be less likely than Al Jazeera to run stories on civilian or U.S. troop casualties, while Jazeera will be more likely than its American counterparts (especially FNC) to air stories on protest and international diplomacy.

## Results

Our data tell us something interesting about how each network framed the war. Entman (1993) defines news framing in terms of the selection of certain information over other information and the relative salience a news organization attaches to what is included in a story or newscast. Hence, there are two important considerations to take into account when assessing the portrait the press paints of a given news event: what is covered and what is not. Analyzing the general view of the Iraq War offered by the various networks included in this study shows interesting differences based on both culture and format (i.e., broadcast network vs. twenty-four-hour cable).

As one might expect, battles dominated coverage across all networks. Prior research has shown that episodic frames in particular are prevalent in television news (Iyengar 1991), and certainly we would expect a rapidly unfolding event that supplies a constant stream of new storylines to be no exception. Still, there are dramatic differences in the attention paid to battle stories and their close cousins, stories about war strategy and tactics. The two twenty-four-hour cable news networks in our study, CNN and FNC, devoted significantly more of their coverage to these topics than did the three broadcast networks or Al Jazeera (Table 2). This was especially true for CNN's *Lou Dobbs Show* (48.8 percent) and FNC (54.7 percent).

Equally telling is what the networks ignored. As Table 2 shows, in general, none of the American networks devoted more than scant attention to dissent in the United States or abroad, despite numerous marches and rallies internationally that attracted millions of protesters, widespread elite opposition around the world, and polls showing about a fifth of Americans opposed to the war even in the height of the rally effect. By contrast, Al Jazeera devoted 6.7 percent of its stories to this topic. Similarly, stories about international diplomacy, which would include stories involving the United Nations, were largely absent in the American media, especially on the three broadcast networks. Yet on Al Jazeera, nearly 13 percent of stories had this as their main topic. And other than CBS and FNC, hardly any attention was paid to stories about postwar reconstruction, which has turned out to be an important and troubling storyline since the end of major combat operations.

While none of the American networks devoted much attention to stories about U.S. or British casualties, Iraqi casualties, or civilian casualties, these

stories were virtually entirely absent on FNC and CNN's *Lou Dobbs Show*. This is consistent with comments made by FNC reporters and executives since the September 11 attacks to the effect that they do not see any news value in images of civilian casualties, with lead anchor Brit Hume arguing that these are merely part of war and not deserving of significant coverage.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, all of the American media largely shied away from showing visuals of coalition, Iraqi military, or civilian casualties. Despite advanced technologies offering reporters the chance to transmit the reality of war in real time, reporters chose instead to present a largely bloodless conflict to viewers, even when they did broadcast during firefights. Al Jazeera's casualty coverage took a different tack and will be discussed below.

### **Tone**

Having discussed the overall picture of the war offered by the various networks, we now turn our attention to how they covered the stories they saw as newsworthy. To reiterate, our measure of tone attempts to assess the objectivity of individual stories using a 5-point scale, where a score of 3 means the story adhered to journalistic standards of fairness and balance.

Except at FNC, the vast majority of coverage at the other networks, including Al Jazeera, achieved a neutral tone (Table 3), ranging from 89 percent of stories at the Arab network to 96 percent of coverage on ABC and CBS. The lone exception was FNC, where only 62 percent of stories were neutral and 38 percent adopted a supportive tone. Many, but certainly not all, of the supportive stories on FNC fell in that category because of the use of first person plural by reporters (e.g., "our troops"). Less than 1 percent of stories on any network, including FNC and Al Jazeera, fell in the most extreme category.

Although overall the networks (save for FNC) ran balanced stories, looking closer at the data, the question of objectivity becomes more complex. For example, Al Jazeera did not air many stories on civilian casualties, contrary to conventional wisdom.<sup>15</sup> Yet the substance of the criticism of Al Jazeera's coverage focused not only on the supposed quantity of these stories but also their luridness. Hence, we addressed this allegation of bias in two ways: (1) by examining the tone of stories in which "civilian casualties" was the main topic and (2) by examining the tone of stories in which visuals of civilian casualties were shown. More than a third (36 percent) of the stories with civilian casualties as a main topic were in fact critical in tone, and the same was true of 40.5 percent of the stories that showed civilian casualties. These numbers are more telling when one considers that only 11 percent of stories aired during the period studied were coded as critical in tone. Hence, while Al Jazeera does not appear to have been as anti-American as critics alleged,<sup>16</sup> it does seem fair to say that its coverage of civilian casualties often failed to be objective.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 2**  
Story main topic by network (in percentages)

	ABC (n = 229)	NBC (n = 197)	CBS (n = 133)	CNN 5:00-5:30 (n = 350)	CNN 6:00-6:30 (n = 209)	Fox News Channel (n = 161)	Al Jazeera (n = 541)	Total (N = 1,820)
Battle	29.5	26.4	29.0	35.5	38.3	41.0	23.7	30.4
Strategy	7.4	8.6	10.7	6.5	10.5	13.7	4.8	8.2
Diplomacy	1.8	5.1	2.3	0.3	7.7	6.2	12.8	6.3
Reconstruction	4.8	5.1	9.2	2.8	3.8	7.5	6.5	5.4
Saddam	1.8	4.1	3.1	6.1	3.8	8.1	2.4	3.8
Media	2.5	3.0	0.8	1.5	5.3	1.2	3.7	2.9
POW: Coalition	4.0	5.6	5.3	9.5	4.3	1.2	0.9	4.1
POW: Iraqi	0.9	0.5	—	0.8	1.4	—	0.4	0.6
Casualties: Coalition	7.5	5.1	6.1	4.7	2.4	1.2	4.0	4.4
Casualties: Iraqi	—	0.5	0.8	0.6	—	—	0.7	0.4
Casualties: Civilian	4.4	3.6	3.1	3.4	1.4	0.6	4.5	3.3
Protest	2.6	3.0	1.6	1.2	—	—	6.4	2.7
Public opinion	0.8	1.5	—	—	0.5	1.8	0.7	0.9
Humanitarian crisis/relief	2.2	4.6	5.3	0.3	2.9	2.5	2.2	2.4
Weapons of mass destruction (WMD)	2.6	2.0	0.8	3.6	3.3	0.6	1.6	2.2
Other	27.6	22.7	22.2	23.6	14.8	16.1	24.8	22.9

**Table 3**

Tone by network (in percentages)

	Critical	Neutral	Supportive
ABC ( <i>n</i> = 229)	2.2	95.6	2.2
NBC ( <i>n</i> = 197)	1.0	94.4	4.6
CBS ( <i>n</i> = 133)	—	95.5	4.5
CNN 5:00-5:30 ( <i>n</i> = 350)	3.9	91.6	4.5
CNN 6:00-6:30 ( <i>n</i> = 209)	—	92.8	7.2
Fox News Channel ( <i>n</i> = 161)	—	62.1	37.9
Al Jazeera ( <i>n</i> = 541)	10.6	89.2	0.2
Total ( <i>N</i> = 1,820)	4.6	89.7	6.0

While much of Al Jazeera's critical coverage revolved around stories about civilian casualties, at the American networks the stories slanting in a supportive direction often stemmed from interviews with retired military officials, especially when those officials were interviewed by anchors (Table 4). A full 34 percent of stories in which retired military officials were quoted had a supportive tone, and 60 percent of the anchor-led stories quoting these sources were tilted prowar, most of these airing on FNC.<sup>18</sup> In addition to anchors, stories that used journalists themselves as sources were more likely to adopt a supportive tone than stories with other speakers (except retired military officials and U.S. political officials).

Breaking down FNC's coverage, most stories with a supportive tone had either battle (36 percent) or strategy/tactics (23.7 percent) as a main topic. In addition, much of the prowar slant in stories came in stories where the anchor was the primary reporter (e.g., stories read or interviews conducted by the anchor), with 66.7 percent of these adopting a supportive tone. This compares to a range of 3.3 to 8.5 percent of the anchor-led stories on the other American networks.

It is also important to note that despite the generally neutral coverage, we do see evidence of culture influencing a station's objectivity. Put simply, when the networks "erred," they usually did so in the direction one would predict based on their country of origin. American networks ran very few if any stories that were critical of the war. By contrast, whenever Al Jazeera ran an imbalanced story, it fell on the critical side of neutrality.

### **Embed or in Bed?**

Finally, as discussed above, many media critics worried before and during the war that embedded journalists would adopt a kind of "Stockholm Syndrome" and produce fawning coverage of the U.S. war effort. We did not find evidence to support these fears in terms of the tone of the stories produced by embedded

**Table 4**

Positive tone by speaker

U.S. military officials ( $n = 144$ )	6.6
Soldiers ( $n = 251$ )	9.0
U.S. political officials ( $n = 188$ )	11.6
Reporters as sources ( $n = 84$ )	11.5
Retired military ( $n = 76$ )	34.0

*Note:* Percentage of stories containing commentary from each speaker with a positive tone. Items are not mutually exclusive.

**Table 5**

Tone by reporter type (in percentages)

	Neutral	Supportive
Embedded ( $n = 244$ )	91.0	9.0
Unilateral ( $n = 172$ )	91.2	5.6
Beat ( $n = 205$ )	88.9	11.1
Anchor ( $n = 398$ )	88.7	11.9
Other ( $n = 259$ )	87.1	10.9
Total ( $N = 1,278$ )	89.7	6.0

journalists (Table 5). In fact, embedded reporters had among the highest percentage of neutral stories (91 percent) of any type of reporter. Furthermore, embeds were not appreciably more likely to produce supportive articles even in stories featuring quotes by soldiers, which theoretically might seem a likely place to find evidence of biased reporting given the critiques cited above. They were also no more likely than other reporters to be supportive in stories about battle, strategy, or tactics.

Yet it is useful to return to our macro-level analysis before pronouncing the embed program a successful experiment in objective battlefield reporting. It could be that, as we have found with most of the rest of the war coverage, individual stories tended to be objective, but important differences lie in the selection of stories to be covered. In particular, we are interested in the differences between stories covered by embeds and “unilaterals,” a comparison that gives us a glimpse of whether the war would have been covered differently had there been a more traditionally independent press on the front lines.

One argument for why the Pentagon would institute an embed program, after all, is that they thought it would lead to many more stories about individual soldiers, stories that might be expected to engender support for the war regardless of tone by putting a human face on the American effort. And in fact, embeds did end up producing significantly more stories that quoted (51.4 percent) and pictured (83.2 percent) coalition soldiers than did unilaterals (33.8 percent and

**Table 6**

Comparing coverage by embedded and unilateral reporters (in percentages)

	Embedded ( <i>n</i> = 244)	Unilateral ( <i>n</i> = 172)
Main topic: Civilian casualties	3.6	7.1
Main topic: Reconstruction	1.1	8.4
Visual: Dead/wounded Iraqis	9.9	36.4

65.6 percent, respectively). At the same time, unilaterals aired more stories that included visuals of Iraqi soldiers (27 percent) than did embedded reporters (15.6 percent).

Embedded reporters (57.5 percent) were also more likely than unilaterals (35.4 percent) to produce stories focusing on battles (Table 6). Part of this can be explained by the fact that embeds were consistently on the front lines, whereas unilaterals often had to trail the action. Still, the discrepancy is dramatic and appears to also speak to the view of the war embeds had as compared with unilaterals, whose greater mobility potentially gave them the opportunity to cover more varied stories. For instance, unilaterals (7.1 percent) were more likely to do stories on civilian casualties than were embeds (3.6 percent) and included visuals of wounded and dead Iraqis in many more of their stories (36.4 percent) than did their embedded colleagues (9.9 percent). Journalists in Baghdad reported many of these, but others came from other battlefields. Unilaterals (8.4 percent) also aired more stories about postwar reconstruction than did embeds (1.1 percent).

### Summary

This study used a cross-cultural analysis of Iraq War coverage across six networks all professing to adhere to the journalistic norm of objectivity to assess whether news about the conflict could indeed be called fair and balanced. Our overall finding is that the overwhelming number of stories aired during the war on American networks and on Al Jazeera—with the exception of FNC—were neutral at the story level but that the general picture of the war presented by the news focused primarily on its whiz-bang aspects at the expense of other important story lines. Put another way, the press may not have covered the entire story, but in general what they covered they covered well. Furthermore, at both the macro and story level, important differences between the networks based on cultural origin and broadcast format became apparent.

In sum, while on CNN's *Lou Dobbs Show* and on FNC about half the stories about the war were primarily about battles and tactics, between 29 and 39.7

percent of those on the other networks in our study did so. Although none of the networks ran many stories about or pictures of U.S. or civilian casualties, FNC and CNN's *Lou Dobbs Show* ran virtually none. In addition, all of the American networks largely ignored any antiwar sentiment, especially in the form of protests and dissenters. Al Jazeera, by contrast, devoted more coverage to protests and diplomacy than did its U.S. counterparts.

Other than FNC, where barely 60 percent of stories adopted a neutral tone, between 89 and 96 percent of the stories aired by the other American networks and Al Jazeera were neutral. Certain sources were more likely to appear in biased coverage. In particular, stories in which anchors interviewed retired military officials (especially on FNC), and stories in which journalists were themselves sources for other reporters, were more likely to have a tone supportive of the war than stories that did not use these sources.

Cultural and ideological differences help explain some of the findings on tone. Most notably, when a network ran an unbalanced story, it was inevitably in the direction consistent with its culture of origin, with Al Jazeera's violations of the objective norm being critical of the war and the American networks slanting toward a more positive view. This was especially true at FNC, where an ideological challenge to the application of journalistic detachment during wartime, particularly through use of the first person plural, accounted for many stories adopting a prowar stance. While Al Jazeera's coverage was generally neutral (though less so than the non-FNC American networks), our data suggest critics have a point when they claim its coverage of civilian casualties carried an antiwar, or even anti-American, tone.

Our data also help illuminate the controversy surrounding the Pentagon's program of embedding journalists. Contrary to concern by critics of the effort, we did not find evidence that stories produced by embeds were more likely to adopt a tone favorable to the American war effort. Much like our findings regarding the networks generally, the differences between embeds and their "unilateral" counterparts in Iraq lay less in biased stories than in what stories they covered, despite both types of reporters being at or near the front lines. Embeds did cover coalition soldiers more than unilaterals, whereas their more independent colleagues were more likely to do stories about Iraqi and civilian casualties and to run stories about postwar reconstruction.

## Conclusion

There may be no time when a country is more in need of an independent and vigorous press than when it is at war. The public depends on the press to serve as their eyes and ears on the battlefield and in the halls of policymakers to ensure that their fellow citizens are not sent to die in unnecessary wars or forced to fight

immoral or poorly waged ones. Yet the history of press coverage in wartime shows that the norm is a patriotic, servile press once the shooting starts.

In the recent Iraq War, however, the news was not all bad. The vast majority of stories on most American news networks, and Al Jazeera, were in fact objective. At the same time, the coverage was dominated by episodic battle coverage, which, while certainly being the most important daily story, ended up crowding out other important aspects of the war. For American viewers in particular, the portrait of war offered by the networks was a sanitized one free of bloodshed, dissent, and diplomacy but full of exciting weaponry, splashy graphics, and heroic soldiers.

FNC took this tendency at the other American networks several steps further. In particular, executives at the network consciously chose to abandon a major component of objectivity—detachment—by encouraging reporters and anchors to use the first person plural when describing the coalition forces and the United States. Combined with other aspects of their coverage that favored a sanitized frame over a more realistic portrayal even more than rival networks, the use of words like “we” and “our” is not an insignificant matter for scholars to consider. Previous research has shown the power of consensus cues in news and other formats to engender support from audiences and even to suppress original or deep processing of information (Aday 1999; Fiske and Taylor 1991). FNC draws an audience predisposed to accepting a prowar (and the officials behind it) message, which theoretically makes the kinds of stories airing on the channel even more powerful in reinforcing attitudes (Lazersfeld and Merton 1948; Klapper 1960). This in many ways mirrors the phenomenon of mainstreaming described by Zaller (1991) and is a fruitful area of future research.

This study raises many other questions for scholars to consider. For one, the role of culture, ideology, and even broadcast format (CNN was more similar to FNC than it was to the Big Three networks) in defining what is objective in a news organization, addressed by other scholars as well as by this study, deserves continued scrutiny. In addition, the nature of embedded reporting is an important matter for scholarly attention. Certainly such a program is a vast improvement over the system of precensorship in place in America since Grenada, and our findings suggest that in many ways the coverage generated by embeds was not noticeably more jingoistic than that of other reporters. At the same time, unilateral reporters covered a broader range of stories (but only by a matter of degree, it should be noted), suggesting that perhaps a better option for future wars is that suggested by a Marine captain in Iraq: “In the future, I’d recommend the media bring their own four-wheel drives, their own diesel, and travel like lampreys under a shark, under the protection of the Marines” (Burnett 2003: 44).

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## Notes

1. Reporters had been at the front in prior wars, but the embed program employed in the Iraq War was different in nature, most notably in the fact that the Pentagon trained reporters months in advance. Journalists allowed on the front lines in earlier wars were more akin to what in Iraq were called unilateral reporters.
2. Bill Carter and Felicity Barringer, "At U.S. Request, Networks Agree to Edit Future bin Laden Tapes," *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2001; Paul Farhi, "For Broadcast Media, Patriotism Pays," *Washington Post*, Mar. 28, 2003; p. C1; and Howard Kurtz, "CNN Chief Order 'Balance' in War News," *Washington Post*, Oct. 31, 2001, p. C1.
3. Tim Graham, "No Honest Eyewitnesses: There's Little Truth Coming Out of Baghdad," *National Review Online*, Apr. 4, 2003; Morton M. Kondracke, "Memo to U.S. Media: Stop Spreading Negativism over War," *Roll Call*, Nov. 8, 2001; and Dorothy Rabinowitz, "Neutral in the Newsroom," *Opinionjournal.com*, Nov. 6, 2001.
4. A very small number of American journalists were embedded in the Afghanistan war in 2001 (Katovsky and Carlson 2003).
5. Jim Rutenberg, "Left and Right Look for Signs of Bias in Reporting," *The New York Times*, Mar. 19, 2003.
6. Barbara Bedway, "Chris Hedges on Distorted War Coverage," *Editor and Publisher Online*, Apr. 2, 2003; David Greenberg, Interview, *Journalismjobs.com*, Oct. 13, 2002; and Howard Rosenberg, "Snippets of the 'Unique' Al Jazeera," *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 4, 2003, p. E1.
7. David Carr, "Reporters' New Battlefield Access Has Its Risks as Well as Its Rewards," *New York Times*, Mar. 31, 2003, p. B2.
8. Todd Purdum and Jim Rutenberg, "Reporters Respond Eagerly to Pentagon Welcome Mat," *New York Times*, Mar. 23, 2003, p. B3; and Alessandra Stanley, "As the Conflict in Iraq Deepens, So Does the Debate about Coverage," *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 2003, p. B15.
9. There was at least 90 percent agreement among coders on all subjective variables included in the analysis.
10. Dobbs was one of the first at CNN to wear an American flag lapel pin, and unlike his colleagues, he still wears it on air.
11. It should be noted that during the war Dobbs's show *Moneyline* ceased focusing on business news and instead became more of a stand-alone news show centered around war news.
12. We acknowledge that the word "coalition" is somewhat controversial. Our use of it is intended only as shorthand to avoid mistakenly implying that all troops were American, even though the vast majority were.
13. Including its factual inaccuracy: such usage could imply, after all, that British troops are also part of America's military.
14. Jim Rutenberg and Bill Carter, "Network Coverage a Target of Fire from Conservatives," *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2001, p. B2.
15. It is possible, however, that these stories, while fewer in number, were longer than those on American media. Unfortunately, we do not have a measure for this.

16. It should be reiterated that mere coverage of civilian casualties does not make a network biased.
17. Of course, the American networks also demonstrated what could be considered biased coverage of civilian casualties by ignoring this story nearly entirely.
18. It is important to point out again that a story would not be coded as supportive just because a former general recounted American successes on the battleground. Only if the tone of that commentary seemed to go beyond mere analysis would it be coded as biased.

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