

Following the Flag: Nationalism, the News Media, and Abu Ghraib

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Abstract: This paper examines the news media's role in American nationalism and patriotism. Based on a content analysis of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*'s coverage of Abu Ghraib, it is argued that the news media largely protected the American identity by portraying the torture as a consequence of a 'few bad apples'; taking cues from the Bush administration's nationalist frame. This research posits that the news media adheres to the "Rather maxim" named after long-time CBS anchor, Dan Rather, who noted that in times of conflict the media tends to "follow the flag."

“Torture anywhere is an affront to human dignity everywhere. We are committed to building a world where human rights are respected and protected by the rule of law...The United States is committed to the worldwide elimination of torture, and we are leading this fight by example. I call on all governments to join with the United States and the community of law-abiding nations in prohibiting, investigating, and prosecuting all acts of torture and in undertaking to prevent other cruel and unusual punishment. I call on all nations to speak out against torture in all its forms and to make ending torture an essential part of their diplomacy...The suffering of torture victims must end, and the United States calls on all governments to assume this great mission.” *George W. Bush - June 23, 2003*
Statement on United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

Introduction: The “Rather Maxim”

In a 1996 forum on journalism ethics at the University of Texas, Dan Rather, then long-time CBS anchor, was asked about his views of the US mainstream media’s propagandistic coverage of the 1991 Gulf War. He responded that in times of war “journalism tends to follow the flag” (Rather quoted in Jensen, 2005, p. 81). Rather is a “patriotic American without apology” who declined to wear a pin of the American flag on the air following 9/11, going against the norm of his colleagues, because he has “the flag burned” in his heart and has “ever since infancy” (p. 69). While he concedes that patriotism is a difficult issue for journalists, Rather made his priorities well-known:

I’m an American, and I’m an American reporter. And yes, when there’s combat involving Americans...I’m always pulling for us to win (p. 82).

These honest remarks highlight the contradictions of a seemingly professional journalist adhering to their assumed societal role of “objective” and “adversarial” reporting. Although most journalists will not boast so openly of their patriotic tendencies, Robert Jensen (2005) correctly asserts that Dan Rather seems to reflect the rule, not the exception. The problem is that, as Marvin Kalb puts it, “Patriotism is...not for the journalist. Patriotism inhibits skepticism and a good journalist has to subject all statements and claims by the government to skeptical inquiry” (Kalb quoted in Singh, 2003, pp. 44-45; see also Jensen, 2005).¹

¹ Kalb paradoxically believes that, unlike journalists, patriotism is fine for citizens. Taking his argument about journalism to its logical end, patriotism should be considered good for nobody since it “inhibits

This paper seeks to explain the news media's role in nationalism and patriotism. It seeks to understand the news media's contribution to constructing and protecting an "us" versus "them" identity. This paper will review previous literature and apply it to coverage of torture at Abu Ghraib. The question guiding this research is if nationalism/patriotism influenced news coverage of torture at Abu Ghraib. This research finds that the media adheres to the "Rather Maxim" named after long-time CBS anchor, Dan Rather. Based on previous literature, the structures and norms of the news media, and the content analysis of this paper, the news media, as Dan Rather put it, tends to "follow the flag" in its reporting of US foreign policy which favors "us" over "them" regardless of the situation. Thus, the news media skews foreign affairs coverage through a nationalist lens.

The paper is structured into three sections. The first section examines how social/national identity is influenced and shaped by news media coverage of US foreign policy. A content analysis of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*'s initial two weeks of Abu Ghraib coverage constitutes the second section. Finally, this paper will discuss the implications of these findings, research limitations, and concluding remarks.

National Identity and the News Media

Like most group identities, the US national self is "wrought with ambivalence" (Flores, 2003, p. 362) and has gone through numerous reconstructions (Jacobson, 1998). It is well established that national identities are largely defined by institutions of power and various identities, such as race and nationality, are socially organized and propagated through public and private institutions (see Anderson, 1991; Jacobson, 1998; Ngai, 2005). Though the media is but one of the numerous social and political institutions that

skepticism" of authoritative claims.

construct group identity, it is a formidable one because of its ability to “reach virtually all citizens all the time” and “no other institution is so well positioned to disseminate messages about national identity and order” (Fishman and Marvin, 2003, p. 42). Artz (2005) argues that the media “reflect and reinforce identifiable cultural norms” that “protect or implement dominant political interests and goals” (p. 8). Lule (2002) makes a similar claim arguing that the media plays a role as mythmaker which “expresses prevailing ideals, ideologies, values, and beliefs” (p. 277).

National identity, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined as “a specific form of collective identity that is simultaneously ‘one of inclusion’...and ‘one of exclusion’” (Hutcheson et al., 2004, p. 28).² It is based on values, histories and myths that helps distinguish an in-group from an out-group. There is a lively debate around the differences between nationalism and patriotism, but what is more convincing is the argument that they are the same. Robert Jensen (2005) contends that, among other reasons, “patriotism is inherently political” because of the “fundamental way it defines citizenship in relation to the nation-state” (pp. 68-69). He cogently argues that “patriotism cannot be distinguished from nationalism” because its forms, tactics and ideologies are based on the same premises (p. 73; see also Pei, 2004).³

Nationalism and the News Media

Liebes (1992) examined US and Israeli media coverage of the 1991 Gulf War and the Palestinian Intifada and its relation to the journalist as a citizen. The author found

² This follows the standard definition of social identity theory.

³ This paper agrees with Jensen (2005) and will use the terms nationalism and patriotism interchangeably. This contention is supported by scholarship that finds that political elites engage in “strategic political communication” to mobilize the public around national policies and instill a collective identity, ensuring they suppress competing or contradictory sub-identities (Domke et al., 2006, Hutcheson et al., 2004). Furthermore, Breuilly (1993) argues that nationalism is a form of politics. Following Weber’s definition, this paper assumes that politics is about power and its distribution.

that “journalists’ treatment of their own country’s war is different from the way they handle other people’s wars” (p. 54). Numerous framing mechanisms such as equalization, sanitizing, and personalizing were employed that biased the coverage. The US media heavily sanitized the Gulf War, focusing more on the technology of the weaponry rather than its consequences. Liebes found the coverage to “be a classic example of how a conflict can be portrayed without showing the other side” (p. 49). Generally, the US media portrayed Iraq (or the ‘other’) by demonizing Saddam Hussein implying that he represented the totality of the country; essentially excising its citizens.

This process coincided with another doctrinal need – equalization – in order to legitimate the blatant asymmetrical military power the US enjoyed. The author claims that the “process of equalizing serves the media in their quest both for balance (in that both sides are equally ‘empowered’) and for a good story.” Furthermore, the “latent function of building up the enemy, of course, is to contribute to making our victory all the more glorious” (p. 49).

Another framing mechanism used was “personalizing” the war, however, “the humanity of the two sides is asymmetrically portrayed” (p. 50). US soldiers and government administration members dominated coverage while Iraqis were largely absent, with the exception of the demonized Saddam (p. 52).

Entman (2004) found dichotomous framing in US news media coverage between the US shutdown of an Iranian civilian airliner in 1988 compared to the coverage of the 1983 KAL shutdown by Cold War foe, the Soviet Union. Despite being similar incidents, in the case of the Soviets, it was framed as a deliberate act, or as one *Newsweek* cover put it, “Murder in the Air” (p. 33), whereas when the US perpetrated the

act, it was framed as “committing an understandable blunder” or a mistake (p. 36). Entman found that agency was explicitly applied to the Soviet regime whereas the US was merely a victim of a technical error. Moreover, in the segments/articles where the US action was framed as a deliberate act, the majority of the citations or quotes came from Iranian or other hostile foreign sources, limiting its political significance (p. 41). Such dichotomous coverage serves to protect national identity (Rivenburgh, 2000, p. 307).

Similarly, scholars have explored how the news media visually frames “us” versus “them.” Fishman and Marvin (2003) analyze *New York Times* front-page photographs depicting violent activity over a 20 year period. The authors analyzed the types of violence (explicit, latent, and dramatic) as well as its agents (US or non-US). Despite that there were more photographs of US agent violence overall, “it is more likely to appear in forms that conceal its presence...in visually indirect and even positive terms” (p. 41). Of the cases sampled, roughly ten percent of the images depicted US agents involved in explicit violence whereas almost half of non-US agents’ images showed explicit violence (p. 35). Furthermore, “U.S. nonviolent agents outnumbered non-U.S. nonviolent agents by nearly 3 to 1” (p. 36). Even when US troops were involved in aggressive military action, the photos either depicted them as victims of violence or showed “activities that fail to suggest war” like soldiers shaving, eating, or attending church services (p. 38). Fishman and Marvin conclude that the *Times* front-page bias “help structure U.S. identity by drawing strong and reliable contrasts with outside groups” (p. 42).

Artz (2004) surveyed the photos and images featured in the *New York Times* during the first week of the invasion of Iraq. He found that “the thematic consistency of visual images sympathetically representing the war underscores the accommodation the *New York Times* made to [Bush] administration perspectives” (p. 87). Despite the US waging a war of aggression, these photos pictured soldiers riding in vehicles, reading novels and giving candy to children; “a glaring inconsistency with the actual conduct of the war” (p. 87). He contends that the *Times* helped sanitize the war by rarely showing civilian death and destruction (p. 88). “War may be hell,” Artz asserts but based on the *Times*’ news photos, “it’s not particularly unpleasant” (p. 85). This coverage was typical of the news media. Similar to previous conflicts, Americans viewed a highly sanitized war, especially since many saw missiles being launched but rarely viewed where they landed. During the initial invasion of Iraq, the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, showed less than six pictures of “dead or grievously wounded bodies” on its front page despite casualties’ exceedingly far higher (Rampton and Stauber, 2003, p. 197). Kellner (2004) found similar coverage on television that “tended toward pro-military patriotism, propaganda, and technological fetishism, celebrating the weapons of war and military humanism, highlighting the achievements and heroism of the US military” while rarely showing destruction and death (p. 57). Furthermore, the media enthusiastically took part in “Pentagon constructed mythologies” like the infamously staged rescue of Private Jessica Lynch (p. 56).

Hutcheson et al. (2004) make the crucial link between how the national identity is shaped by the state through the media. They found that media discourse about national identity following September 11th “closely paralleled that of the government and military

officials” (p. 44). Based on the logic of the institutional structure of the media (ownership, source reliance, advertising/economic pressures, flak, ideology), the news media adopted “a U.S. identity-affirming discourse” (p. 31). In addition, government/media discourse linked identity to national security which “helped create a climate in which dissent and opposition became equated with anti-Americanism” (p. 47). In an effort to do away with any pretense for serving its watchdog role, “the five major television news organizations agreed to follow Bush Administration guidelines for handling videotapes of Osama bin Laden” (Storin, 2003, p. 20). Many corporate newspapers adhere to the same system by withholding information from its readers that the government defined as detrimental to the national security. Ironically, many of these censorship policies (both voluntary and enforced) were justified as protecting American values like the First Amendment (see Graber, 2003).

The coverage of the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq was well within the parameters of discourse ideologically and culturally acceptable to the US. Research found that the media “served as voices of U.S. political power” by framing its Iraq discourse similar to the Bush Administration (Gasher, 2005, p. 219). Lule (2004) asserts that most of the news media “anticipated rather than debated the prospect of war” (p. 187). According to a FAIR study (2003) that examined network newscasts on-camera sources during Secretary of State Colin Powell’s UN presentation, current or former government/military officials were the most frequent guests. Furthermore, US sources that were skeptical of Bush’s Iraq policy or considered “anti-war” still remained within the limits serviceable to the national ideology by being concerned with tactics and costs.

The majority of the critics featured on the networks were non-US sources, limiting its political and cultural magnitude (see Entman, 2004).

As the literature reviewed above indicates, research also finds that the news media is less than vigilant when it comes to covering human rights abuses, especially involving the US as the perpetrator (Caliendo, Gibney, and Payne, 1999; Chomsky, 1989; Entman, 2006; Friel and Falk, 2004; Goss, 2002; Herman, 1993; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Jacobson, Fang, and Raffel, 2002). Friel and Falk (2004) contend that the *New York Times* rarely considers international law when the US is involved in foreign affairs. ‘International law’ or ‘UN Charter’ was never mentioned in the more than 70 editorials on Iraq from September 11th, 2001 to March 20th, 2003. “Thus, the leading editorial voice in the United States simply declined to consider in print whether a major US military invasion and occupation of another country violated international law” (p. 15). The authors note that *Times* news reports occasionally cited individuals challenging the invasion on international law grounds, however, “they were usually if not always foreign officials” contributing to the “nationalist momentum in the United States toward war” (p. 47).

Abu Ghraib and the News Media

Presidents wield tremendous influence over the American national identity (Stuckey, 2004). President Bush, like many presidents before him, contends that “support for human rights is the cornerstone of American foreign policy” (Bush, 2004). However, actions like torture at Abu Ghraib show the contrary. One thing is clear: Abu Ghraib “created serious ideological problems when the United States was accused of using torture against its prisoners and detainees” (Stuckey and Ritter, 2007, p. 659).

Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2007) tracked labels of “mistreatment,” “abuse,” “torture,” and “scandal” in mainstream media coverage of Abu Ghraib (p. 90). While they found that the primary label to describe the activities at Abu Ghraib was overwhelmingly “abuse,” the authors argue that “torture” was an appropriate and justifiable label. Moreover, when torture was used as a label, it was softened and abstracted from US actors and the events that occurred at Abu Ghraib (pp. 92-93). The authors’ data shows that journalists were more reluctant to use the term “torture” in their own narrative compared to the term “abuse.” In the case of the *Washington Post*, 55% of the items used the term “torture” compared to 95% employing the term “abuse.” The national sample found a mere 1% of articles used torture as a primary label (p. 94). A significant majority (62%) of *New York Times* articles and editorials made no reference to torture at all. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston conclude that torture as a label to describe the events at Abu Ghraib was “a rarely offered perspective” (p. 94; see also Jones, 2006).⁴

Abu Ghraib: Background

Located just outside of Baghdad, Abu Ghraib is the infamous prison of the Saddam era for torture and executions. Soon after the US invasion, it was converted to a US military prison. Most prisoners were civilians, including minors, picked up from random military sweeps (Hersh, 2004a). The majority of the detainees were deemed by US authorities to be of low intelligence value for the ongoing war on terrorism (Hersh, 2004b). Abu Ghraib did not become part of the American public discourse until April 28th, 2004 when *60 Minutes II* broke the story including graphic photos of torture and

⁴ Jones (2006) found that over a one year coverage period from April 2004 to April 2005, “‘torture’ did not appear anywhere at all as a label to describe what happened at Abu Ghraib in 80% of all *Washington Post* articles, 85% of all *CBS News* broadcasts, and 69% of all *Newsweek* articles” (p. 16).

abuse.⁵ One investigation that occurred by the media blitz was the Taguba Report. Portions of the report leaked to the press found numerous cases of “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” occurred in late 2003. The immediate perpetrators identified included members of the 372nd Military Police Company, US intelligence organizations, and private contractors. The photographs were part of a “dehumanizing interrogation process” in the attempt to soften the detainees for actionable intelligence (Hersh, 2004b).

Senior-level members of the Bush administration claimed to be unaware of the crimes. They were immediately denounced as, according to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, “fundamentally un-American” (quoted in Hersh, 2004b). The administration was adamant in contending that the torture at Abu Ghraib was a consequence of a few low-level individuals. Moreover, those actions did not reflect the overall objectives and tactics of the Iraq War.

The Bush administration’s reaction to Abu Ghraib is surprising considering that torture is historically quite American, at least policy-wise for numerous presidential administrations (McCoy, 2006). Following 9/11, Secretary Rumsfeld publicly declared his contempt for the Geneva Conventions. Similarly to his broader critique of the Pentagon culture (one that he made well before the terrorist attacks), Rumsfeld wanted the ‘gloves to come off’ and urged his underlings to take greater risks in intelligence gathering. It was clear well before the Abu Ghraib revelations that torture was not a consequence of “a few bad apples.” Rather, the practice of torture occurred in multiple locations including, among others, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay.⁶ Moreover,

⁵ CBS initially held the story for two weeks at the personal request of General Richard Myers.

⁶ For the documentary evidence of torture, see Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston (2007, pp. 84-89, 199-204). As of April 2006, more than 600 military personnel were accused of involvement of abusing detainees around the globe (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007, p. 221n19).

various legal memos inside the administration specifically sought to protect President Bush and top-level officials from legal recourse for the policies they were pursuing.

Method

Based on a review of past literature, this paper expects that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage of Abu Ghraib were reported with a nationalist bias. Since the news media relies heavily on government and elite sources that have an incentive in the national structure, the news media will amplify sources and ideologies defined and serviceable to the nation while ignoring or marginalizing competing frameworks. Furthermore, coverage of US actors involved in violent activity will be framed to reflect well upon the US national identity.

Bennett et al. (2007) found that the label “torture” appeared most prominently in the initial two weeks of the Abu Ghraib story breaking (p. 95). With this in mind, this paper will examine the initial two weeks of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*’s coverage of Abu Ghraib. Starting from the day after *60 Minutes II* broke the story⁷, it will determine if two of the leading agenda-setting US dailies were sufficiently independent enough to reconcile the representation and reality of the Bush administration’s nationalist framing on torture, and, more broadly, human rights policy.⁸

Abu Ghraib provides one of the most stringent case studies to test the nationalist tendencies of the news media. Bennett et al. (2007) dismiss the nationalist thesis of the news media arguing that if they are nationalist, then these issues would not receive any

⁷ Coverage period: 04/29/04 – 05/013/04

⁸ This paper follows Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston’s definition of media independence which is “the capacity to offer timely and sustained news perspectives that challenge dominant government positions when evidence warrants them” (p. 74; see also Entman, 2004, p. 17). Entman (2004) defines ‘news frames’ as “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (p. 5; see also Entman, 1993). Frames consist of defining problems, identifying causes, expressing a moral judgment, and providing remedies.

coverage. For example, the fact that the term “torture” appears in news discourse undermines the cultural congruency/social identity thesis (pp. 104-105). Abu Ghraib equally provides suitable conditions for independent reporting. First, Abu Ghraib fits specific information biases as the story was dramatic with scandalous photographs to substantiate the allegations. Furthermore, it violated international law and the reported values of the US public and Bush administration. Second, a plethora of credible information existed from authoritative sources both in and out of the government. Third, Abu Ghraib demonstrated a blatant contradiction to the Bush administration’s declared objectives with significant legal and political implications. Finally, it provided the means for the media to redeem itself after its unsatisfactory pre-war coverage, as both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* admitted.

Using Nexis, the search yielded a total of 127 relevant articles, masthead editorials, and op/eds.⁹ News items were coded to assess the overall frame and determine whether it adhered to the Bush administration’s nationalist frame or adopted an independent frame. To establish if human rights received consideration, any mention of relevant international law protocols (e.g. Geneva Conventions) or human rights organizations (e.g. International Committee of the Red Cross) were coded. These were placed into three categories – *explicit* (human rights and the role of international law is an important aspect of the story), *passing references* (cites international law without context or understanding), or *none* (no consideration of human rights as it relates to Abu Ghraib). The last category being the Bush administration’s preferred frame while the first category as a counterframe. Additionally, the item’s primary point of view was coded to assess if

⁹ *New York Times*, n = 57; *Washington Post*, n = 70. For Nexis, this paper borrowed Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston’s (2007, p. 211) search term “hlead (Abu Ghraib or (prison and Iraq*))”. Please note that letters to the editor were not analyzed nor were any items that did not appear in Section A.

the victims of the abuses received consideration since one of the justifications for the invasion was human rights. The articles were also coded for descriptions of torture and abuse of the victims. This paper expects to find that descriptions of the alleged acts would be vague and marginal to the reporting as it would be harmful to the national identity. Furthermore, the items were coded for the use of the term torture and if that label was applied to US actors. Photographs of abuses and the placement of the photos were also considered.¹⁰

Blame was coded to determine if coverage contextualized Abu Ghraib to broader US policy or followed the nationalist cues of the Bush administration. If blame was assigned to *low-level* soldiers, then Abu Ghraib was a consequence of ‘a few bad apples’ (the administration’s preferred frame) and not reflective of the American identity. If blame was assigned to such actors as President Bush, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, or the Bush administration at large, then it follows that the torture was systemic (independent counterframe) and against the preferred framing of the national ethos.

Data and Analysis

As the data in Table 1 shows (see appendix below), the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* coverage of Abu Ghraib largely followed the cues of the Bush administration. Abu Ghraib was rarely considered from a human rights perspective.¹¹ More than 50% of the items ignored the Geneva Conventions and other relevant international treaties and organizations that protect both civilians and combatants in conflict environments. At best, they were referenced in passing, with little grounding in

¹⁰ Photos were coded only for the *Times* as the *Post* does not indicate in Nexus if photos were included.

¹¹ The *Post* published the only utterance of ‘war crimes’ during the first week of coverage – an accurate term for what occurred and the legal classification for those to be punished – which came from a quote from former Human Rights Minister of Iraq, Abdul Basit Turki (Chan, 2004). Thus, the source of the quote limits the political significance (see Entman, 2004).

the situation at Abu Ghraib. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the coverage adhered to the administration's 'bad apples' frame. In other words, the blame was left largely at the feet of a handful of low-level individuals rather than examine the event as official policy. The overwhelming majority of items did not apply the term torture to US actions. In short, the coverage was viewed through a nationalist-colored lens.

Framing Abu Ghraib from the victims' viewpoint was equally scarce as only 7% of the pieces from the *Times* and *Post* featured statements from the victims. Moreover, the majority of Abu Ghraib articles were not featured on the front-page. This paper supports Bennett et al.'s finding that "the victims remained in a sense invisible" (2007, p. 113).

After *60 Minutes II* broke the story, the *Times* picked up the story the next day but buried it in the back on page A15. Curiously, it was ignored on Friday. The *New York Times* did not run a headline story until Saturday, May 1. The headline read "Bush Voices 'Disgust' at Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners" (Shanker and Steinberg, 2004). As Massing (2004) put it, "the *Times*' initial front-page story on Abu Ghraib concentrated not on the abuses themselves but on the President's response to them" (p. 73). No photographs of torture accompanied the headlines. Rather, they were placed on A5, providing distance from President Bush on the front-page. In fact, photographs of torture and abuse were scarce. As Table 1 indicates, of the more than forty stories the *Times* ran on Abu Ghraib for the initial two weeks, a mere eight photos depicting torture and abuse were featured. Three of which were worthy enough to make the front-page.¹²

Though overall the news demonstrated little capacity for reporting free from state framing, significant differences exist between articles and editorials as revealed in Tables

¹² The *Times* first week of coverage did not feature any photos of torture on its front-page.

2 and 3. These differences demonstrate the power of sources. As noted, current protocols of journalistic norms require that reporters' keep their own opinions out of the story. As a consequence, journalists are reliant on authoritative sources to shape the story. As the Table 2 demonstrates, editorials are not bound by the constraints of "objectivity" and ironically enough are more likely to provide a multidimensional story. Editorials were more likely contextualize Abu Ghraib by tracing the path of torture to the administration as opposed to a few low-level individuals. These pieces were more likely to argue that the Bush administration, especially Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, set the conditions for torture. In other words, the policy at Abu Ghraib should be viewed institutionally. They supported this contention by comparing the statements and actions of the Bush administration human rights policies revealing the large discrepancies between them. In addition, these editorials noted the administration's open contempt for international law and human rights.¹³ Most importantly, editorials were more likely to view Abu Ghraib from a human rights perspective. While they did not bring the actual victims to the forefront like a few of the news articles, the primacy of international law protecting human rights was apparent in the editorial section. Finally, more than half of the editorials used the label torture to describe US actions. Thus, the editorial sections somewhat challenged the nationalist frame. However, these pieces were sporadic and failed to provide a consistent counterframe to the largely nationalist reporting.

One finding that challenges the thesis of this paper and merits further consideration was the majority of the news items provided descriptions of the acts of

¹³ These editorials, however, did not spur any self-reflection on their own neglect, or any of the mainstream media outlets, of under-reporting many of these issues. For example, both the *Times* and *Post* essentially ignored the killing of more than 600 civilians in Fallujah just a few weeks prior to Abu Ghraib (see Entman, 2006). Equally important, neither news coverage nor commentary investigated previous presidential administrations torture policy such as the Vietnam War's Phoenix Program.

torture at Abu Ghraib. However, this was softened with framing the crimes as a result of a “few bad apples”, rarely linking the actions with the term “torture” and marginalizing the victims of Abu Ghraib by essentially muting them.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper confirm Hutcheson et al.’s assertion that in times of crisis the press is more likely to be patriotic. Despite sufficient evidence warranting a more objective analysis of the torture at Abu Ghraib, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* failed to offer sustained and relevant counterframes to challenge the Bush administration’s nationalist perspective. They overwhelmingly allowed the Bush administration to define the “reality” of Abu Ghraib. The data suggests that the seemingly free press is, at best, “semi-independent” (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007).

As noted, Bennett et al. (2007) dismiss the nationalist tendencies of the news media arguing that if they are nationalist, then these issues would not receive any coverage. For example, the fact that the term “torture” appears in news discourse undermines the cultural congruency/social identity thesis (pp. 104-105). However, the very logic they use to dismiss nationalism in the media refutes their own argument. To be sure, nationalism is not the sole explanation for patterns of Abu Ghraib coverage. While it is clear there was not a “blanket cultural prohibition,” the news media, consistent with previous literature, softened and obscured the nature of the crimes at Abu Ghraib. In other words, if the media is “semi-independent” as they argue, this paper contends that the news media is also “semi-nationalist.”¹⁴ This harkens back to Gans’ (1979) “enduring

¹⁴ Similar to Jones (2006), this argument is complementary rather than contrary to the one put forth by Bennett et al. (2007).

values” of journalism; one of which is ethnocentrism, especially during times of covering a foreign crisis.

The data supports Liebes’s (1992) contention that journalists are likely to treat their own country’s conflicts more sympathetically compared to another country. The findings equally confirm Chomsky’s “damage control” thesis (1989). He posits that when horrific acts become impossible to ignore, news media coverage is

diverted to overzealous patriots or to the personality defects of leaders who have strayed from our noble commitments, but not to the institutional factors that determine the persistent and substantive content of these commitments (pp. 19-20).

Bennett’s (2007) four information biases of news reporting were also apparent in the Abu Ghraib coverage. The stories were highly personalized and dramatic, dealing with President Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and the political game of handling a sensational scandal without scrutinizing the scandal itself. Also, the stories were largely fragmented. The news coverage provided very little context to the broader policies of the Bush administration nor did they challenge the objectives of the Iraq War. Also, the four information biases were largely ethnocentric and provided little challenge to the American ethos. Finally, the data also supports Entman’s (2004) observation that a strict line of demarcation exists between the news and editorial staff as the latter were able to provide a more nuanced critique.

This adheres to the Rather maxim developed throughout this paper. The news media played a significant role in protecting the American national identity in its coverage of the crimes at Abu Ghraib. As the content analysis demonstrates, the media, taking cues from the Bush administration, provided a nationalist bias to the coverage of Abu Ghraib. More importantly, as the historical record has shown, this is standard operating procedure of the news media in that they are “pulling for us to win.”

Analyzing the structure and patterns of the news media provides a fairly clear reason as to why the media is overwhelmingly nationalistic. However, limitations persist and more research is required. The data collected is limited, consisting of only two weeks of coverage in two newspapers. Future research needs to investigate a more extensive coverage period as well as include more newspapers and other mediums like television. Furthermore, a comparative analysis, similar to Jones (2006), needs to be assessed in order to clarify the nuances of American reporting. The role of the Internet and its effect on the business of the news media needs to be considered as it transcends the nation-state. An examination of news media reporting during non-conflict times (i.e. when the US is not explicitly at war) needs to be compared to the present as the war on terrorism may be considered a qualitatively different era. A longer examination period allows for tracing, what Hallin (1984) calls, the spheres of legitimate controversy. If legitimate sources voice opposition to a policy, then the spectrum of debate in the media increases. It is possible, then, that legitimate opposition, such as Democratic presidential contender John Kerry, framed the abuses from a human rights perspective and challenged the nationalist frame.¹⁵

What's At Stake Here?

The preamble to the Society of Profession Journalists' Code of Ethics proclaims that "public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues." As such, the code demands that journalists' should, among other things, "examine their own cultural values and avoid

¹⁵ In reality, Kerry did not. He joined his colleagues in Congress in lambasting the Bush administration for not giving them a sufficient heads up about the crimes. Thus, it was not the crimes that elicited the outrage from Congress but rather the fact that the White House did not tell Congress about the crimes.

imposing those values on others.” In addition, “support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.”¹⁶ An independent press, as the public sphere demands, must transcend nationalism which Albert Einstein considered to be “an infantile disease” and “the measles” to humanity. At the very least, the news media should provide sufficient and contextual information for citizens to deliberate and understand policies in their name regardless of the hurt this may impose on a nation’s sensibilities.

This paper suggests that the news media adheres to the interests of national elites rather than serving the informational imperatives of a self-governing society. Stuckey and Ritter (2007) assert that, like most presidents, Bush’s rhetoric and practice “subverts the democratic impetus of human rights” and weaken “the practices of democracy he claims to be furthering. He has deepened the shadows clinging to democracy” (p. 662). A more independent press can shed light on these dark shadows of presidents’ human rights policies. For now, Abu Ghraib demonstrates that “when democracy needs it most, the press is least capable of independent reporting” (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007, p. 71).

¹⁶ Society of Professional Journalists: Code of Ethics <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Appendix

Table 1

Total *New York Times* and *Washington Post* Items (n = 127)

Human Rights/International Frame	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
Explicit	6	12	18 (14%)
Passing Reference	18	23	41 (32%)
None*	30	38	68 (54%)

*Administration's preferred frame

Blame¹⁷	NYT	WP	# of References
Bush	9	8	17
Rumsfeld	6	12	18
Congress	0	2	2
Low-level*	31	41	72

¹⁷ Note that the number of blames may not equal the number of news items as more than one person or institution may be assigned blame in an item.

None 11 13 24

*Administration's preferred frame

Acts Described	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
# of articles	35	49	84 (66%)

No Torture	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
# of articles	37	41	78 (61%)

Torture Label applied to US actors	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
# of articles	12	19	31 (24%)

***New York Times* Articles and Photographs of Torture (n = 46)**

# of Articles without photos of Torture	38 (83%)
# of Articles featuring Photos of Torture	8 (17%)
# of Front-page articles featuring photos of Torture	3 (7%)

Table 2

New York Times and *Washington Post* Masthead Editorials and Op/Eds (n = 26)

Human Rights/International Law Frame	NYT	WP	Total (% of Total)
Explicit	3	7	10 (38%)
Passing References	3	1	4 (15%)
None*	5	7	12 (46%)

*Administration's preferred frame

Blame	NYT	WP	Total
Bush	4	4	8
Rumsfeld	4	5	9
Congress	0	2	2
Low-level*	2	6	8
None	1	1	2

*Administration's preferred frame

Torture label applied to US actors	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
	7	7	14 (54%)

Table 3

New York Times and *Washington Post* Articles (n = 101)

Human Rights/International Law Frame	NYT	WP	Total (% of Total)
Explicit	3	5	8 (8%)
Passing Reference	15	22	37 (37%)
None*	28	28	56 (55%)

*Administration's preferred frame

Blame	NYT	WP	Total
Bush	5	4	9
Rumsfeld	2	7	9
Congress	0	0	0
Low-level*	29	35	64
None	10	12	22

*Administration's preferred frame

Front-page stories	NYT	WP	# of Items (% of Total)
	18	24	42 (42%)

Victims' frame	NYT	WP	# of Items (% of Total)
	4	3	7 (7%)
Front-page	3	2	5 (5%)

Torture label applied to US actors	NYT	WP	Total (% of total)
	5	12	17 (17%)

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