

Finding Frames in a Web of Culture:  
The Case of the War on Terror  
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The framing concept brings an intuitively appealing and provocative openness, a bridging model that resists being pinned down to any one paradigm, a program of research made useful by its theoretical diversity (D'Angelo, 2002; Reese, 2007). My own definition of frames broadly captures this diversity and bridging quality: "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001). This idea suggests that frames manifest themselves in a number of different sites and across a number of domains: policy, journalistic, and public. Other definitions have focused on the idea that in framing certain aspects of the world can be communicated "*in such a way* as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). I am especially interested in the "in such a way" aspect, the way in which frames accomplish these results, which is determined by the nature of the organizing principle.

As the goal of this volume suggests, framing analysis can be "done" in a number of locations or sites. Given the eclecticism and multiple perspectives, the definitive framing study will never be found. So, the researcher "doing framing analysis" must make some well-informed choices about the best point of entry to answer the question at hand. Many of these decisions are implicit or taken-for-granted, but in this chapter I would like to think about them more explicitly within the context of a particular case study. In doing so, I call to mind the emphasis placed on the researcher's own decisions about how to go about a study—the practical, conceptual, and methodological decisions that must be made before and during any framing analysis. I have experienced these decisions first-hand through working with students in seminars devoted to framing research, which inevitably yield a few predictable questions: Where does the frame reside (in text, culture, or the cognitions of the perceiver)? How does one convincingly establish that a frame exists (or is it the subjective construction of the researcher)? Is framing a subset of agenda-setting or vice versa? Where do topics and themes leave off and frames begin? What is the unit of analysis—that is, what is to be counted or examined? Regardless of how these issues are resolved, one inevitably reaches the moment of truth when frames must be empirically identified so they can be usefully examined. Taking the term "empirical" broadly, one must engage with real materials and evidence whether making a quantitative codification or taking a more interpretive, qualitative approach.

In my particular case example, I consider the interpretive, qualitative approach, which tends to give greater emphasis to the cultural and political content of news frames and how they draw upon a shared store of social meanings. In this light, because frames are specific and explicit agents of ideological processes, they tend to be more general and

encompassing than news themes, topics, and issues. Frames organize and structure-- and thus are bigger than topics. This leads naturally to exploring how they are connected to other systemic features that give them support and reinforcement. So, for me framing relates to my interest in media sociology—connecting media production and content (Reese, 2008). Understanding the routines and values of newswork, for example, helps explain how certain frames are favored over others. Journalists occupy a significant role in the propagation of news frames and don't just simply relay ideas from political leaders to citizens. They participate in frame construction, just as do others in the deliberative arena.

Thus, as the title of this chapter indicates, I regard frames as embedded in a “web” of culture, an image that naturally draws attention to the surrounding cultural context and the threads that connect them. Much as Tuchman (1978) conceived the “news net” as a dynamic phenomenological structure, ensnaring events and new concepts, the web idea alerts us to how certain frames are connected to an underlying structure--a historically rooted but dynamic cultural context. Frames don't just arise as free-standing entities. Of course, the challenge then becomes how to draw boundaries—isolating and foregrounding frames for analysis from their surrounding context. Although I don't address framing effects in any depth, this approach speaks to those questions too, and I will examine their implications. Framing effects analysis (what I will later call the “how” of framing research) should rely more firmly on work that has identified frames in their cultural environments, which is what I will call the “what” of framing. Too many effects analyses now rely on vague notions of “considerations” (e.g., (Zaller, 1992)) or “attributes of issues,” without locating them in this larger web.

### **Critical Constructionist Perspective**

In working through my own research, I have regarded framing as a valuable analytical approach to answering the questions I have about media phenomena. So, rather than try to organize a theory about framing, I have borrowed some ideas from this area that help organize my own thinking about large-scale political influence. As D'Angelo (2002) advocates, framing research benefits from working across paradigms, which he identifies as cognitive, constructionist, and critical. My own interests span the constructionist and critical: critical in the sense that I see frames as expressions and outcomes of power, unequally distributed with public opinion dominated and enlisted accordingly; and constructionist in the sense that I grant participants, such as journalists, some professional autonomy and take them seriously, using frames as “interpretive packages” in creating understandings of the social world.

I have been particularly interested in how the government has helped organize public opinion about the risks of war and terrorism, beginning with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 and the subsequent success of the first Bush administration in mobilizing public opinion in favor of Desert Storm. I characterized the media jingoism and marginalization of dissent in that period as the “routine” framing and militarization of local television (Reese & Buckalew, 1995). By introducing American troops into the Middle East, the Persian Gulf conflict helped feed the ideology of Osama Bin Laden and lead to his subsequent attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington,

D.C. I revisited these concerns several years later in view of the globalization of dissent and media (Reese, 2004) and was concerned personally with the way the second Bush administration located terrorism within a broader political framework of the War on Terror—again, with effective impact on public opinion (Christie, 2006). I began thinking of how best to approach this question—with great difficulty, it turned out, given the breadth and elusive quality of this particular framing. Later in this chapter I will discuss the steps taken in this study regarding the measurement of frames and its theoretical implications.

### **The ‘What’ vs. the ‘How’ of Framing Analysis**

A major dividing line in framing research it seems to me is whether the emphasis is on the ‘what’ vs. the ‘how’ of frames. In my own research, I have been particularly interested in the way issues are organized *in such a way* that they guide policy and opinion. The ‘what’ perspective is more frame-centric; it is concerned with frame-building and involves the dissection of the content of the frame, specifically the network of concepts and the unique narrative and myths that make it work. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) pointed out, an important step in a framing analysis is the identification of framing devices, which are specific linguistic structures such as metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that communicate frames. In addition, the ‘what’ of framing (analysis) leads the researcher to examine latent aspects of the text, such as reasoning devices (e.g., problem definition and moral evaluation [see also, Entman, 1993]) as well as specific keywords that constitute the concepts underlying frames (e.g., the words ‘game’ and ‘competition’ are integral discourse elements of a ‘strategy’ frame in political campaign news [see (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) In all, an analysis of the ‘what’ of frames emphasizes the special configuration of discourse elements that articulate culture. Exploring the ‘what’ of frames encourages an analysis that delves into the contextualization of topics—social, historically, culturally—and urges the framing researcher to look closely at the particular features of the frame. Some have pointed out that this approach to studying framing leads to ad hoc analyses applicable only to a particular topic or issue ((Tankard, 2001)). Still, the specificity engendered by the ‘what’ of a framing study helps in the end uncover the culturally relevant and resonant theme that illuminates unique social and political understandings. And these are the sorts of frames that have the greatest implications for understanding the ‘how’ of framing.

One can also conceive of frames uncovered in the way just described as strategic resources, constructed and wielded by an individual or group (including journalists), along with everything else the individual or group has at its disposal. This emphasis underlies a more process-centric, or ‘how’ research orientation. Here, frames are situated in competitive social and political environments; frames are constructed and promoted to achieve some predetermined outcome. In these environments, elites compete against elites, as in the struggle over the Clinton health care policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). And whereas groups may utilize frames to mobilize themselves internally and to compete against each other in the public arena (Snow & Benford, 1988), they may also, as in the case of social movements, seek to construct frames—often using media—that resonate with the life experiences of a target group (Benford & Snow, 2000). In other instances

elites may be said to compete with the public, such as with the nuclear freeze issue where elite frames were at variance with public opinion (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). In each of these cases, a focus on the ‘how’ of framing encourages researchers to examine the features of frames associated with success—and the role, too, of the news media in this process. Along these lines, some experimental framing research, for example, is criticized for its often exclusive emphasis on the ‘how’ of framing. These studies take the “what” for granted, focusing instead on how cognitive processes interact with (news) frames to produce effects (e.g., Carragee & Roefs, 2004). In the larger picture, both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ are important facets of doing framing analysis, as long as ‘what’ is not given short shrift. Privileging the “what” leads to deeper inspection of frames in the social arena; identifying the key organizing principles and most relevant values that inevitably help guide the “how” studies that are more concerned with examining specific effects.

The “what” of frames opens to analysis the internal structure both of frames themselves and their connections to the surrounding web of culture—and in doing so more likely leads to the level of analysis question. The significance of frames increase as they become more over-arching and broadly reaching, and the bigger the frame, of course, the more difficult it can be to isolate and measure the social influence process. Gamson (2001) observed that frame analysis brings the “vexing problem” of level of analysis: events, issues, master frames, and worldviews yield frames within frames (p. x). In this respect, frames can be macro (e.g., Cold War, War on Drugs) or smaller in scope (e.g., pro-life/pro-choice). Depending on the level, different questions come into play. At the lower level, one is more likely to examine the “how” of frames, the specific political and marketing decisions made to mobilize sufficient support to win the policy conflict—frames as part of the deliberative process toolbox. At the larger level, we are more likely to consider how frames are connected to the surrounding culture, and how sponsors may go about exploiting these connections. Macro-cultural frame analysis may not lend itself to precise measurement and codification, but it is an important part of the overall project. Putting the “what” before the “how” provides a valuable foundation for selecting more specific frames for further effects analysis, because their importance within the overall society has been more clearly demonstrated and understood.

### **Critical Effects of Frames: Constructing Culture**

One of the tendencies for communication scholars grappling with framing is in being drawn into the traditional sender-receiver model of message, audience, and effect. We substitute “frame” for some other stimulus and measure its effects as we would with other persuasive appeals, information emphasis, agendas, etc. Broadening that view to include the conceptually prior media and journalistic factors that shape the creation of frames opens up other questions but retains the linear, process model of effects. The idea of framing certainly suggests a linear transmission of influence from one location to another, exemplified by the agenda-setting model with its compelling matrix for tracking the correspondence of objects and attributes in media to audience. A set of objects and attributes in the media find their correspondence in the minds of the audience.

Frames, as a semantic equivalency, refer to structures in various locations

(cultural, symbolic, and psychological), raising the often confusing question of where does the frame reside? Based on my own definition of frames as organizing principles, the frame is always an abstraction and finds its manifestation in various locations. But using the “frame” concept to apply to both cognitive and textual phenomena can be confusing. In the ‘how’ orientation of framing, exemplified by the agenda-setting tradition, a frame is conceived of as multi-sited structure that moves through space--from textual structures to mental structures. A change is found in the receiver, an effect, and attributed to some cause.

In the case of the political psychologists (a large framing area), the effect is not so much the movement of emphasis from media to public, but in the making of some values and facts more relevant to the receiver for issue reasoning. Framing is the interaction between the incoming message structure and the psychological characteristics of the receiver. In Nelson’s work, for example, frames work to establish hierarchies among values (Nelson & Willey, 2001). A message can activate mental frames, but how did those frames become effective? People differ in their responses to facts when certain values are prioritized for them, but this doesn’t help explain the most relevant configuration of values. The “how” shouldn’t take precedence over the “what,” the important aspect of frames that arises from their cultural rootedness. Frames articulate and maintain ways of reasoning about public issues, creating issues in discourse (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 1993). To emphasize the effects *of* frames, or effects *on* frames, draws our attention away from this rootedness. That’s why the cultural approach means approaching the issue of framing effects in a different way, namely, to consider how social actors participate in the creation and maintenance of certain frames, the ongoing construction of the discursive environment, and the interests that are served in the process. Disaggregating the frame into merely an emphasis on certain values over others has the effect of taking attention away from the cultural origins of specific frames. So, the effects, in the broad sense, that interest me are suggested by big swings in public opinion, suggesting that someone has won a framing contest. This focuses attention on the public generally, how significant social frames emerge, and less on specific individual-level processes. We must be careful to examine those frames of greatest import and resist the tendency to focus on the strong effects caused by relatively insignificant issues.

### **Background to the Case Study: War on Terror**

As a case study illustration, I will review the conceptual and empirical decisions involved in analyzing the frames surrounding the War on Terror (Reese & Lewis, in press).<sup>1</sup> War frames are highly significant in directing national policy, and I chose an inductive qualitative approach to help understand the constitutive components and narratives binding them together. Rather than narrow the scope of such frames to particular short-term policy options, we should also be concerned with more macro framing that subsumes those options within terms of the Administration’s own choosing. Research for me is always a process of linking my own normative concerns to the language and tools of investigation, and I had been thinking about this particular issue for several years. After the president declared “war on terror” in 2001, I was immediately concerned about his resurrecting this phrase (used previously in the Reagan administration) as a guide for thinking about the issues surrounding 9/11. In an op-ed I

wrote for the local newspaper about a year later, shortly before the Iraq invasion, I argued that the framing regrettably conditioned the public to think about the solutions as primarily military.

Patriotic post 9/11 television news graphics provided related short-hand frames, with “America strikes back” mutating into “America’s new war.” Placing the issue primarily in the military realm privileges armed strength at the expense of the international political, diplomatic, and law enforcement arenas, where conflicts may also be mediated. We are led to ask simply whether we will win, not whether we are in the right fight with the right strategy. (Reese, 2002)<sup>2</sup>

Even within the national security community, Record (2003) argued that the Global War on Terror’s insistence on moral clarity lacked strategic focus, that its open-ended quest for absolute security was not politically sustainable and risked involving the military in conflicts it was not designed to fight, much less win.

Any study begins with the justification of its importance, and to me this frame was particularly compelling. In their life and death implications, war frames are highly significant in the way they direct vital debates on national policy. The Bush Administration has been successful in obliging policy actors to approach the debate over military conflicts within terms of its own choosing. Opponents of the war in Iraq, for example, have found it difficult to respond to the administration’s claims of moral legitimacy without reframing it in their own terms (Lakoff, 2006). As political violence has taken on global proportions, it is more important than ever to understand how the policy has been structured, its validity, and the role of the news media in allowing the expression of clear and appropriate role for the U.S. in the world community.

### **Content of ‘War on Terror’ Frames**

To examine the War on Terror means taking its frame construction seriously. Beyond observing whether the media treat an issue using, say, a “war” frame compared to a “diplomacy” frame, it is helpful in this case to open up this analysis to examine precisely what were the elements of the frame and how were they organized. This makes me vulnerable to the ad hoc frame criticism, which, as I mentioned, argues that rather than proliferate more frame categories, research should identify a consistent set of frames generalizable over many cases. But here I examine an already established framing and don’t create one as an analytical category.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, I understand frames to have structured content; they’re not just “considerations” or varying “contexts” for the same nucleus of facts (e.g., Zaller, 1992). As I’ve argued throughout this essay, in opposition to the psychological approach that often treats them as easily manipulated element within a news story, divorced from a context of production and usage, frames should be treated in a more holistic and integrated fashion. In this sense, I favor Hertog and McLeod’s (2001) approach, which regards frames as “structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts” (p. 140). Master narratives are among the devices that structure these concepts, providing rules for processing new content, which is organized on the basis of the more central network of concepts. This gives frames their dynamic quality as they operate over time to assimilate and reconstitute new

facts and concepts. That is, frames are not static and immutable as the “agenda” or issue approach often implies.

This perspective lends itself to both quantitative and qualitative approaches (although Hertog and McLeod place more emphasis on the latter). The network of concepts, with notions of center and periphery, could be tackled with semantic association analysis and the identification of nodes, links, and structure. The basis for these links, however, lies in the societal associations of meaning and their historical evolution, and draws on a different tradition. This approach to framing traces to the concept of ideology, a lineage provided by Hackett (1984), who regards framing as the application of “deep structure,” the naturalized, taken-for-granted beliefs by members of society about what goes together. In that respect, the examination of the myths, metaphors, and narratives calls for a more qualitative, interpretive approach. The ultimate frame may not be plainly visible from a simple inspection of the manifest content and terminology that it invokes. Rather, it must be interpreted in its latent message.

### **Examining the Global War on Terror**

In this analysis, I’m not interested in terrorism per se, but in how the meaning of terrorism has been constructed for political ends. Terrorism has been examined before as a form of political “theater,” with the media seen as a vital link for terrorists to produce their desired impact—sending demands and relying on public fear to accomplish their goals. These earlier scholarly concerns seem almost quaint by comparison to the mega-terrorism made possible by global coordination and access to technologically advanced weapons of mass destruction. The terrorist is no longer some aggrieved party seeking dramatic redress, someone with whom authorities may negotiate. Instead, destruction on a broad scale is possible on behalf of groups who seek to wound a society, literally and symbolically, and don’t necessarily desire any immediate concession.

To examine the War on Terror frame, I began with a close reading of the policy documents produced by the administration and the various critiques of policy in academic and media commentaries (Gordon & Trainor, 2006; Isikoff & Corn, 2006; Ricks, 2006). This immersion helps alert the analyst to the problematic nature of the targeted frame. Deconstructing the War on Terror begins with the component concepts, beginning with the metaphor of war itself, which follows in the tradition of other social problems that government is led to “declare war” on, including poverty and drugs (Lule, 2001). Invoking a war metaphor allows frame sponsors to marshal other comparisons and to define abstract challenges as more concrete “fronts.” Traditional war involves conflict between armies, with the boundary between them labeled a front. By definition, asymmetric warfare has no “front,” but the president has insisted on declaring Iraq the “front line.” Arguing that point is made easier when located already within the metaphor. “War” also connects with other conflicts, which are deeply rooted in the American psychology. The War on Terror, thus, becomes linked to World War II, Pearl Harbor, and the Axis of Evil slogan recalls the Fascist Axis forces. Unlike the War on Terror, however, traditionally defined wars have specific identifiable enemies, and they have determined phases of time during which they are fought until one side has defeated the

other and declared victory. In this respect, the policy takes a concept understood by all and applies it to a new and less familiar domain. Of course, the policy involved an actual war beginning with the conflict in Afghanistan, but the larger metaphor was controlling for all other related initiatives, including domestic surveillance and other measures.

Regarding the more problematic concept of terrorism, many definitions reinforce the role of government as the protagonist, leaving aside the possibility of state-sponsored terrorism. For example, Nacos (2002) defines “mass mediated terrorism” as “political violence against noncombatants/innocents that is committed with the intention to publicize the deed, to gain publicity and thereby public and *government* attention” (p. 17). In this way it is easy to render terrorism a status quo concept, with Nacos even including within her definition anti-globalization dissent! Others have properly adopted more encompassing definitions. Norris, Kern, and Just (2003), for example, call it “the systematic use of coercive intimidation against civilians for political goals” (p. 6), containing the nature of the techniques, the targets, and the goals, and including violence perpetrated by state *and* non-state actors.

In various addresses by the President and other policy documents, the strategy is explicitly organized by marshalling core American values. Recognizing that some frames may be accused of being superficial “spin,” Bush declared that the “war on terror is not a figure of speech. It is an inescapable calling of our generation” (Stevenson, 2004). Indeed, the frame slogan is deeply rooted in the strategic plans of the government. The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (The White House, 2003), defines the attacks of 9/11 as “acts of war against the United States of America and its allies, and against the very idea of civilized society.” It identifies the enemy as terrorism, an “evil” threatening our “freedoms and our way of life. Freedom and fear are at war” (p. 1). Calling the defeat of terrorism “our nation’s primary and immediate priority” (p. 19), this terrorism strategy as outlined argues that the nation cannot wait for terrorist to attack before responding. As such, it takes on even greater significance by being coupled with and expanding upon the National Security Strategy of the United States (The White House, 2006), which outlines a doctrine of unilateral pre-emptive strike capability that runs counter to historical norms of containment, deterrence, and international cooperation. Indeed, the National Security Strategy was developed years before 9/11, but was not palatable policy until the rationale of preventing terrorism was available. The War on Terror and national strategy are thus crucially linked (Armstrong, 2002).

Within the broad national strategy, terrorism is seen as crucially connected to rogue nations and weapons of mass destruction. If nation-states can be defined as sponsors of terrorism, then these two strategies combine into a powerful rationale for interventions at home and abroad. The frame fits the government’s national security strategy in setting up a clear demarcation between us and them. Terrorism is linked to rogue states, which are defined in part as those states that “display no regard for international law... and callously violate international treaties...” Rogue states “reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands (The White House, 2006). As seen in these documents, specific security threats (nations and groups) are named and discussed, but beyond that broad culturally potent concepts are

invoked to justify the political objectives of the government. A war is outlined with on one side arrayed the forces of civilization, rule of law, freedom, democratic values, prosperity, security, way of life, security, human dignity, tolerance, and even open economies; on the other side is the enemy: terror, fear, violence, fascism, and the destroyers of civilization. Speaking on the first anniversary of the start of the Iraq war, Bush declared, "There is no neutral ground--no neutral ground--in the fight between civilization and terror because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery and life and death" (Stevenson, 2004). The irony, of course, is that the administration has created a strategy that has led to our own country revoking international multi-lateralism in order to oppose others for violating international law. The War on Terror seals off the government from criticism. It is right, and those who oppose it are wrong.

This rationale was used as the basis for the invasion of Iraq, locating it within the frame. As one article reported, a year before the invasion, "President Bush acted to leave no doubt Thursday that his warnings to Iraq, Iran and North Korea to shape up or face U.S. retaliation are part of an expansion of the War on terrorism" (Keen, 2002c). He underscored that link the following year in proclaiming a military success: "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a War on terror that began on Sept. 11, 2001, and still goes on" (McQuillan & Benedetto, 2003). Connecting the ongoing occupation with terrorism, he declared that the "defeat of violence and terror in Iraq is vital to the defeat of violence and terror elsewhere." He further declared that the "the first time, the civilized world has provided a concerted response to the ideology of terror" (Bush, 2004a). Although no specific evidence linked Saddam Hussein to the 9/11 attacks, the administration has continued to link the invasion of Iraq to the War on Terrorism, leading a majority of Americans to believe that there was such a connection. In an article concerning casualties in Iraq a month after the beginning of the conflict, the 88 American dead were compared to the 3,000 who died on Sept. 11, 2001. "Those, to me, are casualties of this same war, which is a war against terrorism," said Daphne Scholz, co-owner of a gourmet food store in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. "We took the first casualties, and the balance of dead is still on our side." (Wilgoren & Nagourney, 2003).

### **Inductively Finding the "What" of Frames**

Following an intensive period of following news media accounts, I began to consider how best to operationalize the framing in some kind of more systematic measurement scheme. An early hypothesis was that a news article making reference to the War on Terror would have certain characteristics; in particular, the story would likely accept the prevailing assumptions of the administration embodied in the frame. Perhaps such stories would be more likely to emphasize military language and strategy than a reference to the issue couched in other language. After much reading of media texts from both U.S. and international news organizations, however, it became apparent that the War on Terror was used in ways difficult to predict and classify. For example, I assumed that international media would be far less likely to use the frame than U.S. news organizations, but this was not the case. The terminology of the administration was picked up by a variety of international officials, who found in the campaign a way to direct U.S. policy toward their own goals. The Israelis found in the War on Terror

support for their dealings with the Palestinians, the Russians confirmation of their strategy toward Chechnya, and the Chinese against the Falun Gong. Subsumed within the phrase was a variety of local problems and political needs. Domestically, even critics of the administration found themselves using the phrase, even if ironically. Michael Ignatieff, for example, warned in the *New York Times* of the nation becoming decadent and repressive in combating the problem, giving up democratic liberties, but he also continued to use the metaphor, referring to the “front lines” of the war on terror (Ignatieff, 2004).

I observed a variety of evidence, however, to suggest that the response to terrorism had particular American features. In Madrid following the bombings of March 11, 2004, I observed that the Spanish response was to reassert the importance of democracy, looking internally to rearticulate those values. The American response to 9/11 had been a much more externally focused response, aimed at attacking the perceived source of the threat. The War on Terror, although cast in terms of upholding the American “way of life,” is first and foremost a reconfiguring of relationships in the service of U.S. security policy, with new allies, enemies, and bases for international coalitions. Rojecki (2005), for example, noted that American support for promoting human rights and other liberal international initiatives was at a low ebb before 9/11. Afterwards, he found that press coverage of globalization and its connection with terror did little to change it—creating an issue culture emphasizing state security as an “unfortunate but necessary drag on global prosperity” (p. 77).

I discussed some of my preliminary impressions in Reese (2007), making the point that the War on Terror had become an institutionalized way of seeing the world, but I had yet to settle on a specific research design to pursue that claim. During that same spring and following discussion of these issues, one of my doctoral seminar students, Seth Lewis, carried out an analysis of the Associate Press and how it covered the War on Terror. I was particularly struck by a graph he produced showing that over the period from 2001 to 2006, the war on “Terrorism” declined in frequency of mentions in news articles, with a visible rise in the preference for the war on “Terror.” As often happens in the research process, a striking pattern or result emerges that can spur the imagination for a larger analysis. It seemed that in these contrasting trends lay an illustration of how the policy had become internalized by the press. The “War on (or against) Terrorism” is the phrase used by national security policy statements, including the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, released by the White House on February 14, 2003 (although in his remarks about it the President said, “The war against global *terror* will be hard and long”). The phrases have been used interchangeably, but they have a different connotation relevant to the process of internalization. “Terrorist” and “terrorism” suggest a specific actor and action, while “terror” conveys a condition, an ideologically-laden term often contrasted with “freedom” or “civilization.” Moreover, a war on *terror* fashions itself as a war against fear, a more global condition that affords wide latitude in defining “enemies” and justifying tactics. Thus, I would argue that a preference for “terror” by journalists suggests a naturalization of the frame over time.

Over the period it was clear that the administration had been successful in framing

the response to 9/11 in a way that successfully enlisted public opinion, with no clear competing frame. During this time Entman (2003) proposed a “cascading activation” model that assumed the administration’s success in dominating the public discourse, examining how various “counter-framing” emphases (war with Iraq vs. war with Saudi Arabia) were challenged or not by influential journalists: Thomas Friedman and Seymour Hersch. My own preference, however, was to see how the entire macro frame was absorbed by the press. So after this extensive exposure to news texts, my primary question was still rooted at the professional level: to what extent did U.S. journalists absorb the administration’s framing and take for granted the policy, which should rightly have been contested? Given the debacle of the war in Iraq that unfolded even as I had been thinking about this framing issue, one of the key areas for fault-finding was a compliant press corps. The question for me became how this happened within a framing context, and how the communication of the War on Terror could reveal a crucial aspect of the press’s role in the process.

Taking an inductive approach, I began to more systematically examine coverage by identifying a sample of news texts from *USA Today*, which I took to be a representative national news organization, that contained as the sampling unit the various combinations of War on/against Terror(ism), whether mentioned in headline or main text (N=226), selected from the middle full week of each month of the period. The main time period of interest lay between the attacks of 9/11 and the three-year anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war in the first quarter of 2006. This period encompasses the declaration by President Bush of the “War on Terrorism,” Afghanistan, and the most controversial expression of that policy—the Iraq invasion and its aftermath. I assume here that the entire discourse was relevant, so I didn’t make any distinctions between editorials or news articles when selecting the excerpts. Here the unit of analysis was the excerpt rather than the entire article, based on my view that frames are embedded across a body of discourse and speakers, rather than cleanly identified within a single article.

In examining such excerpts I’ve found that some kind of electronic tool is helpful to keep track of the analysis and classification, especially when the amount of content is large. This time I used a software application called Tinderbox, an organizer for “notes, plans, and ideas,” which allowed me to retain the original electronic full text of the news item, highlight the excerpt containing the target phrase, and then link those excerpts to categories as they developed. Throughout the analysis it was helpful to be able to quickly refer back to the original article for context in deciding how to evaluate the particular excerpts. Lists of journalists could also be kept with quick reference to one or all of their articles.

I made the assumption that a mention of the War on Terror signaled an engagement with the administration framing, a framing that had already been well established in the policy documents and speeches. Given my research question, I was particularly concerned about how journalists handled the frame, and what indications that could provide about their own internalization of the organizing principle. As I reviewed the 226 excerpts selected from the middle full week of each month of the period, some patterns began to emerge and I tagged them electronically into several working

categories. Later, I consolidated these categories into three, which I labeled: transmission, reification, and naturalization. A fuller description and analysis of these is found in Reese and Lewis (in press)

In my reading I tried to keep in mind what was journalistically realistic. A number of articles referred to the War on Terror because that was what Bush called it, and it would have been awkward to call it anything else. Critics now may refer to the “so-called” War on Terror, but this distancing from administration terminology cuts against the objectivity norm. So, “transmission” was indicated when the frame was passed along as a reasonable proxy description of the policy itself, and about half the excerpts were in that category. Here are two examples:

In his State of the Union address, President Bush made clear that “the war on terrorism is only beginning.” (Deats, 2002)

Bush asked for support from wavering Democrats and vowed to prosecute the war on terror. (Page, 2004)

“Reification” was indicated when the excerpt seemed to treat a contested policy as a material fact. Beyond simple transmission, the usage in many instances became uncritically routine, with the frame and its underlying assumptions taken for granted. The newspaper editorial grouping of stories under the heading “War on Terror,” or as *USA Today* might do, “What Happened Wednesday in the War against Terrorism,” exemplifies this kind of handling.

It’s a touchy topic because Bush advisers don’t want people to think he’s coasting while the war on terrorism and economic jitters continue. (Keen, 2002a)

Echoing the television graphics of “America strikes back,” the more muted print response was still to turn Bush’s policy into “America’s” policy, another aspect of this reification. Two examples:

The two nations need much from each other. The United States needs Russia’s oil, its help in the war on terror and its support in curbing nuclear ambitions in Iran and North Korea. (Dorell, 2005)

Intelligence is one of America’s most important tools in the global war on terror. (Di Rita, 2005)

Journalists naturally follow a “horserace” angle when covering politics, a tendency that allows them to insert themselves into the story without appearing biased. In the case of the War on Terror, the organizing principle often appeared taken for granted as news reports proceeded to consider who could exploit the policy with greatest success. Republican frame sponsors, of course, considered that it favored their interests (as they continue to do).<sup>4</sup>

Bush advisers say *his stewardship of the War on terrorism will help GOP*

*candidates*, and he mentions it in each speech. (Keen, 2002b)  
 Later these attributions seem to drop by the wayside as the idea became absorbed into the “common wisdom.” Following are three examples

To some degree, *Republicans will benefit* from the president’s association with the War on terrorism. (Shapiro, 2002)

Crowd reactions to President Bush’s new campaign speech provide more evidence that *his management of the War on terrorism is his best political asset*. (Keen, 2004)

*Bush’s popularity is rooted in the War on terrorism*. He is the commander in chief leading the assault on the forces that traumatized us on 9/11. (Wickham, 2003)

Even Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who *has gotten high marks for leading the War on terrorism*, faced criticism before then for alienating generals, defense contractors and members of Congress because of the way he put together a defense overhaul plan. (Page, 2002a)

Bush has emphasized a moral dimension of the War on Terror (Spielvogel, 2005), with his “steadfastness” by definition becoming a measure of its success. News reports seemed to have internalized this advantage:

Bush succeeded in his first term when *he displayed his strong convictions and acted decisively* — as he did after the 9/11 attacks in launching the war on terrorism. (Gannon, 2005)

Q & A. Some Democrats have suggested that the Bush administration is playing politics with the threats to bump Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry from the headlines and boost *Bush, who is viewed as a strong leader in the war against terrorism*. Are they right? (Hall, 2004)

Vice President Cheney’s so-called “one-percent doctrine” argued that U.S. action is justified given even a minute chance of danger to the nation (Suskind, 2006). By that logic, the absence of terrorism would seem to vindicate any action taken prior to that absence, a fallacious *post hoc* reasoning mirrored in the following analysis provided for “context.”

Context: The war on terrorism remains a success for the Bush administration by its most basic measure: The United States has not been attacked since 9/11. (Dorell, Drinkard, Kiely, Kirchoff, & Ko, 2006)

Another form of reification lay in what I originally regarded as a separate “execution” frame: the tendency, especially among election candidates, to compete on who could be the toughest prosecutor of the War on Terror.

Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry said Monday that President Bush has dragged his feet in the war against terror and failed to make America as safe as it could be since the Sept. 11 attacks. "I believe I can fight a more effective, more thoughtful, more strategic, more proactive, more sensitive war on terror" than Bush, he said. (Lawrence, 2004)

Bush, of course, was only too happy to oblige, given that Kerry was playing within his definitional boundaries.

Our biggest difference is found in our approach to the war on terror. I will always make America's security my top priority. Sen. Kerry would be satisfied if terrorism were just a "nuisance." (Bush, 2004b)

These are not journalists directly making these statements; rather, they are only reflecting what the candidates themselves said. So, execution seems to be better regarded as an aspect of the reification process. Given that news media track, or "index," (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006) the partisan campaign discourse, the absence of a viable counterframe from the Democrats meant that the War on Terror was reified through the balance routine, reinforcing the notion that the only decision on the table was how to be most effective.

Surveys of public opinion struck me early on as an example of reification in that they took a clearly problematic concept and turned it into an unproblematic subject for polling. In 2002, for example, a Pew Center survey reported that the public "continues to be disposed to use military force in the war on terrorism" (cited in Hess & Kalb, 2003, p. 262). In a circular process, the issue is defined by administration labeling, the public asked to respond to it, and the predictable results fed back to the country through the media as accepted wisdom. In constructing the poll questions, the language of "war" itself becomes a given with predictably favorable effect on opinions about its militarization. Journalists further confirm this when they reproduce these results through reification: "Mr. Bush has consistently received a much higher public trust rating on the war on terror than the Democrats" (Luce, 2006).

The most obvious form of internalization that I sought was the frame at its most embedded. In ideological analysis, this process is suggested by the concept of naturalization, in which the War on Terror was no longer policy but "way of life." These expressions were often found in "analysis" or other non-breaking news commentaries, where it seemed the frame had become the institutional common-sense:

Our view: Even after deadly surprises of Sept. 11, convention reigns. From the opening salvo of airliners assaulting buildings to anthrax attacks that come in the mail, the war on terrorism has proved to be one of unexpected turns. (Editorial, 2001)

Bush can change that course simply by reverting to the policies of earlier

Republican administrations, notably his father's. If that gets in the way of smaller party agendas, so what? The war on terror is the top priority. (News Analysis, 2004)

Bin Laden showed new strengths and fallibilities in his tape. They revealed, too, the antidote: determination in the war on terror. That begins with hunting down bin Laden, but it also includes much more. (Editorial, 2004)

Others like George Lakoff (2002) and Pancake (1993) have examined how often military conflict is likened to natural events (e.g., "Desert Storm"), so I was looking for expressions of this literal "naturalization." Bush himself has encouraged this by depicting the War on Terror in terms of natural events, claiming that "We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen the turning of the *tide*" (Bush, 2003). Like a force of nature, it just "happened" to us (on 9/11). Indeed, after Hurricane Katrina, Bush couldn't resist trying to link that natural disaster to the War on Terror, suggesting that America's enemies were pleased to see the devastation (Sanger, 2005)!<sup>5</sup> In this respect, likening the War on Terror to an "event" (natural or otherwise) seemed another way to naturalize it, by taking a political policy over which there should be debate and likening it to an event over which there is little public input and control.

*A series of raw events*, including the economic downturn, "the elusive War on terrorism, the impending war against Iraq and now the shuttle accident" are a challenge to a nation "grown comfortable with predictability, prosperity and superficiality," he said. (Grossman, 2003)

Other references suggested that how long the War on Terror lasts was something beyond our control. Like a natural event, it lasts as long as it lasts. Excerpts like the following pose the question as a matter of duration, a formulation that left no one in charge.

The economic impact of the War on terrorism *will depend on how long it lasts*, how much it costs and whether it slows the trend toward globalization. If this war continues for years, as President Bush warns it will, analysts say it could have the most far-reaching effects on the U.S. economy of any event since World War II. (Page, 2002b)

### **Journalists and the War on Terror**

My original sense, following the AP data trends, was that journalists would follow a stage model, handling the frame objectively early on but over time absorbing it more completely. There were fewer of these "naturalization" references than I had expected, and they did not necessarily fall toward the end of the period. But the "organizing principle" definition of framing suggests that these structures can be manifested in a number of ways, not just as embedded in news texts, which led me to want to corroborate these results with another source. With a background in journalism education, I've spoken to a number of professionals as a "reality-check" about my concerns about media handling of the War on Terror. I'm reluctant to attribute explanations for their behavior

based solely on their work (a frequent academic tendency, given the easy availability of electronic news retrieval systems). At the same time, their ability to reflect on why they do what they do is often limited by their time and perspective. Journalists are among the most closely scrutinized professions, and they naturally become defensive when second-guessed about press failings. Nevertheless, I thought it was important to have their views as further evidence for the internalization hypothesis.

Seth Lewis and I identified from their bylines several of the journalists behind the articles in our sample, eventually interviewing 13 of them in a semi-structured interview format by phone. In spite of the number of requests they must receive, we got a surprising response from an initial email identifying ourselves and requesting an opportunity to speak with them. The challenge was to find words to describe the project without unduly influencing their responses, or provoking an automatic professional defense mechanism. Here's how I prefaced our interview request:

I've been taking a look recently at how issues surrounding 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq have been covered in the press, specifically how post-9/11 security policy has been characterized in the print media. The focus is on a broad sample of reporting at the national level, including the Associated Press and *USA Today*. Academics often stop at just reading news articles, so I wanted if possible to go directly to the source and get your insight about the subject... We both have already done a thorough review of news articles on these issues spanning the last six years. So, at this point we are following up by getting journalists' reflections on their reporting, now with the benefit of hindsight.

Asking someone to reflect on work from several years previous has its own problems, but where necessary we could read back their phrasing and ask for their thinking at the time. There's a balance in interviews with expert respondents between essentially trying out one's hypothesis and using their responses as evidence for it. We said we were particularly interested in the War on Terror and we asked what they thought people meant by the phrase, what qualms they may have about it, and whether the administration and media were more or less talking about the same thing when using it. A fuller analysis of the interview results is described in an upcoming publication (Lewis & Reese, 2008).

Given their status as professionals at one of the nation's top news organizations, these were thoughtful and often self-critical respondents. They recognized that the War on Terror had become something of a cliché, politicized, and propagandistic, which does not seem like a group that has internalized an administration framing. One noted that the War on Terror was the wording of Bush, and therefore would likely be used in that context. This was supported by the number of transmission-style excerpts in *USA Today*. On the other hand, numerous other examples (including references continuing to the present day in elite publications such as the *New York Times*), show otherwise, indicating that it has become disassociated from the frame sponsor. Closer examination of their responses suggested, however, that they objected primarily to the frame having been invoked to invade Iraq, and that objection came after the fact—as suggested by the

following response:

I think there would be more of a reluctance [on the part of the press] to extend it to that war (Iraq) because the linkages are not as clear.

Another journalist was more specific:

I think some press aren't using that phrase anymore, or are using it less. They've become more sensitive to it, especially since the revelations that have come out about the reasons for going to war. ... The administration tries to confuse people and just lumps Iraq and Afghanistan and 9/11 and everything else in the same package, and I don't necessarily think they go together.

Thus, the phrase proved to be context-dependent, with a meaning that shifted over time, as a third journalist indicated:

So, I don't think it has one meaning. It has an infinite number of meanings, and that only serves to confuse people. ... It's all in the context of what they're saying. It can mean very different things. ... It's sort of thrown out there and left for the audience to interpret what they mean by that.

This sense that “we all know what we mean” when we say the War on Terror, that it means what we want it to mean, speaks to the embedded quality of the frame, that it has passed into the realm of common-sensical taken-for-grantedness. Occasionally, one can find deconstructions of the frame in the mainstream press, but these are rare.<sup>6</sup> The War on Terror was accepted from the beginning, with its weakness as an organizing principle revealed primarily with respect to Iraq—but that was only after it became recognized as a foreign policy debacle.

I don't provide further analysis of these interviews here, but for me their main value was to show some of the professional context of the internalization process. To the extent that the frame has been undermined in recent years, post-Iraq, underscores the extent to which it was accepted uncritically in the early going post 9/11. Frame contestation in this case was not a linear process of slowly winning over the news media and public, progressing from transmission to reification and naturalization. Each of these processes was going on throughout the period. Here was a case where the country was immediately caught up in a particularly compelling macro-level organizing principle, and the discourse that followed took place within those boundaries. Given their professional constraints, journalists were ill-equipped to mount their own frame challenge when the opposition party gave them little to index, when they emphasized horse-race style strategy flowing from the frame, and when they themselves felt obliged to transmit and amplify the framing they already implicitly accepted as a way of viewing the world.

### Summary

Within the framing project one could approach the War on Terror from a number of different directions. In this case, taking the frame as a cultural “structure of meaning”

leads to examining the network of concepts and underlying narrative that gives it power as an organizing principle—which has worked to shape profoundly U.S. foreign policy. Militarizing the policy response and drawing on definitions of terrorism cast as a threat to the status quo, and with a benign view of state-sponsored violence, has warped our ability to think clearly about the real problem. But how has this frame been propagated by the U.S. press? To answer that question has meant taking a close look at the construction of the frame and how journalists participated in this process, not as a passive recipient (as the critical paradigm might suggest). This construction is seen in specific content, but also in the surrounding cultural context of social values and professional norms to which it must be connected (a construction I still can regard in a critical context). The frame that eventually works to affect public opinion, invoking and altering certain values hierarchies, must be created. The “what” of the frame must be understood before the “how” of its effectivity on citizens. In between, it must be processed through institutional machinery, and that’s where another “how” question comes in: the professional context of journalism. In examining news texts and asking journalists themselves to articulate their own understandings about those texts, I hoped to triangulate an understanding of cultural framing—how journalists participate in the construction of the War on Terror.

Taking a more qualitative and interpretive approach can be difficult when it appears that definite categories are not immediately presenting themselves—providing an easy coding scheme into which textual units can be sorted. But in sifting through texts and allowing these insights to emerge, the subtle power of large macro frames can be discerned. For me, that’s where frames get interesting—the “in such a way” aspect of their internal structure. For such an important issue, which has filled the media for years with commentaries and investigations, an interpretive framing study of the War on Terror makes a stimulating way to merge the public debate with the scholarly questions. For such issues, the news is always full of grist for the mill, and the research task takes on a journalistic style in trying to get to the bottom of a story. But the academic task is to be systematic and provide the careful analysis not available elsewhere, and stepping back with that kind of imagination is all the more important when it seems the entire society is captive to the power of a deeply embedded organizing principle.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Various phrases have been used in this context, including the “war on terrorism,” the “war against terror,” and the “war on terror.” Henceforth, the capitalized “War on Terror” will be used when referring to the frame itself and otherwise a lower-case “war on terror(ism)” when quoted or paraphrased in its use by others.

<sup>2</sup> Suggesting something of what concerned me about journalists, the op-ed editor changed the headline of my piece from “Framing the War on Terror” to “Framing Our Country’s War on Terrorism.”

<sup>3</sup> Based on Smith’s (2005) cultural sociology perspective, I would argue that the War on Terror approximates his most extreme genre, “apocalyptic,” which pushes the good and bad guys to their most divergent and, according to him is the only narrative capable of mobilizing mass support for warfare by making it culturally acceptable.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2008 presidential race, an official in the McCain campaign claimed that a terrorist attack would benefit McCain, an assumption with clear ties to Bush’s success in framing terrorism to the advantage of Republicans.

<sup>5</sup> Echoing this force-of-nature perspective, White House adviser Karl Rove said of the War on Terror: “We didn’t welcome it, we didn’t want it, but it came” (Kelly, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> A number of articles have revealed the internal struggles within the administration over terminology (e.g., Stevenson, 2005). In summer of 2005, reporters noticed the administration’s transition in the “catchphrase,” quoting officials as saying the slogan had outlived its usefulness by overemphasizing military response. Instead, the plan was to introduce a more positive alternative of democracy and freedom, while, in the words of Defense Department spokesman Lawrence Di Rita, denying that it represented a “shift in thinking, but a continuation of the immediate post-9/11 approach” (Schmitt & Shanker, 2005). In fact, the alternative, “global struggle against violent extremism,” was still cast by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as an apocalyptic conflict “against the enemies of freedom, the enemies of civilization.” Not long afterwards, however, Bush reasserted his preferred label cast in military terms, repudiating any notion that the policy had changed: “We’re at war with an enemy that attacked us on Sept. 11, 2001” (Stevenson, 2005).