

# **The Iraq War 2003 in Western Media and Public Opinion: A Case Study of the Effects of Military (Non-) Involvement on Conflict Perception**

by

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There is only little empirical data, and few studies available at this moment on the media coverage of the war in Iraq in 2003. The following contribution comprises preliminary observations that allow explorative hypotheses as a starting point for future research. It concentrates on the media coverage in three countries – the United States, Great Britain, and Germany –, and it focuses on finding out whether political and military involvement and a country's participation in war has made a difference to their respective media systems. Is impartiality and objectivity upheld in a country that goes to war?

## **1. The US media and public opinion during the Iraq war in 2003**

The Gallup Poll (Table 1, see annex) reveals that public opinion in the US during the Iraq war is a role model for what communication scientists have named the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon (see chapter 4). After a slow start, the majority of Americans – more than 70% – was behind President Bush. However, support was lower before the war (around 50%) and it declined again after the war due to the human and financial costs of US and British occupation.

Turning to the press, we might say that while newspapers of renown in the US generally deserve their relatively good reputation for impartiality, observers have pointed to a number of deficits concerning their performance during the Iraq war. The New York Post, to take but one example, showed a photograph on its front page of an American military cemetery in France with the headline: “They died for France, but France has forgotten”.<sup>i</sup> FAIR, the American watchdog organization, bemoaned that the New York Times played down domestic opposition to war. The New York Times and the Washington Post barely covered the anti-war movement in the US.<sup>ii</sup> Further research is needed on the American press.

Criticism of US coverage of the Iraq war has so far concentrated on the broadcasting sector, i.e. TV and radio. US networks stirred public emotions with

special reports entitled “Countdown Iraq” on MSNBC or “Showdown with Saddam” on CBS. The BBC’s Chief, Greg Dyke, attacked US broadcasters, saying that they not only revealed a clear pro-American bias during war coverage, but that many of them were outright patriotic and heated up public opinion during the war. Fox News, being the number one news channel in the US ahead of CNN, was generally considered strongly committed to the US government position. The largest radio group in the United States, US Cable News Networking, was criticized by Dyke for organizing pro-war rallies throughout the country.<sup>iii</sup>

There were other critics as well: Robert Jensen of the left-wing paper *The Progressive* wrote: “If the first two weeks of the coverage was any indication, this war will be a case study in the failure of success by U.S. journalism (...) There was no meaningful debate on the main news shows of CBS, ABC, NBC or PBC (...) The media didn’t even provide the straight facts well”.<sup>iv</sup> CNN’s domestic program was considered by many to have been more patriotic than CNNI.<sup>v</sup>

But even CNNI was surely not completely balanced. For example, I analysed the coverage of one afternoon on CNNI, and I found that it was packed with voices from the pro-war forces. In a period of about four hours a British ex-minister of defence, a Kuwaiti specialist for strategic questions, a British press conference in Basra, and a number of “embedded journalists” with the British army had the chance to speak. Although that same day there were big demonstrations all around the world against the war, anti-war voices were almost absent from the programme or reduced to little news slots.

This observation is reinforced by one of the rare solid studies that we have at this point, a study conducted by the American media watch agency FAIR. According to the study, US broadcasters poorly served democracy by their war coverage. To summarise some of the results of that study:<sup>vi</sup>

After the invasion of Iraq began in March, official voices dominated U.S. network newscasts, while opponents of the war were notably underrepresented.

Starting the day after the bombing of Iraq began on March 19, the three-week study (3/20/03-4/9/03) looked at 1,617 on-camera sources appearing in stories about Iraq on the evening newscasts of six television networks and news channels. The news programs studied were ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, CNN’s Wolf Blitzer Reports, Fox’s Special Report with Brit Hume, and PBS’s News Hour With Jim Lehrer.

Sources were coded by name, occupation, nationality, position on the war and the network on which they appeared. Sources were categorized as having a position on the war if they expressed a policy opinion on the news shows studied, were currently affiliated with governments or institutions that took a position on the war, or otherwise took a prominent stance.

Nearly two thirds of all sources, 64 percent, were pro-war, while 71 percent of U.S. guests favoured the war. Anti-war voices were 10 percent of all sources, but just 6 percent of non-Iraqi sources and 3 percent of U.S. sources. Thus viewers were more than six times as likely to see a pro-war source as one who was anti-war; with U.S. guests alone, the ratio increases to 25 to 1.

Official voices, including current and former government employees, whether civilian or military, dominated network newscasts, accounting for 63 percent of overall sources. Current and former U.S.

officials alone provided more than half (52 percent) of all sources; adding officials from Britain, chief ally in the invasion of Iraq, brought the total to 57 percent.

Looking at U.S. sources, which made up 76 percent of total sources, more than two out of three (68 percent) were either current or former officials. The percentage of U.S. sources who were officials varied from network to network, ranging from 75 percent at CBS to 60 percent at NBC.

In the category of U.S. officials, military voices overwhelmed civilians by a two-to-one margin, providing 68 percent of U.S. official sources and nearly half (47 percent) of all U.S. sources. This predominance reflected the networks focus on information from journalists embedded with troops, or provided at military briefings, and the analysis of such by paid former military officials.

In terms of their guest-lists, the television outlets studied by FAIR were more alike than different: All had a heavy emphasis on official sources, particularly current and former U.S. military personnel; each featured a large proportion of pro-war voices; and none gave much attention to dissenting voices.

The highest percentage of officials among U.S. sources (75 percent) and the lowest number of U.S. anti-war voices (one--a soundbite from Michael Moore's March 24 Oscar speech) was CBS Evening News.

## **2. The British media and public opinion during the Iraq war in 2003**

Public opinion in the United Kingdom was more critical of the war than in the United States, but less critical than in the rest of the European Union states. After the beginning of the war, support rose to above 50 per cent. A second climax of support could be observed in the final phase of war when allied troops had much more success than in the beginning.<sup>vii</sup> The images of the Saddam statue tumbling down, pictures of cheering Iraqis etc. brought a public breakthrough for support of Blair's policy.

Before the war the British it was clear that there was nothing close to full support for Blair's policy in the press. There was an open confrontation between the proponents and the opponents of war.<sup>viii</sup> This, however, was mostly true for the elite press. The mass-selling tabloid sector, which is dominated by papers like Rupert Murdoch's Sun and News of the World, was mostly in tune with Blair's pro war policy.<sup>ix</sup> When during the war British MP Galloway asked for sanctions against the US, the Sun called him a "traitor".<sup>x</sup> There are clear indications of stout patriotism and a pro-government approach characterising Murdoch's tabloid press all through the pre-war- and war-periods. This is an important observation since whenever we speak of the British press as being the role model for impartiality in journalism, we must not forget that the British tabloids are popular opinion leaders.

But how did the elite press, papers like the Guardian, The Times, The Independent, react to war? I analysed all front pages and some of the interior pages of The Independent and The Times in the war period between March 15 and April 15, 2003. Generally speaking both papers remained relatively neutral, but The Independent seemed more critical of the war, while The Times tended to support the British government position.

When the war started, The Independent's correspondent Robert Fisk, who is known as an advocate of humanism, described in full detail how a taxi driver in Baghdad was blown up. Blair was criticized for ignoring the human aspect of

war. The second day headline was „Night of Terror“. On March 27, a large article on front page called the bombing of the market place in Baghdad an „obscurity“. However, with the growing success of British and US troops in Iraq, critical remarks about the war became less outspoken and were more and more banned from the front page, until The Independent finally led with the „Final countdown for Baghdad“. Even Robert Fisk seemed to focus on demonstrating human destruction rather than being outright political and asking Blair to stop the war. When the statue of Saddam Hussein was brought down, this image filled the whole title page without words, as if it would speak for the historic moment. In reality only a limited number of people celebrated that event on the street – the tumbling of the statue was a pseudo-event created for the media. On April 5, The Independent presented the statistics of war in big letters on the front page: 130.000 British and American troops in Iraq, about 1,300 civilian deaths etc. – but interestingly enough the most important figure was missing in the list: the number of dead Iraqi soldiers. While we have no solid figures, estimates rank between 10,000 – 30,000 dead. Two weeks later, on April 16, after the war, The Independent posed exactly the missing question “How many Iraqi soldiers were killed or injured?” But that was only after the war.

My immediate impression when studying the papers was, that The Times, other than The Independent, published many heroic images of British and US soldiers: soldiers in action, soldiers receiving flowers from Iraqis, soldiers handing food to children and the like. On the first pages, military briefings were also dominant every day, while on the back pages anti-war voices were considered, although not in a prominent position. The Times published many headlines that were at least close to active war support, for example:

1. “We are liberating a country that is enslaved by a lunatic”
2. “Birthplace of Saddam might yet be his grave”
3. “The blitzing of Baghdad”
4. “Be ferocious in battle, but be generous in victory”
5. “He was my little boy and he died a hero serving his country”
6. “Ruthless despot who can't resist a gamble”

Headlines like these are surely more in support of the war than The Independent’s “Night of Terror” or than headlines in the Arab media that one could read at the same time, like “Baghdad set ablaze” (Arab News) or “U.S. unleashes massive air war on Iraq” (Gulf Times). To sum up, although still not completely one-sided, it is surely justified to claim that The Times as the former flagship of impartial journalism has lost a lot of its credibility since being taken over by Rupert Murdoch years ago. The British press as a whole, however, remained relatively diverse during the war.

The British broadcasting sector is dominated by the BBC, which is usually considered a role model for unbiased reporting. There is no substantial proof

that its coverage was *not* balanced during the Iraq war. Obviously, it was not patriotic in tone and style as many US networks were. However, there are some critics of the BBC who maintain that the BBC hardly ever covered opponents of the war.<sup>xi</sup> It can be as dangerous to leave aside vital information and central frames, arguments and perspectives on the causes, effects and solutions of war can be as it is to be patriotic or to commit other violations of professional standards of impartiality. Solid research is needed on this point.

### **3. The German media and public opinion during the Iraq war in 2003**

Public opinion in Germany was clearly against the Iraq war. Many polls have shown that this was also true for most other European countries, except for Great Britain and perhaps parts of Eastern Europe. Public opinion was anti-war in Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxemburg, Russia, and also in Turkey which is a country on the brink of entering the European Union.<sup>xii</sup> Unlike the governments of Europe, which split over whether or not to support the US and Great Britain, (Western) European populations were united in their common opposition against the war. In this respect, the peoples of the EU countries were really in tune with Arab and Middle Eastern public sentiments, which – except for Kuwait or the Gulf emirates – opposed the war on Iraq. In comparison, one can say that the British public was the exception in its ambivalence and relative strong support of the war.

In contrast to the German population, the German press was definitely not clearly anti-war, and it seems to have remained rather controversial.<sup>xiii</sup> Liberal and conservative papers like *Die Zeit* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* sharply criticized Schröder, the German Chancellor, for harming German-US relations through his heavy-handed diplomacy. Left-liberal papers like the *Frankfurter Rundschau* were pacifist in trend.

German broadcasting was very self-critical concerning the possible misuse of the media by state propaganda. Public TV channels like ARD and ZDF considered information deficits and asked the consumer to distrust British, American and Iraqi information policies. But in most talk shows advocates as well as opponents of the war were present, especially since the conservative opposition party, the CDU, sided with the George Bush. Comments made by a British media scientist that the German media were completely anti-war and that they simply reflected the government position have not proved correct. The media's approach was quite professional, and private TV, much like their American counterparts, at times even added a sensationalist style of war coverage to this. All these observations clearly need more in-depth analysis.

#### **4. The media, public opinion, and the government – relations between autonomy and independence in times of war**

After having set the empirical ground, we can move on to some theoretical conclusions. The main target will be to reflect on three kinds of relations: those between governments and the public, between governments and the media, and between the media and public opinion.

##### **4.1 Governments and public opinion**

It is obvious that in countries which were not militarily involved in the Iraq war, like Germany, or which were only symbolically involved, but did not suffer any deaths, like Spain, public opinion was clearly against the war. Even when governments in those countries, as in the case of Denmark, Spain or Italy, sided with the US, they were unable to influence public sentiments. In cases of war and peace where deep-seated human values are concerned, propaganda seems to have no great effect. Research has shown that the long held assumption that most people do not have any clear opinion on matters of international relations is not completely true. Especially in cases of peace or war, where central values of a society are concerned, people do have a vision of what they expect from international relations.

The cases of the United States and Great Britain, however, proved that there exists, in fact, also a rally-round-the-flag-effect – although to varying degrees in the two countries. As a lesson from history we have learned that once a country gets militarily involved, large parts of public opinion support the government and differences in opinion that are visible before the war become irrelevant. This was the case in the US and, less clearly so in Great Britain. It is not so much the government that influences public opinion, but the simple fact that for most people their own security ranks higher than the general willingness for peace. It is quite wrong, therefore, to assume that democratic countries are unable to go to war because they are split over political issues. In times of war, public opinion in Western democracies can be fairly homogenous, or at least, the majority may be on the side of its own government and soldiers.

The case of Great Britain, however, reveals that military involvement is not sufficient to generate full support for the government. Public support for Tony Blair was hardly ever higher than 60%, and I presume the reason for this was that people did not believe that there was a realistic danger or threat to their own lives, to Great Britain or the Commonwealth territory (see below).

##### **4.2 Governments and the media**

Rally-round-the-flag mechanisms can also be observed within the media. Chris Hedges, a reporter of the New York Times said during the Iraq war: “In wartime

the press is always part of the problem. When the nation goes to war, the press goes with it (...) The blather on CNN or Fox or MSNBC is part of a long and sad tradition”<sup>xiv</sup> Especially for big US networks it seems that any attempt at objectivity was abandoned once the war had started. Even Dan Rather, CBS's anchorman, who by many was considered a role model for critical and unbiased reporting, openly declared the partisanship of his coverage: “Look, I'm an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win, whatever the definition of ‘win’ may be. Now, I can't and don't argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced.”<sup>xv</sup>

The strong bias visible on US networks and many radio stations is ample evidence for the assumption that, in fact, national military involvement makes mainstream media co-parties of their governments. Interpreted with the help of systems theory one could argue that the media system gets “surrounded” by three sub-systems pushing in the same patriotic direction in an effort to secure the “survival” of the whole societal and state system:

1. journalists as individuals often become patriotic partisans (like Dan Rather),
2. the political system reduces internal differences (for example many Democrats did not criticize the Republican Bush government at war), while at the same time the government exerts pressure on the media,
3. any public, which is a media audience and consumer at the same time, will “rally round the flag” and expect the media to do the same.

This environment that is hostile to the freedom of opinion(s) limits the manoeuvrability of a free media system, so that adaptations are needed, until the war ends and autonomy is regained. In contrast, countries which are not directly involved in war, like Germany, or Turkey, maintain rather intact media systems because their systems' constellations are completely different and pressure from other sub-systems and media environments remains rather low-key.

But how do we explain the case of Great Britain? It seems that the British so-called “home front” of military intervention – public opinion and the media – was at least fragile. The media were not as streamlined as in the US, although we are not in the position to really compare US- and UK-media coverage because we are lacking information on both the US press and the British broadcasting system. But it is obvious that during the last war in Iraq at least, the British elite newspapers did not develop the same patriotic fervour as during the wars in the Falklands or Kosovo. We might not be able to say that the home front “collapsed” in the sense that the media turned too critical of the government. Nevertheless, excepting the tabloids, the British press had more to offer than simple patriotic fervour.

There is no final evidence that the British media during the Iraq war 2003 really disproves the assumption that during wars mainstream media fall into line

behind the government. The case of Great Britain, much like the Spanish case, needs more in-depth research as well as a clearer definition of theoretical premises. We need to define much more exactly what we expect the media to do when their nations go to war. Is the American model of a broadcasting system turning patriotic in content and style really the blueprint for all cases? Or was the British reaction also a universal adaptation to war, in which a tabloid press goes patriotic and an elite press resorts to very subtle means of support, as in the case of *The Times*, or a paper accepts a moratorium of fundamental criticism of the government, as in the case of *The Independent* perhaps?

In the end, we might keep to the old presumption that the media falls into the slipstream of the government in wartime. Or perhaps we will come to the amazing conclusion that while in the last Iraq war governments and public opinion in militarily involved states (USA and UK) on the one hand and non-involved states (like Germany) on the other hand were much divided, German and British media were not as far apart as one might think. Perhaps there really is a growing professional, journalistic resistance to external pressure in war time. The British and other cases of the 2003 war in Iraq need further analysis.

### **4.3 Media and public opinion**

The last relationship that needs consideration is the one between mass media and public opinion. For countries like the United States we might argue that the media and public opinion influenced each other, reinforcing trends of patriotic solidarity. From a strictly methodological point of view, however, we cannot prove which side influenced which, since there has been no comparison made, so far, with a non-media-consuming reference group.

For the non-involved countries the case seems obvious that the media were not able to affect the existing public sentiments. If we accept, for instance, that in Germany the media were not completely one-sided, but mixed, then we have to explain why the polls show that the Germans remained strictly anti-war before, during, and after the war.

## **5. Conclusion**

For countries like Germany that were not militarily involved in the Iraq war, it seems that all the relations analysed here – governments and public opinion, governments and media, media and public opinion – show a very low degree of interdependence. This implies that in militarily non-involved countries all three sectors – government, media and public opinion – mainly develop according to their own specific dynamics: governments have a political target that they follow; the media work according to their own, inborn ideological and professional or commercial orientation; and the public decides on matters of war

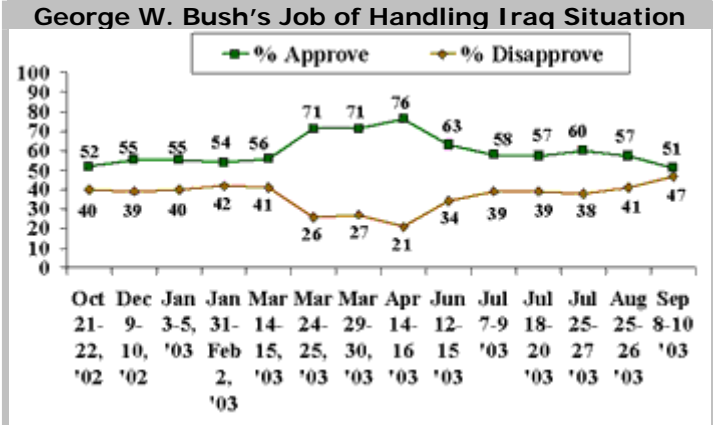


and peace according to their own values and attitudes that are rooted in the political culture and history of the relevant country. This, of course, does not mean that governments do not influence the media and public opinion or that the media and public opinion are not influenced by information and disinformation strategies of the governments at war. But it shows that there is no mechanism “manufacturing consent” about the facts – whether they are right or wrong – that are debated.

In contrast to in Great Britain, which still remains unclear, in the US, which was the main military protagonist during the Iraq war, all three relations between government, media and public opinion drew much closer. Many mainstream US media and large parts of their audiences seem to have “handed over” part of their internal diversity and autonomy to the leading sub-system: the government. The question for us is to decide whether we think that kind of mechanism, which overcomes internal strife in order to be ready for war, is healthy and vital for a democracy,. Or whether we think that open debate should be encouraged at all times, especially in wartime, when the public needs to decide about matters of life and death.

**Annex**

**Table 1**



Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr030912.asp>

**Notes**

<sup>i</sup> February 10, 2003.  
<sup>ii</sup> Jim Naureckas, When ‘Doves’ Lie. The New York Times plays down anti-war opinion, [www.fair.org/extra/0304/nyt-doves.html](http://www.fair.org/extra/0304/nyt-doves.html)  
<sup>iii</sup> Merissa Marr, BBC Chief attacks U.S. media war coverage, <http://washingtondc.craigslist.org/com/101673454.htm>

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- <sup>iv</sup> Mariellen Diemand, Media and Iraq : War Coverage Analysis,  
[www.mediaed.org/news/articles/mediairaq](http://www.mediaed.org/news/articles/mediairaq)
- <sup>v</sup> Deutschlandradio, Sendung : Zeitfragen,  
[www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf](http://www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf).
- <sup>vi</sup> Selected quotes or paraphrases from the study: Steve Rendall/Tara Broughel,  
Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent,  
[www.fair.org/extra/0305/warstudy.html](http://www.fair.org/extra/0305/warstudy.html).
- <sup>vii</sup> TV, patriotism helped swing British opinion on Iraq war, Agence France-  
Presse, April 17, 2003, [http://quickstart.clari.net/qs\\_se/webnews/wed/az/Qiraq-war-britain...](http://quickstart.clari.net/qs_se/webnews/wed/az/Qiraq-war-britain...)
- <sup>viii</sup> Deutschlandradio, Sendung : Zeitfragen,  
[www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf](http://www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf).
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>x</sup> Doing the dissent thing ? <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2907599.stm>.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ted Turner calls Murdoch warmonger,  
[www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/article.asp?ID=727](http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/article.asp?ID=727).
- <sup>xii</sup> Frankfurter Rundschau, February 13, 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Deutschlandradio, Sendung : Zeitfragen,  
[www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf](http://www.dradio.de/dlr/sendungen/zeitfragen/doc/z-030223.rtf).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Mariellen Diemand, Media and Iraq : War Coverage Analysis,  
[www.mediaed.org/news/articles/mediairaq](http://www.mediaed.org/news/articles/mediairaq).
- <sup>xv</sup> Larry King Show Live, April 14, 2003.