

Gulf War Fallout: A Theoretical Approach to Understand and Improve Media Coverage of the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This paper's goal is to lay the theoretical and conceptual groundwork to better understand global media's reporting behavior before, during and after the 2003 Gulf War. Its task is to get journalism educators and trainers thinking about an increasingly popular conceptual approach to studying mass media effects on audiences, and how personal biases inculcates the information in stories reporters choose to write and broadcast, which ultimately impacts the way audiences come to view an event. This paper raises issues salient to the understanding of mass communication theory, media effects, political communication, and global mass media studies.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dr. Ralph D. Berenger is an assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in international communication, ethics, communication theory, and mass media management and economics classes. He also consults with several public and private media corporations and organizations. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and book chapters and has delivered papers at several international communications organizations. He is editor of a book on media behavior during the 2003 Gulf war (Marquette Books, August 2004), and is currently book review editor/essayist for *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*. With over 30 years professional experience as a newspaper and magazine reporter, editor, publisher and international consultant, he holds master degrees in international mass communication and public administration, and a doctorate in political science. He has taught at Minnesota Metropolitan State College in Minneapolis, The College of Southern Idaho, and Idaho State University before joining AUC in 2000. In addition to the various states in the US, he has lived and worked in Bolivia, St. Lucia, Kenya, Zambia and Egypt. He is a native of North Dakota, but he lists his permanent residency as Idaho, where he spent most of his professional life. His email is: berenger@aucegypt.edu, and his home page can be viewed at <http://www.aucegypt.edu/faculty/berenger>

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This paper did not start the day American and British tanks rumbled across the Iraqi border on February 20, 2003. That was a “triggering event.” The idea’s incubation occurred shortly after September 11, 2001, and the initial reaction by some Middle East Arabs to the event.

The idea crystallized after Gallup and Zogby opinion polls revealed a deep rift in thinking between respondents in the Middle East and in the West about what happened on 9/11 and, more importantly, who was to blame for it. The polls were staggering in their total misunderstanding of each others’ cultures. Some would call them a mirror image of perceived reality. It was a reminder of what Majid Tehranian said in 1999 about four types of misunderstanding in the Middle East:

- a. Muslims do not understand the West
- b. The West does not understand Muslims
- c. The West does not understand the West
- d. and Muslims do not understand other Muslims.

That means simply that academics in the Arab and the Western worlds must try harder to understand each other and not leave the task to international mass media to do the job for them. Frankly, the media have done a lousy job anyway as they constantly grapple with language usage problems, misinterpretations of each other’s cultures, semantics and agenda-laden political cultures whose purposes are to exploit the differences between people and not to understand them.

Recent scholarship, evidenced by the number of papers presented at this conference and others, such as the AEJMC, and Global Fusion, has found framing theory a useful tool to explain not only media behavior but what messages people

consume and how this might affect development of individual and group schema (See Berenger, 2002b; Kuypers, 2002). This embrace of framing theory is somewhat new. A quick review of the literature produced by political scientists and communications scholars found few academic papers referenced framing theory before advent of the 21st Century. One major journal, the American Political Science Review, for example had not published a single paper with “framing or frame theory” in its title before 2002 (Berenger, 2002b). And few theory books, in either political science or mass communication, gave framing theory more than a passing reference prior to 2000. That has changed. Communication journals were a little more active in the mid to late 1990s, but the millennium seemed to embrace the popularity of framing theory, and it seems particularly well suited for propaganda and public relations studies (Hallahan, 1999) because it mixes mass audience behavior (which is measurable) with persuasive message dissemination. Some have even suggested framing theory might be an umbrella-like meta theory under which other theories are subsumed. That is debatable. What is not debatable is that to adequately understand how and why reporters, editors and audiences “frame” a concept in a cultural setting, one must also understand other recognized communication theories such as agenda setting; selective perception; cultivation theory; cue theory, and socialization-learning theory; etc.

Frame theory is a useful heuristic device that can be qualitative, quantitative and connotative. It is especially useful as an explicate of behavior of key components in the mass communication process: the communicator, the message, the medium and the audience (Entman 1991, 1993). Methodologies can be readership study, content evaluation and analysis, focus group analysis, and even ethnographic study. It can be

prescriptive, descriptive and comparative in its analysis as well, an extremely useful academic tool if you are interested in audience reception and behavior study.

Having read the likes of the Big G's—Goffman (1974), Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980), Gamson (1992), Gerbner (1992), Graber (1993) and Gurevitch (1977)—and wading into the cleansing waters of Anasobole (1995), Entman (1991, 1993), Iyengar (1991, 1993), Jamison (2000) and others, scores of media scholars have applied it to various aspects of the 2003 Iraq War.

Frames provide a context (by inclusion and exclusion) for message recipients. Of the hundreds of thousands of media messages disseminated before, during and after the 2003 Gulf War we, as individuals, are psychologically aware of only a few. We “select” what we want to think about. Frames make those messages memorable and understandable. Messages that contain frames agreeing with the schema of individual audience members resonate and can contribute to the way some people think about certain things. In a few rare cases—usually with reinforcement from groups and societal norms—they can contribute to a change in attitudes and schema.

To help the reader better understand the dynamics of how individual's accept and internalize messages, see Figure 1. Under this model each individual has two frames, a core opinion (CO) frame that contains one's strongest beliefs. This is a very rigid core that does not change readily. Surrounding the CO frame is a peripheral opinion (PO) frame. This is considerably porous and elastic and expands or contracts readily to encompass frames that contain messages. These message frames “negotiate” psychologically to be included in the peripheral frame, some times unconsciously. One could consider PO frame to be the mechanism that allows individuals to “select” their “perceptions” of reality based on information supplied externally. If message frames “resonate” with individual's CO frames (somewhat like

the engine that drives an individual's opinion forming process) those message frames become part of a person's perception and interest. Some times message frames can change the CO frames, but those epiphanies are rare. Most message frames reinforce an individual's CO frame schemata or they would have been selectively perceived by the PO frame in the first place. Messages that conflict with the CO frame but which have equal importance and weight can cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). If a message does not resonate with the CO frame it is either partly or totally rejected or it is neither accepted or rejected and awaits more information to give it greater salience (importance) or valance (weight) to renegotiate with the core frame. Messages that cause conflict with core frames are either rejected, rationalized, suppressed, or accepted (rarely) as a new reality.

Insert Figure 1 here

This model is useful in understanding one theory of how opinions are formed and changed, and why newsmen are naturally biased when they report events that conflict with their core beliefs. People who "package" communication create message and image frames to help their audiences decode their messages. This process is called enframing.

An example how media enframe information can be found immediately in what the 2003 Iraq war was called. Naming and framing go hand-in-hand. (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). To Western media, it was "Gulf War II," "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the "War in Iraq," the "Anglo-American-Iraq War" or simply, "the Iraq war." Note the neutral to slightly positive way the news organizations "framed" the conflict by choosing what to call it.. Arab media referred to the war differently. To them it was "Gulf War III" (the 1991 War was Gulf War II, and the eight-year Iraq-Iran conflict of the 1980's, was Gulf War I). The titles revealed a propensity of groups of people

to arbitrarily pick points in time as reference points. Europeans, of course, have done this for centuries. For eurocentrics the world is conveniently divided into Before Christ and After Christ with subchapters such as the Dark Ages, Middle Ages, Age of Enlightenment, Modern Ages and now Post-Modern Ages. Who knows what future “ages” will be named by scholars once the hyperbolic terms have been exhausted? For Middle East Society in the Modern Era history seems to have begun with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and resultant wars of 1967 and 1973—inexplicably ignored as “Gulf Wars” though the Gulf was most assuredly involved. This is the essence of framing—the inclusion or exclusion of terms that cloud a particular point of view.

During the 2003 Gulf War, Arab broadcasters and newspapers had alternative—mostly negatively—framed names for it as well. The mildest was the “U.S. War on Iraq.” Others called it “U.S. Aggression on Iraq,” “the U.S. Attack on Iraq,” the “U.S. Invasion of Iraq,” or even, the “U.S. Terrorism on Iraq.” The West, of course, no slouches in the name game, called it a “War of Liberation” or “Operation Freedom,” choosing these universally desired values as appropriate appellations. Criticism in the Arab World was harsh, often unbalanced, and unrelenting during the 2003 Gulf War, not only in print and national media, but on satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera, Abu-Dhabi TV and a new entry into the “air war”, Al-Arabiya from Saudi Arabia. Few Middle East commentators, if any, saw anything good to come from the war long before the first shot was fired. It could be argued that Arab viewers never before had so many sources of real-time information about an international war in the region. The era of competitive, transnational broadcasting in the region had arrived.

Because the 2003 Gulf War was played out in media with different ideological viewpoints—or *weltanschauung*—media scholars have found comparisons in news coverage irresistible and fruitful. This comparativist approach has spawned scores of recent papers and book chapters that help explain how print and broadcast journalists in the Middle East and the West reported the conflict. It can be safely said no other international conflict has ever been reported so instantaneously across so many different types of media than the 2003 Iraq War. Framing theory's popularity can be attested by the number of papers using it as an explicate of media behavior during the 2003 Iraq War, an indication of its usefulness in studying a variety of media—new and old.

Recent scholarship has examined regional media coverage around the globe—not only newspapers and broadcast news—but also Weblogs, Internet chat rooms, photographs and cartoons, alternative media such as Indymedia, global news outlets such as the BBC World Service and CNN and the Arabic satellite channels, and even television talk shows and late-night comedians (Berenger, 2004). Many Middle East newspapers or news services now publish their material on line over the Internet and in English, which greatly helps scholars without resources to hire translators. But the best stuff, it could be argued, are in the rich and nuanced native languages of the media themselves.

The frames embedded in the critical messages often reflected the worldviews (schema) of reporters and their media cultures, which allow researchers to decode frames. For example, the Arabic media often speculated about these now familiar general frames repeated before, during and after the conflict:

- Coalition's war was only its desire to control Iraqi oil, regardless what it said was the reason for Saddam's removal
- Coalition was fighting Israel's war on Muslims

- The Iraq war, as well as the war in Afghanistan against terrorism, was itself a greater terrorism of innocent peoples
 - Coalition disregarded lives of innocent civilians (video and newspaper photographs from the region tended to concentrate on dead and injured Iraqis, which Western press seemed to ignore)
 - U.S. was hypocritical in application of democracy/U.S. violated its own Constitution in this war
 - Coalition was arrogant in use of power; U.S. was bully
 - Coalition was targeting innocent civilians
 - War was unnecessary and potentially destabilizing to “moderate” governments in the region; war can only make matters worse
 - Coalition dangerously ignorant of Middle East customs and values
 - Coalition was on an anti-Muslim “Crusade”—in fact Osama bin Laden in interviews often referred to Coalition forces as “the Crusaders” who were fighting a war against Islam
 - No matter what the coalition’s war on terrorism was going to fail and even create more terrorists
 - U.S. and UK acted without world support and therefore was illegal
 - UN and Arab World powerless to stop U.S. and UK war.

Curiously, the Arab media did not immediately focus on Iraq’s potential Weapons of Mass Destruction program, which was one of the main reasons cited by Bush and Blair as the exigency for going to war. This was and continues to be a bigger issue in the United Kingdom and to a lesser degree the United States. It now appears Saddam’s WMD program was a Potemkin-like bluff in the grand Soviet tradition. But using a “fear appeal” propaganda technique to mobilize support, the Coalition was, in the final analysis, successful.

The Arab media, following the lead of the Western media, personalized the war. While Western media constant referred to Saddam Hussein’s behavior during his 35-year regime as another reason for the war, the Arab media—in news, broadcasts and cartoons—personalized the conflict as Bush and Blair’s war. In England, the media was mixed with only a few outlets (notably *The Times of London* and SkyNews, both owned by Rupert Murdoch) favoring the war with other national media opposing it. Blair was often portrayed in cartoons as Bush’s lap dog, ironically drawn as a French poodle, given France’s opposition to the war.

Framing theory—the examination of how media reporters and editors use images, symbols and word pictures—can be particularly useful in bias studies, though these, too, must be carefully crafted and risk cultural biases themselves.

Many scholars have argued that bias is unavoidable in language, especially if reporters want their stories read and understood. Over use of “neutral language” often results in blandness, albeit accurate blandness. Yet other academics maintain good reporting does need to be either bland or biased. This school of thought offers hope for journalism instructors if they understand that frame studies are more than academic exercises.

For one thing the studies of bias and framing can be useful in journalist training programs, which are increasing in the Middle East and elsewhere. These programs, sponsored by international organizations, are generally designed around the Socially Responsible Western Press Concept which has as normative values, not always realized but aspired to:

- Truthfulness in reporting issues
- Fair, balanced, impartial and two-sided reporting of events
- A fetish for accuracy no matter the ramifications for political regimes or dominant social constructs
- News reporting that is not sensational or purposefully inflammatory
- Free from governmental influence, fear or favor
- Respect for cultural minorities and their opinions

Under this concept, responsible news reporters and editors should be better aware of how the framing process works, not only the affect on audiences but also the biases reporters bring to their jobs. This is evidenced by which stories journalists and editors choose to report, how they are reported, who journalists interview and what parts of the interview will be selected for print or broadcast. An examination of their own motives in writing the story is also important: are they trying to further an

agenda (like anti-Americanism as a perceived national policy in the Middle East press; rampant stereotyping and euro-and-amercentrism in the Western press, etc.); or are they just trying to write an interesting story (by ignoring uncomfortable, contradictory facts or by artificially sensationalizing the story to inflame public opinion)? This would be a good start, but there are other dynamics that beg for investigation.

For example, why do intellectually honest individuals view the same event and arrive at completely different causations and conclusions? Why do we focus on one aspect of an event, discard the context and history of it, and form an opinion? How can truth ever be discerned truly? Troubling questions all—especially in relation to how these images are spread to mass audiences through media.

In the West where news media are aggressively independent of overt government influence. They are individualistic, highly competitive and professionalism is a highly regarded journalistic value, the information presented to the public helps shape its opinions. In the Middle East where the media follows a different model that combines elements of the authoritarian state press and essentially anti-colonial/anti-West developmental press models. (Someone must one day come up with a Middle East Model that stands alone among the standard taxonomies. Such a description would have to contain such normative behavior as deference to political authority, interpretation rather than explanation, and their convictions that they arbitrate the moral high ground in any discourse with the West.).

Media behaviors determine the information that viewers, readers and listeners need to form public opinions (Bateson, 1972, pp. 186-188; Clair, 1993, p. 117) based on their perceptions of reality. (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Berenger (2002a), in a talk to Egyptian journalists, listed the following as why media frames contribute to

misunderstanding, as well as understanding regardless of where media are based geographically. The comments were initially intended as an explication of media behavior during the second Palestinian Intifada, but were salient to the brief 2003 Iraq War as well since Western and Middle East media essentially employed the same techniques, including:

1. they distorted facts to fit pre-conceived convictions, ignoring contrary points of view or uncomfortable challenges to individual reporter schema.
2. they strengthened negative stereotypes held by their readers', viewers', or listeners' core frames—audience schema—by “cueing” or “priming” audiences to conclude what is cognitively comfortable.
3. by using only primary sources that reinforce reporters' or news organizations' pre-conceived ideas instead of seeking out authoritative sources on the other side of an issue. Instead, many broadcasters use a “card stacking” technique that gives space and air time to those who are controversially or outrageously opposed.
4. by following only what they perceive are their government's policy or interests on a given issue. This is called “agenda-setting.” It could also be called propaganda when there is no reasonable attempt to voice contrary viewpoints.
5. by contributing to audience's selective perception—by disseminating only images or information that reinforce the audience member's personal opinion frames—this is called “cultivation” theory.
6. by selecting images that incite rather than illuminate (sensationalism)—in our business the best images are those that stir our emotions. However, some reporters go beyond the impact of images and ascribe motivation to the action. Never distort the meaning of a picture by altering its meaning to “make it more interesting.” It goes without saying that digitally changing one head with another is unethical and could be libelous.
7. by not being aware of the “harm” they cause their audience by non-professional, careless, sloppy, unethical and dishonest reporting and editing controversial news stories
8. by constantly seeking stories where an action brings a reaction, then another action-reaction, never arriving at a closure point. This contributes to a “spiral of misunderstanding.”

As suggestions for future journalism training programs, Berenger (2002a) said professional media practitioners can break this cycle of action-reaction by:

1. recognizing that we, as journalists, have preconceived ideas about the story before we cover it. (core frame beliefs, attitudes). A professional knows himself or herself, and his or her biases. First step is to recognize

them. The next step is to work against them by ensuring every event is reported fairly.

2. understanding that our coverage contributes to “a spiral of silence” among our readers and viewers. Voices that differ from ours are stifled by overwhelming coverage and the perception that their comments are unwelcome or could even draw a hostile response if they differ from the accepted line.
3. encouraging editors to select photographs, video and stories that tell the story without needlessly inflaming public emotions.
4. covering stories aggressively—but ethically and honestly—through double-checking facts, quoting sources on both sides (and especially in the middle if you can find them).
5. trying to identify your personal frames and how they fit with universal values. Then try to analyze the opposition’s frames and how they fit with universal values. Chances are you will find they are similar if not exact. These values define our “humanness.” Some universal held values that cut across religious, ethnic, cultural and social boundaries are: truth, love, loyalty/fidelity, desire to be safe and secure, honesty/trustworthiness, liberty/freedom, respect/honor, and pursuit of happiness.
6. understanding that your media contribute to the development and hardening of core opinion frames, for good or bad..
7. recognizing that in any dispute there is a “third way” toward resolution, not merely a zero-sum, win-lose. Resolution might be a win-win or even a lose-lose to gain a higher goal: peace and understanding. But you should only recognize that fact. Your job, as a journalist, is to tell the truth as close as it can be discerned.
8. developing an understanding that everyone in the North Africa-Levant region is hurt by the continued turmoil, not only economically but over the long-term as violent acts on both sides of disputes become rationalized in the press, or are not strongly condemned by those media that carry influence with the public. The struggle for getting world opinion should not be the end goal because it is a process. Do the right thing and world opinion will follow.
9. And finally, understanding there is no simple formula for forming public opinion. The processes are too complex and the outcomes too uncertain to be simplified by any theory, including the ones espoused here.

In Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, overwhelmingly unfavorable—at times cleverly sarcastic—views of the United States has helped cultivate negative public opinion in the region to the point that a U.S. initiative of several hundred million dollars has been earmarked for journalism training in the coming years. Part of that training should include a frames theory component.

In conclusion, frame theory is an excellent tool for scholars to assess how the print and broadcast media are doing their jobs and how audiences are receiving and internalizing the messages media send. An understanding of the audience reception process by journalists would also help shape their professionalism and social responsibility, which in turn will result in less-biased and more truthful reporting that will gain the audience's trusts. One of the results of the 2003 Gulf War was that information for the first time was available to all audiences interested in the conflict, and in the languages of the combatants. Arab media to a large extent competed with themselves globally rather than just regionally. Arab audiences could weigh for themselves which Arab or even Western satellite channel was the more trustworthy and dependable, which was the more credible. This might well have been the lasting fallout of the war: the new battle by competing Arabic channels for the hearts and minds of the Arab audiences. The main weapon in that battle will likely be credibility.

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FIGURE 1 PO and CO Political Frames How Receiver Internalizes Information

