Media, War and Propaganda: A Content Analysis of U.S. Propaganda in *Time* and *Newsweek* Coverage of the Iraq War

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Abstract

Purpose: The study analyses the propagandistic manipulations embedded in the U.S.-led war in Iraq in 2003. The aim is to ascertain how America used propaganda in her attempts to shore up support for the war and sway her targets.

Methodology: Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the propagandistic manipulations of the U.S. government during the build-up to the war (the threat of war) and the actual war. Two U.S.-based news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, were studied. The period of the study spans from February to April 2003.

Findings: the findings showed that Washington applied propaganda to an unusual degree in search of global support for the war. Research question two probed into the extent and degree of Washington's propaganda printed by the *Time* and the *Newsweek* magazines. We uncovered that the *Time* transmitted a total of 35 propaganda (64.8%); while the *Newsweek* churned out only 19 representing 35.2% of total coded propaganda techniques.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study concluded that in spite of the heavy dose of propaganda America administered on the world, she failed to win the UN and world support for the war. The military operation it led in Iraq was an unpopular one.

Keywords: *Journalism, Content Analysis, War Coverage, Propaganda, United States, Iraq War*

INTRODUCTION

What role the media plays in conflict situations has remained topical. Communication scholars have continued to investigate this highly contentious issue. While some have canvassed for a detached coverage (Dennis, 2002), others have argued that media neutrality in violent conflicts is untenable (Vulliamy 1993; Bell, 1997; Friend et al., 2000; Merrill, 2002; Ekeanyanwu & Ajakaiye, 2016). Those who support the latter view maintain that in war situations, there is an expectation that the media will willingly jettison objective reporting and support the troops and government's war policy (De Beer & Merrill, 1994). Yet we know how difficult it can be in war theatres for journalists to gather information and verify its accuracy without depending on governmental sources. For instance, several studies have criticised the Gulf War of 1991 for being highly censored by the American government (Vincent, 1992; Taylor, 1992; Smith, 1992; Mowlana, 1992; MacArthur, 1993; Hallin, 1994; Benett & Paletz, 1994). This aligns with Herman and Chomsky's (2002) position that elite power groups control the resources and access to the media system in order to protect their ideology. Consequently, mainstream media tend to serve the interests of political elites by providing uncritical coverage and acting as a mouthpiece of US foreign policy (Bennet, 1990; Kellner, 1993).

Nwankpa (2004) reported that the CNN and Skynews had a steady graphic banner that read: "Operation Iraqi Freedom" displayed during their daily coverage of the war, thus justifying the war the world opposed, much in the same way Jenson (2004) pointed out that when "Operation Iraqi Freedom" appeared on TV screen, news sources were endorsing the Bush administration's stance on the war. Hiebert (2003) argued that the U.S. government used strategic communication to influence the media coverage and thus rally support for the military action in Iraq. Pentagon's tactic of embedding reporters with the military was in the hope that it would help win the information war by dominating the information environment (Wall, 2006). The embeds, it was anticipated, would come to identify with those that provided them escorts and report from a coalition perspective, helping to counter propaganda from the Iraqi side (Brandenburg, 2007; Cortell, et. al., 2009).

This notwithstanding, from the outset the war coverage was plagued by numerous inaccuracies arising from the reporting of rumours and information frequently based on faulty intelligence. Marshall (2003, p. 7A) attributed the inaccuracies to the "fog of war, a place where fact, fiction and battlefield exaggerations merge into a muddle." Among the several incidences cited were reports that Saddam Hussein may have died in an air strike when in fact his fate was unknown; that a captured chemical plant produced banned weapons, which was untrue; that thousands of Shiites had revolted against Saddam in Basra, also false; and that bodies found in a warehouse in southern Iraq were victims of Saddam's brutal regimes when in fact, the remains were from the war in the 1980's against Iran. Austrian journalist John Pilger argues that uncritical reporting by the media allows governments to get away with acts that would not have occurred if there were greater public scrutiny. The journalist cited a *New York Times* editorial from August 2005, which argued that but for misperception arising from uncritical reporting, the 2003 invasion of Iraq "would have been stopped by popular outcry." Pilger lamented that journalists "betrayed the public by accepting, amplifying and echoing the lies of Bush and Blair, instead of challenging and exposing them" (cited in Harper, 2008, p. 1).

Like all other international wars, the Iraq War attracted a lot of communication research attention (Hiebert, 2003; Kull et. al., 2003; Aday et. al., 2005; Dimitrova & Stromback, 2005; Fahmy & Johnson, 2005; LaLlave, 2005; Pfau et. al., 2005; Ravi, 2005; Walgrave & Verhulst, 2005; Ghanem, 2006; Hanley, 2007;

Murray, et al., 2008; Cortell et. al., 2009; Kolmer & Semetko, 2009; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Johnson & Fahmy, 2010; Barker, 2012; Johnson & Fahmy, 2012; Gou et al., 2015). It can be argued that none of the previous studies had specifically focused on the U.S. propaganda in international news magazine coverage of the war. It is this void the present study sought to fill by analysing the U.S. information manipulation printed in *Time* and *Newsweek* coverage of the Iraq War in 2003.

Statement of the Problem

Whenever nations go to war, they seek to portray the enemy side as evil in order to win public sympathy and support. Propaganda is therefore employed by the feuding camps to justify their different positions. In keeping with their role as information purveyors and the people's right to know, the mass media cover wars. They are often the main sources of information on a given conflict and their coverage can influence people's perception of that conflict. It is therefore not surprising that the mass media can become a platform for the warring parties to seek to manipulate information to win people's heart. As McQuail (2004, p. 446) writes, "The mass media are now regarded as essential to successful propaganda, since they are the only channels guaranteed to reach the whole public and have the advantage (in open societies) of being regarded as trustworthy."

Given the stiff opposition to the war around the world, and the UN refusal to back it, Washington laboured hard to persuade the world on the necessity and urgency of the military action against Saddam Hussein. As the U.S. claimed at the time, Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, was developing weapons of mass destruction and had strong ties with al-Qaeda. The Bush administration used strategic communication in promoting the war as an act of self-defence, a concept that resonates well with most Americans (Kull, et al., 2003). This was widely reported in the mass media at the time. It has therefore become necessary to take a retrospective look at how the print media re-echoed Washington's propaganda in connection with the war. And two U.S.-based news magazines, the *Time* and the *Newsweek,* were among several international news media that covered the U.S. case for war and the war itself. Did the two magazines print U.S. propaganda in their reporting of the war?

Research Questions

Four research questions are posed in the study;
1. Did the U.S. government employ propaganda in an attempt to shore up support for the war in Iraq in 2003?
2. What is the frequency of the U.S. propaganda printed by *Time* and *Newsweek*?
3. What media/channels were employed by the U.S. to disseminate her propaganda?
4. Did the U.S. propaganda win popular support for the war?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Hegemony

State propaganda in conflict situation is often transmitted through the mass media. This is understandable. They are the only channels with the capacity to reach a very large diversified audience, and often, there is the tendency to rely on the media for accurate information, and in most cases, these conduits of mass communication are owned and controlled by the state. The term "hegemony" draws largely from the work of the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). A state of hegemony, according to Watson and Hill (2012, pp. 122-123), "is achieved when a provisional alliance of social groups exerts a consensus

that makes the power of the dominant group appear both natural and legitimate." As McQuail (2000, pp. 96-97) points out, hegemony helps to bring together several different ideas about how the culture of media (news, entertainment, fiction) helps to maintain a class-divided and class-dominated society. It tends to define unacceptable opposition to the status quo as dissident and deviant. The mass media are seen as agents through which hegemony is constructed and maintained, because they are controlled by the dominant class in society and they help in exerting the control of that class over the rest of society. Bennett (1990) writes that mainstream media rarely oppose the government when national forces are involved in international warfare. The sources they use in such cases usually support the argument of government officials and their spokespersons. It is only a disagreement among the power elites that can create a space for dissenting voices in the mainstream media. At no time has what is communicated via the media been of more concern to the ruling class than in war situations. Because they are desperate to portray the "enemy side" as the aggressor and their side as good, they go all out to establish a strong control over the media, by suppressing dissenting views and granting the right of passage to only information that advances their cause. This was largely the case with the war in Iraq.

So, with all information channels available to it, its state department for foreign affairs and information, respectively; government public relations organs, centre for information service abroad, the U.S. sought to influence public sentiment on the Iraq War through its propaganda.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the propagandistic manipulations of the U.S. government during the build-up to the war (the threat of war) and the actual war. Two U.S.-based news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, were studied. The period of the study spans from February to April 2003. This time represents the most tensed period of the war. Although the war broke out on March 19 and the coalition forces seized control of Baghdad on April 9, marking the fall of Saddam Hussein, we had gone back to accommodate the pre-war propaganda during the threat of war by the U.S. The total issues of both magazines published within the study period were 24. The random sampling technique was adopted to select the editions of the two magazines studied. For the months of February and April, two editions each of both magazines were randomly selected, while in March, the actual period of the war, two editions of each of the magazines were randomly selected. This brought to 8 the total editions of the magazines content analysed for the U.S. government propaganda. Gunter (2000, p. 197) maintains that "newspapers (or magazines) may be monitored for just a few days or over several weeks." From coding the following propaganda techniques emerged: Glittering generality; Name-calling; Transfer; Testimonial; Card stacking; Bandwagon; Others. These are briefly explained below:

- **Glittering Generality**

This is the direct opposite of name-calling. While the propagandist calls the other side names, he uses "virtue" words to describe himself or his position. While the U.S. uses name-calling to malign Saddam, it uses glittering generality when it says, "America is a friend to the people of Iraq" (cited in Nwankpa, 2004, p. 28). And maybe to prove this point, the U.S. while prosecuting the war was at the same time distributing food and water to Iraqis. In fact, the U.S. labelled the war in Iraq, "Operation Iraqi Freedom" even when there were civilian casualties. The essence of this technique according to Lee and Lee (1939) is to make the propaganda accept and approve the thing without the evidence.

- **Name-calling**

Lee and Lee (1939) describe it as giving an idea a bad label to make us reject and condemn it without subjecting the evidence to proper scrutiny. Logicians call it argumentum ad hominem. It is calling a dog a bad name in order to hang it. Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. secretary of defence at the time, contemptuously labelled European states opposed to the war as the "old Europe." Similarly, Saddam was variously described by Bush as the "the dictator in Iraq," "an enemy of the Iraqi people," one of the "authors of mass murder;" therefore, Bush vowed, "We will not wait for the authors of mass murder to gain weapons of mass destruction."[1] All this, analysts believe, was to justify the de-Saddamization of Iraq in 2003.

- **Transfer**

This technique transfers or conveys the authority and prestige of someone or something respected to another person, thing, event etc. in order to make the latter acceptable. In this case, the propagandist seeks to link an idea or product or cause with something that people like or have favourable attitude to.

- **Testimonial**

Propagandists who apply this technique "employ the credibility of well-known and respected persons to support their claim to acceptability. Testimonial uses evidence, attestation as proof of the propagandist's position" (Wilson 2005, p. 92). The U.S. used the respected diplomat and Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to make its alarming case for war at the UN, February 5, 2003.

- **Card Stacking**

This according to the Lees involves the selection and use of facts or falsehood, illustrations or distraction, and logical or illogical statements in order to give the best or worst possible case for an idea, programme, persons or product. The propagandist flaunts facts that support his point of view, while suppressing or ignoring information to the contrary.

- **Bandwagon**

The theme here is "Everybody is doing it. Why do you want to be left out?" With it, the propagandist gives the impression that every other person is in support of their position, thus urging those who are yet to make up their mind to follow suit, that is, "Jump on the bandwagon." President Bush had claimed that "Many nations are joining us in insisting that Saddam Hussein be held accountable. They are committed to defending the international security that protects the lives of both our citizens and theirs" (cited in Nwankpa, 2004, p. 32) whereas analyst point to the "patchy coalition" that eventually fought the war.

- **Others**

Any propaganda technique outside the six listed above;

In the study, the units of analysis are "news stories," "viewpoints," "world view" and "interviews" that carried the U.S. propaganda. These units of analysis are from the sampled editions of the *Time* and the *Newsweek* magazines, published from February to April 2003. Coding was by two independent coders and the inter-coder reliability was 0.75 using Scott's pi. index. Data was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to determine frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion is in relation to each research question.

Research Question 1: Did the U.S. government employ propaganda in an attempt to shore up support for the war in Iraq in 2003?

Tables 1 and 2 provide part of the answers. From Table 1, the *Time* published a total of 35 (64.8%) U.S. propaganda while the *Newsweek* printed 19 (35.2%). Table 2, which provides specific

Table 1: Distribution of U.S. propaganda

Magazine	Frequency	Percent
Time	35	64.8
Newsweek	19	35.2
Total	**54**	**100**

Table 2: Content Category

Content Category	Frequency	Percent
Card stacking	16	29.6
Glittering generality	15	27.8
Transfer	7	13.0
Name-calling	6	11.0
Testimonial	3	5.6
Bandwagon	1	1.9
Others	6	11.0
Total	**54**	**100**

Information on the propaganda techniques used by the U.S. government, shows that card stacking was employed most, appearing 16 times, representing 29.6% of coded propaganda techniques.

The prevalence of card stacking is understandable. Given the stiff global opposition to the war, Washington had to amass facts – what card stacking does – to support her case for war. She had sought to prove the real evil Saddam was as to attract global support. As the *Time* (February 17 edition) reported, U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powel, exploited card stacking to full when he appeared at the UN, February 5, 2003 to make America's alarming case for war, with the ultimate goal of persuading a reluctant world to go to war. Powel flaunted evidence to prove how Iraq was secretly developing biological, chemical and nuclear weapons and concealing same from UN weapon inspectors and played intercepted conversation between Iraqi officers to substantiate his charges. He showed that Baghdad has links with al-Qaeda. His one-sided presentation neither acknowledged even the least co-operation Iraqi government had given the UN weapon inspectors in the past nor acknowledged past successes of weapon inspectors in Iraq.

Following closely (in Table 2) is glittering generality. America had relied on this technique to prove her good intentions for Iraqis. In fact, the U.S. labelled the war, "Operation Iraqi Freedom." In one stance, America had boasted that the coalition forces would be greeted on the streets of Baghdad, as liberators – what later turned out to be a flawed assumption (*Time*, April 7, pp. 44-48). For Washington, it was more important to justify her position with virtue words than attacking Saddam with name-calling. This may be responsible for the more use of transfer devices (13%) than name-calling (11%). Saddam is notorious for his atrocious crimes in Iraq. Excessive use of name-calling may make no new impact. And America understood this. Given the scant support the war enjoyed – which was obvious to the U.S. – she could not rely heavily on bandwagon to shore up support. This accounts for the near absence of this technique in Washington's propaganda arsenal. It appeared only once, representing a lean 1.9%.

Though the U.S. scarcely resorted to the use of testimonial to endorse the war, as is evident in 3 appearances (5.6%) the technique made, the instances of it seen were powerful and superbly placed. The use of the popular Secretary State, Colin Powell, "... the man Americans and the world trust more than any other in the Bush administration (cited in Nwankpa, 2004, p. 51)" to present America's case for war at the UN was a spectacle to behold. By this, America was saying, "If Powell has endorsed this war, why not everybody else!" Even CIA director, George Tenet, according to the *Time* (February 17), was made to sit directly behind Powell as the latter made his presentation. For a man who had shown initial reluctance to accept Bush's assertion about Saddam-bin Ladin link, this sitting arrangement was testimonial propaganda in action – and by extension – a proof to the world that Washington was now united in her case for war.

Furthermore, the *Newsweek* confirmed that, "To an unusual degree operation Iraqi freedom is relying on psychological warfare, or "information operation..." (March 31, p. 29). Subsequently, the *Time* added that the U.S. claimed that the war would be "quick, easy, and relatively bloodless, while concluding that Iraq's leadership would snap, Iraqi forces would surrender and Iraqis would welcome America's soldiers with open arms." This was contained in its April 7 (pp. 44-74) cover story entitled, "3 FLAWED ASSUMPTIONS." In a statement that smacks of glittering generality, Bush had claimed, "We (Americans) exercise power without conquest, and we sacrifice for the liberty of strangers" (*Time*, Feb. 17, p. 27). As Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis (2003) found, misperception created by the media's uncritical reporting of President Bush's decision to go to war was "the most powerful factor predicting support for the war" (reproduced in Graber, 2007, p. 124). The growing public criticisms of the media's failure to interrogate the administration's war policy prompted the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to publish self-reflective editorials that acknowledged reporting failures, while admitting they could have done better in their reporting (*New York Times*, 2004; Kurtz, 2004). The nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity has documented 935 false statements (as wells as hundreds of other disputable claims) by top Bush administration officials before the war regarding the threat from Iraq (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008). In the end the administration's claims for the war could not be vindicated.

Research Question 2: What is the frequency of the U.S. propaganda printed by *Time* and *Newsweek*?

Table 1 reveals that both magazines printed a total of 54 U.S. propaganda. The *Time* takes the lead with 35 (64.8 %) while the *Newsweek* circulated 19 (35.2%). The reason for this disparity is not immediately clear and would require a full-length study to establish. However, it could be a reflection of the volume of coverage each magazine gave to the war in general. It might be that the *Time* was more sympathetic to the U.S. and may have sought to influence public opinion in favour of Washington.

Research Question 3: What media/channels were employed by the U.S. to disseminate her propaganda?

In addition to the mass media of communication, the U.S. employed personal contacts (lobbying by U.S. government officials) loudspeakers, leaflets, e-mail, anonymous telephone calls and speeches at both national and international fora to disseminate war propaganda. Propaganda circulated through loudspeakers, leaflets, e-mail (in some cases) and anonymous telephone calls were targeted primarily at Iraqis to accomplish the following:

  i. To prove America's good intentions;
 ii. To dissuade Iraqis from resisting the coalition forces;
iii. To sow defeatism;
 iv. To make Iraqis see Saddam as their real enemy and therefore join forces with America in de-Saddamizing Iraq.

Propaganda beamed through the mass media, national and international fora and e-mail (in some case) sought to accomplish the following:

  i. To garner world support for the war.
 ii. Show that America was not being propelled by selfish reasons.

In the final analysis, it was indeed an information warfare waged on the world through any imaginable channel of communication. Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2005) describe the U.S.'s combined use of modern media technology, censorship and embedding of journalists as "perception management." All this combined with "Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)" targeting Saddam Hussein's soldiers with leaflets and radio broadcasts in order to demoralise them, brought the concept of "information warfare" to a whole new level (cited in Ottosen, et al., 2013, p. 3).

Research Question 4: Did the U.S. propaganda win popular support for the war?

The U.S. propaganda failed to make the war popular. The war did not have UN mandate. Out of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, three, (France, Russia and China) were vehemently opposed to the war. They wanted more time for weapons inspectors to peacefully disarm Iraq. Only America and Britain wanted war. Though the British government supported the war, the British public and Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party were "hostile to a war" without UN backing (*Time*, March, 17, p. 27). In a cover story entitled, "His lonely march" in which President Bush was pictured walking on a broad and lonely pathway, the *Time* (March 17, pp. 24-27), warned that, "American troops are about to fight and die, in a war that major US allies do not endorse." Not even Powell's moving presentation at the Security Council could help popularise the war. As the *Time* (Feb. 17, p. 22) confirmed:

Despite Powell's bravura, the European public remains firmly against a U.S.-led war in Iraq with or without the UN's blessing.

The *Newsweek* (Feb 17, p. 18) agreed with the *Time* when it reported:

And yet oversees, Powell seemed to have made little impacts, as many prominent world leaders showed scant enthusiasm for the war.

In a poll published by the *Time* (Feb 17, pp. 22-23), various European publics opposed even a UN-mandated war. In the Netherlands, 72% opposed it. Although the Spanish government stood behind the U.S., over 70% of the Spanish public, according to the poll, did not want the war. In Italy, it was more than two-thirds; Czech Republic, 67%; Hungary, 76%. Italian and Portuguese publics opposed the war,

the *Time* revealed. Germany, Cuba and Libya said "No" to the war. This is in addition to several anti-war protests around the world. It was only in the US that a Gallup poll published by the *Newsweek* (March 31, p. 53), showed that most Americans by a margin of 2-to-1 were willing to go to war with or without a UN mandate. Global opposition to the war has been highlighted in other studies (Kull, et al., 2003; Walgrave & Verhulst, 2005; Murray, et al., 2008). Overall, America failed to persuade a reluctant world to go to war.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study focused on how the U.S. sought to drag a reluctant world to the war in Iraq in 2003, by the use of propaganda. We undertook a quantitative and qualitative content analyses of the *Time* and the *Newsweek* coverage of the war to uncover the U.S. propaganda carried in their reports. Four pertinent research questions were raised to enable us to find reliable answers to the research problem. Question one ascertained if the U.S. government employed propaganda to advance the cause of the war. Our findings showed that Washington applied propaganda to an unusual degree in search of global support for the war. Research question two probed into the extent and degree of Washington's propaganda printed by the *Time* and the *Newsweek* magazines. We uncovered that the *Time* transmitted a total of 35 propaganda (64.8%); while the *Newsweek* churned out only 19 representing 35.2% of total coded propaganda techniques. Research question three focused on the media/channels the U.S. employed to disseminate its propaganda. In addition to the mass media, we established that America transmitted its propaganda through personal contacts, loudspeakers, leaflets, anonymous telephone calls and speeches at both national and international fora. In research question four, we considered whether the U.S. propaganda made the war popular. The findings revealed that in spite of the heavy dose of propaganda America administered on the world, she failed to win the UN and world support for the war. The military operation it led in Iraq was an unpopular one.

Notes

President George W. Bush, "State of the Union," address, Washington, DC, 28 January, 2003, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/release/2003/01/images/2003128-19p261140a-ed515h-html. For additional insight on President Bush's claims about Saddam and Iraq, see his "Presidential Letter," available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-1.html.

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APPENDICES

Table 3: Unit of Analysis

Unit of Analysis	*Time*	*Newsweek*	Total
News stories	11	5	16
View point	1	-	1
World view	-	-	-
Interviews	-	-	-
Total	**12**	**5**	**17**

Table 4: Headline (Point Size)

Headline (Point Size)	Frequency	Percent
18 – 30	2	11.8
36 – 48	3	17.6
60 – 72	-	-
72 and above	12	70.6
Total	**17**	**100**

Table 5: Depth of Stories (Word Count)

Length of Story	Frequency	Percent
300 -699	3	17.6
700 – 999	3	17.6
1000 – 2999	11	64.7
3000 and above	-	-
Total	**17**	**100**

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