
WHAT IS THE WAR ON TERROR? FRAMING THROUGH THE EYES OF JOURNALISTS

By Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese

This study explored the War on Terror framing process through interviews with journalists at USA Today, testing the presumption that, because frames are organizing principles whose manifestations extend beyond the level of content alone, journalists' personal discourse will reflect and reinforce frames found in the text. Results show that reporters "transmitted" the War on Terror as shorthand for policy, "reified" the frame as concrete and uncontested, and "naturalized" it as a taken-for-granted condition. These findings suggest broader lessons for the U.S. press in becoming more aware of the words and catchphrases that signify the prevailing wisdom of public officials.



In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration advanced a War on Terror to justify security policies at home and military intervention abroad, exemplified by continuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a rhetorical device for marshaling resources and defining the terms of debate, the War on Terror has emerged as a powerful ideological frame. Whether called the *war on terror*, the *war on terrorism*, or the *war against terrorism*,¹ the frame put forth by the Bush administration, beginning the day after 9/11, was the same: The tragedy required an immediate war-like response against the perpetrators and states that protected them.² This "loaded and elastic frame" was used to "justify and fast-track the new unilateralist foreign policy."³ More broadly, this frame took on ideological dimensions, not only providing linguistic cover for widespread political change in the name of national security, but also offering an institutionalized way of seeing the world—a frame as influential as it was subtle.⁴

As a central facet of political communication, frames define the terms of debate; shape public opinion through the persuasive use of symbols; and, when most effective, lead to public policy change. They serve as the primary vehicle through which public officials, the news media, and other elites exercise political influence over one another and the public at large.⁵ As such, frames do not arise organically; they are

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constructed and disseminated as a result of social and institutional interests. In short, “framing is an exercise in power.”⁶ That power comes from frames’ capacity to shape democratic discourse and public opinion, but such effects are dependent on news media acceptance and sponsorship of those frames.⁷ Thus, to track the arc of influence in framing, it is essential to examine the ease with which journalists adopt and naturalize frames put forth by powerful institutions.

The present study seeks to explore how the War on Terror has become a socially shared organizing principle. In particular, it explores how the Bush administration’s rhetoric has been internalized by the U.S. news media, and what role individual journalists have played in this framing process. A previous analysis⁸ found that news and editorial reports primarily engaged the War on Terror frame in three ways: (1) “transmitting” the label as shorthand for administration policy; but, more problematically, (2) “reifying” the policy as an uncontested thing; and (3) “naturalizing” the frame as a taken-for-granted worldview. While most studies on media framing begin and end at this layer of analysis—the text and its implied effects—the present study seeks to enhance this line of research by giving voice to the frame-shapers, using interviews with journalists from a prototypical national newspaper (*USA Today*). Thus, this study investigates one of the most important frames of our time as reflected by reporters from one of the nation’s most popular newspapers. In these interviews, we examined the framing process through the eyes of these journalists, primarily seeking to understand the sensemaking involved: What did the War on Terror *mean* for them?

**Theoretical
Overview:
War
on Terror,
Framing,
and
Journalistic
Norms**

As a rhetorical catchphrase, *war on terror* has its roots in the Reagan administration, which used the term to define its fight against state-supported terrorism in the Middle East and Latin America.⁹ On September 12, 2001, President Bush likened the terrorist attacks to “acts of war,” and defined the battle to come as a “monumental struggle of good versus evil.”¹⁰ The proposed War on Terror took shape the following week in administration comments, culminating in the president’s address to a joint session of Congress on September 20: “Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there.”¹¹

As framed by the Bush administration, the War on Terror occluded all but military solutions to the problem,¹² calling for special powers for a wartime president and demanding patriotic allegiance. Its all-consuming nature took the focus away from other problems while justifying a wide array of policies, from tax cuts to the Patriot Act.¹³ A metaphor like the War on Poverty and the War on Drugs,¹⁴ it nevertheless has yielded very real military action. Although the War on Terror delineated neither a clear enemy nor battlefield, the frame’s flexibility and good-versus-evil judgment provided the moral cover for pre-emptive military action. Perhaps recognizing the inherent contradictions and limitations of the War on Terror rhetoric, the Bush administration tried to drop the phrase in favor of “global struggle against violent extremism,” but within weeks of the name change President Bush reversed course by reinstating *war on terror*,

and in doing so “planted himself ... firmly on the side of framing the conflict primarily in military terms.”¹⁵

The mainstream media quickly picked up the War on Terror frame, often without questioning its assumptions or challenging its built-in worldview.¹⁶ Describing the reaction to Bush’s War on Terror speech on September 20, Levenson wrote, “Beginning the following day, the American press wove ‘war on terror’ into tens of thousands of news reports, features, and editorials to describe the logic for policies ranging from the Homeland Security Act to the Iraq war.”¹⁷ Virtually no major newspaper used its editorials to argue against military action leading up to the war in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Moreover, critics contend that the press all too willingly mobilized the public through jingoistic icons, war rhetoric, and uncritical cheerleading of the Bush administration.¹⁹

In recent years, a number of high-profile journalists and news organizations have come to lament and publicly self-scrutinize coverage of the War on Terror—both their own²⁰ and that of the press at large in “selling” the Bush administration’s case for war in Iraq.²¹ Bob Woodward²² has admitted that he should have pushed the *Washington Post* for a front-page article on the weakness of the administration’s claims of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) on the eve of invasion in Iraq, and a top *New York Times* editor acknowledged a similar failing during her time as Washington bureau chief.²³

The rather immediate and widespread acceptance of the War on Terror frame should have been expected, perhaps, when it came sponsored by major political figures in a time of crisis.²⁴ With the help of an “echoing press,”²⁵ the Bush administration effectively framed the march toward war in Iraq as an extension of the War on Terror, allowing the Iraq war to achieve levels of public support that were nearly as high as those for the war in Afghanistan.²⁶ Looking back on an election season in which the “handling” of the War on Terror was both a central issue and a chief point of confusion, Levenson was led to ask, “How seriously did the press err in adopting the shorthand of the political establishment to describe America’s response to 9/11? And, what should it do now that the terminology has been naturalized into the vernacular?”²⁷

Frames are more than cognitive structures of meaning, separated as it were from their sources. They are tools used by social actors to structure reality,²⁸ and their creation and manipulation are often managed by elites seeking to reinforce their discursive dominance.²⁹ Because such frames often are embedded in and resonate with everyday culture, and thus are considered normal and natural, “their impact is by stealth.”³⁰

Perhaps the framing definition that best bridges the cognitive, constructivist, and critical aspects of this research paradigm³¹ is that proposed by Reese: “Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.”³² That expansive perspective describes the War on Terror: It comprehensively *organizes* information, providing an umbrella for a wide range of military, political, and legal policies; it is based on an abstract *principle* that is embedded in ideological strug-

gle—an “organizing idea”³³ far larger than an individual text; it is socially *shared* as a rallying cry of nationalism in this “post-9/11 world” and served as the backdrop against which the 2004 presidential election was played;³⁴ it has been *persistent*, durable, and constant since its introduction in 2001; it is revealed through *symbolism*, as typified in Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003; and it lends clear patterns of *structure*, bifurcating the world into two camps—with us, or with the terrorists.³⁵ Like the “Cold War,” the War on Terror is a meta-frame; it conjures up “a larger world of meaning,” bringing with it a set of assumptions, symbols, and worldviews that gain and maintain organizing power as they are naturalized.³⁶

Such power is predicated on the notion that frames constrain public discourse and thus shape public opinion—and that the news media play a crucial part in accepting and conveying frames proffered by social actors. In this way, the world is “framed” through reporters’ “lenses,”³⁷ most often privileging the prevailing views of political elites.³⁸ This occurs in large measure because of sourcing patterns that favor “official” accounts³⁹ and beat structures that rely on government and institutions to generate news.⁴⁰ Moreover, in their pursuit of objective truth, reporters tend to cast their work within a “web of facticity”⁴¹ that lends particular gravity and validity to the words of authority figures; hence, the news is that the President said X, not whether X is empirically accurate. Of concern for this study is how these and other norms and routines—such as the constraints of space and time in news operations—influence how easily journalists internalize frames put forth by powerful interests.

We want to examine the extent to which the press is capable of or comfortable with expanding the War on Terror discourse beyond administration-defined boundaries.⁴² For example, Bennett and his colleagues faulted the press for “indexing” its coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal by adopting the administration’s “isolated abuse” frame and downplaying the “policy of torture” counter-frame posed by critics.⁴³ However, these efforts of indexing and counter-framing operate at the “functional” level of framing; that is, the competing discourse still remains hedged within the broader cultural framework of the War on Terror, which itself goes unchallenged in intra-elite debate and thus slips into the background as a larger meta-frame. That would help explain the difficulty for journalists in going beyond the official “index.”

Problem Statement

Thus, the War on Terror deserves greater scrutiny to uncover the deeper, less apparent workings that have led to its internalization in the press. In exploring how reporters articulate the War on Terror, we presume that frames, as organizing principles, will be reinforced in journalists’ own words just as they are in the text. Thus, we examine the following research questions:

RQ1: From the perspective of these journalists, what is the War on Terror?

RQ2: What does the personal discourse of journalists reveal about how they engage the War on Terror frame through *transmission*, *reification*, and *naturalization*?

Method

Interviews tap into the sensemaking of social actors, drawing out the rhetorical construction of their experience and perspective.⁴⁴ Of course, it might be difficult for individuals to accurately describe their “internal frames,” and yet interviews are a useful supplement to analyses of content by connecting the text to actual human actors. Extending the ethnographic study of news construction,⁴⁵ interviews have emerged as a popular research tool for understanding how journalists approach their work.⁴⁶

While less time-intensive than ethnographic observation, conducting research interviews with journalists poses its own challenges. Perhaps because they are so familiar with the rhetorical tools of interviewing and the now regular attacks over issues of alleged bias, journalists often avoid being interviewed or do so with great care. This defensiveness is only heightened when they are asked to reflect on their own reporting. Moreover, as busy professionals whose jobs have expanded and become more technically complex in the digital era, journalists—particularly those at elite organizations—are simply hard to pin down for an interview.

For this framing study, we interviewed thirteen journalists⁴⁷ from *USA Today*, which was chosen for this and for our previous analysis⁴⁸ because it has the widest circulation of any U.S. newspaper and seeks to speak with a national voice. Of those interviewed, twelve were news reporters and one was a bureau chief who had been a writer in recent years. All were veteran journalists, most with considerable expertise in national security, military affairs, foreign policy, and politics. The journalists volunteered to be interviewed after being contacted with an introductory e-mail that was sent to 64 reporters at *USA Today*—those whose bylines had appeared on stories examined in our previous study. Of those sixty-four, more than half had left *USA Today*; of the remaining thirty, about half were able to be interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in late 2007 via phone because the journalists were spread among bureaus in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington. The interviews ranged from 10 to 30 minutes in length, with an average time of about 20 minutes. Questions were prepared in advance,⁴⁹ but the interviews were loosely structured, going deeper into some areas than others depending on the expertise and responses of the journalists. Broadly speaking, journalists were asked to define the War on Terror, reflect on the phrase’s use in the news media, and offer thoughts on how such issues should be presented in the press. Our challenge in conducting these interviews was to strike a delicate balance—of asking questions centered around the War on Terror without sensitizing them to our hypotheses or leading them to answers we wanted; and of being sufficiently open-ended to tap into their sensemaking without seeming to “play dumb.” The ultimate goal was to better understand

what they (and their colleagues in the press) were *thinking* in writing about the War on Terror. As such, we listened for keywords, target phrases, or subtleties that would call up larger structures of meaning.⁵⁰

Analysis

Overview. Of these thirteen journalists, nearly all expressed frustration with the difficulty of defining the War on Terror and disappointment with its usage in the press, and most seemed resigned to accept that the phrase had become a convenient (yet unfortunate) shorthand for Bush administration policies since 9/11. The journalists' responses were consistent with the findings of our previous textual analysis,⁵¹ which suggested that the U.S. news media not only transmitted President Bush's preferred phraseology, but also reified and naturalized the policy, making it an uncontested and unproblematic "thing."

What is the War on Terror? The interviews began with an open-ended exploration of how the War on Terror is defined in the minds of journalists: *When you think of the War on Terror, what issues and ideas tend to fall under that label?* Many reporters ticked off a series of policies, actions, and events: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the handling of detainees, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and other efforts at home and abroad. Perhaps summing up the definitional consensus, Journalist A said, "I think of the general basket of activities and the government's posture since September 11, 2001."⁵²

In these initial, top-of-the-head reflections, journalists made little reference to the Bush administration's role in the War on Terror. Although most of them would go on to criticize the president, the fact that the frame's author and chief sponsor didn't come to mind, at least not at first, reinforced the degree to which it has moved from being "Bush's war on terror" to "America's war on terror."⁵³

Also common was exasperation over the difficulty in defining this concept. Perhaps its very ubiquity and ambiguity have contributed to its power, as journalists noted.

The war on terror has come to be a catch-all phrase. It's so *amorphous*. I don't know it's been defined. Not sure anyone knows what it means anymore. (Journalist B)

The war on terrorism is pretty big. Is it a war on Osama bin Laden and his followers and al-Qaeda? Does it include Hezbollah and Hamas? Does it include the war on people like the guy who blew up Oklahoma City? When you say war on terror, it's pretty *amorphous*. (Journalist C)

It's sort of thrown out there and left for the audience to interpret what they mean by that. It's definitely become *clouded and vague*. (Journalist D)

I don't think it's a particularly useful term. It's too . . . *amorphous*. I don't think it has any meaning anymore. You listen to me struggle to define it. (Journalist E)

Transmission. At a basic level, a frame is transmitted by its sponsors as the words of public officials pass into public discourse through direct and indirect quotations in the press. Just as this was the most obvious and most common engagement with the War on Terror frame in our textual analysis, so was it apparent in our follow-up interviews with *USA Today* journalists. This transmission element was evident as they referenced the War on Terror in terms of its editorial convenience—a catch-all shorthand that could clue readers into a larger, ongoing process of policies and events. For these journalists, the War on Terror could be ideological, in certain settings and when spoken by certain political actors, but its larger purpose was functional: It was a shortcut for communicating complex phenomena. As Journalist C explained:

It's a handy catchphrase that can be used, and probably will be used, because it's short and tight and has a *general meaning that people understand*. But I think people are becoming more careful about how we use it because it can mean different things to different people.

This “general meaning” was cited by many journalists as the primary rationale for using the War on Terror terminology.

You can't always spell out what you mean by the war on terror. *Americans understand it to mean wars against Muslim countries that are accused of sponsoring terrorism. That's what I assume they think when they see the shorthand*. In my case, I use it for al-Qaeda. (Journalist F)

Yet, at the same time, they couldn't articulate the precise nature of this meaning, nor could they explain how this shared understanding with readers had been achieved.

I thought then and think now that to say war on terror is kind of a wink and a nod. *We know what we're talking about here*. We're not talking about a war on Basque ETA or the Irish Republican Army or another terrorist organization. We're talking about Islamists, Muslim jihadis. So why don't we say that, or why doesn't the government say that? I don't know. (Journalist A)

Beyond seeking contextual common ground, journalists were quick to point out that President Bush had made the War on Terror his routine rhetoric, and thus they had little choice but to quote him and other administration officials, either directly or indirectly. This rationale reinforces the transmission element of the War on Terror, the news media amplifying the president's frame and embedding it in public discourse. “I think the press uses it only because the administration uses it,” Journalist G said. “The Bush administration gave us this phrase,” Journalist F said. Another, Journalist H, concurred: “The war on terror

is a creation of the administration.” When asked how she classified the War on Terror, as compared to how Bush used it, she said:

Again, I don’t classify the war on terror. *The president uses the phrase; I quote him using the phrase.* He has defined it a certain way, the administration has defined the war on terror a certain way. I don’t use it independent of the administration using it. So, *it’s not my responsibility to define it.*

Journalist H failed to acknowledge that, like her colleagues, in many cases she did use it “independently” of the administration. Quite often War on Terror references appeared without any direct connection to the Bush administration as the source.

Finally, the word-length limits that constrain the writing of any print newspaper reporter—and particularly one at a newspaper known for its short articles—were another rationale for using War on Terror as a catch-all shortcut. “That was the phrase the administration used, so it’s a shorthand,” Journalist F said. “And, at *USA Today*, where there are very few words allowed, you use the shorthands that you can.” These editorial constraints involve space and time. “Perhaps if we had more time,” Journalist I said, “we could write more nuanced reports.” Moreover, these temporal constraints are not just limited to newspapers. One reporter noted that “if you’re on TV and you have 20 seconds or 30 seconds for a spot, it [war on terror] gets the idea across, the context in which you’re talking about something” (Journalist J). In many cases, the journalists sought to demystify the shorthand use of the War on Terror as a space-fitting necessity.⁵⁴ In doing so, however, they failed to acknowledge the political power inherent in word choice, treating the War on Terror as just another turn of phrase and leaving unchallenged its potential for shaping the terms of debate.

When you’re writing a big story about a big event and you have 10 inches to write it in, are you going to reach for a phrase that is less nuanced than another? Yeah, you bet. *So often these decisions have so little to do with politics and everything to do with space constraints and deadlines.* (Journalist C)

The *USA Today* reporters seemed to sigh and shrug at the catchphrase nature of the War on Terror. On the one hand, they saw it as useful and ubiquitous—easy to employ, easy to understand. On the other hand, they acknowledged its lack of precision and bemoaned its frequent use in the press—although most believed that the phrase had fallen out of use, when in fact our data indicate otherwise.⁵⁵ Furthermore, these journalists expressed a certain passivity about the War on Terror, portraying themselves and the press at large as unwitting (and almost powerless) accomplices to the administration.

There wasn’t really another phrase being used at that time. That was the one put out there. That was the crawl on all the

TV screens. That was what CNN talked about. So, I imagine everyone [in the press] picked it up as a shorthand. (Journalist F)

Reification. As we move into the realm of reification, the abstract policy frame becomes concrete and real, transforming what should be a contested policy into accepted wisdom. The frame itself is not contested, but rather its *execution*, as exemplified when George W. Bush and John Kerry argued over who would wage a “tougher” War on Terror.⁵⁶ Such reification also became apparent in the journalists’ criticism of Bush and his policies. For while nearly all of them were openly and sometimes vehemently opposed to certain aspects, their criticism still seemed to be contained within the War on Terror superstructure, contesting not the frame but its expansion and execution in recent years. This was particularly true in their assessments of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To most of those interviewed, the invasion of Afghanistan was an appropriate response to the 9/11 attacks, while the war in Iraq was mistakenly linked to the War on Terror.

At the beginning with 9/11 it started with al-Qaeda, but, unfortunately, the Bush administration began to widen the target almost immediately. Bush began to talk about terrorists with global reach. There started to be mission creep very early on. (Journalist F)

Like journalists generally, *USA Today* reporters felt burned by the faulty press coverage of weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq war. As they reflected on the War on Terror and its coverage in the press, they seemed to be saying: Everything was fine until we invaded Iraq.

As Journalist I said, “We’ve taken our eye off the ball with Iraq, lost focus on where terrorists really are.” Later, reflecting on an article in which she used “war on terror,” Journalist I mused, “If it was 2002, I was talking about the war in Afghanistan and intelligence and counterterrorism and things like that. And, that probably would have been appropriate at that time *because we weren’t in Iraq yet.*” Journalist G discussed at length whether the Iraq war belongs under the War on Terror rubric, finally concluding that it “*technically* falls under the global war on terrorism [but] seems distinguishable from it,” although he did not further explain this distinction. In each of these instances, the Iraq incursion was contested, but not the frame from which it developed. Reification removes the War on Terror meta-frame from the realm of debate, leaving pundits and the press to squabble instead over technicalities and tactics.

To be clear, however, there was no lack of critique from these journalists. And they were as critical of themselves as they were the administration. When asked what the press had learned since 9/11, they spoke of the need for skepticism and investigative vigor. For example, Journalist K observed:

I wish we were tougher-minded in the build-up to Iraq, but it took time for the traditional adversarial relationship to reassert itself because of the shock of 9/11. So that's why you find the use of language becoming somewhat more critical and not so apt to repeat the phrases used by the administration, because that critical voice has reasserted itself.

What became apparent from the interviews was that, perhaps like the press and public at large in recent years, these journalists had come to recognize the rhetorical framing efforts of the Bush administration. They believed something dubious was afoot, and were determined not to be duped.

You run the danger that it can become *propaganda*. If you allow a government to put everything and anything under the rubric of "It's part of the war on terror" ... it's an effort to convince people that, well, you have to go along with this, it's part of the war on terror, or else we'll all be terrorized and killed. (Journalist J)

Just falling into the use of what amounts to a loaded term, the war on terror, the use of various code names, operation this or that—it's what in World War II you would call *propaganda*. (Journalist L)

I don't know anybody in the newspaper business who wants to be a tool for *propaganda*, so if you feel that you're being used—"Hey, we're at war, so let's all unite behind this position"—when there should be legitimate debate, people are cautious about it. (Journalist C)

Perhaps such awareness on the part of journalists came too late in this framing process, with the War on Terror already so deeply (and uncritically) embedded in public, policy and press discourse.

Naturalization. A frame's internalization is complete as it moves from reification to naturalization, from a fixed thing that is apparent to a taken-for-granted condition of modern life that is amorphous. As it slips into the background, the frame becomes almost imperceptible, making it difficult to see where it begins and ends. Such unproblematic renderings of the War on Terror frame were infrequent in our interviews. After all, these were seasoned reporters whose "journalistic antennas" had been aroused by formerly "neutral" words becoming politically charged (Journalist C). But the frame's naturalization became apparent as journalists struggled to describe the War on Terror outside of itself, and as they sought to distance themselves from their own references to the War on Terror in print. As journalists reflected on preferable phrases, their alternatives seemed to vary little from the frame, the elements of *war* and *conflict* and *terror* no less apparent than before.

Rather than “war on terrorism,” they [journalists] might say “the fight against terror,” or “the conflict with terrorists,” or whatever. (Journalist C)

I’ll try to use words like “combating terrorism” or “battle against terrorism,” but I’m sure I’ve used the “war on terrorism” many times. But I try to use other words that are less likely to indicate the war is going to have a start and an end. (Journalist K)

Toward the end of the interview, some journalists were presented with examples of War on Terror references that appeared in their own writing since 9/11. Several reporters said they doubted they had ever used the phrase “war on terror,” and were surprised to learn that in fact they had—in some cases, twenty or more times since 9/11. Each was asked, “What do you think you meant when you wrote that?” Put on the defensive, they seemed to retreat behind professional norms that obliged them to convey the Bush administration’s words (i.e., transmission) and remain neutral in the debate. Some assumed an agnostic gatekeeper perspective of news construction:

I think *the press reflects society*. ... A lot of times people like to blame the media. [But] the media holds up a mirror to society. You can go ahead and blame the mirror for what you see in the mirror, but you’re looking in the mirror. (Journalist C)

The objectivity ideal encourages journalists to be circumspect in their wording and give deference to official accounts of issues and events. When it was pointed out that liberal critics refer to Bush policy as the “so-called” War on Terror, Journalist L laughed and said, “Yeah, if *we* say that, it sounds like we’re pissing on it.” Furthermore, the interviewees distanced themselves from their War on Terror usage by emphasizing the shorthand necessity of the phrase, and they hinted at a certain degree of acquiescence in the face of the administration’s framing. After she was read an example from her reporting, Journalist F became defensive:

Gosh, it was three years ago. That was the phrase commonly being used, the shorthand. ... You can’t ask somebody about stories they wrote three years ago. I mean, I’ve written how many stories about these issues? That was the phrase the administration used.

Indeed, reporters backed away from their own work and accused their counterparts in television of perpetuating the phrase. Even when turning critical in discussing the War on Terror, the journalists seemed more concerned with phraseology—how it was worded, or in which media it appeared—than with the larger issue of the press’

responsibility to scrutinize and challenge the messages put forth by public officials.

The very phrase “war on terror” is imprecise and inaccurate. Terror is not an ideology; it’s a tactic. So, I think there’s been some effort to use more accurate and precise terminology. The global war on terrorism was the phrase of the day for some years. Now we make some effort to talk with more precision. (Journalist K)

In this sense, we come full circle to the beginning of this analysis, in which we explored how journalists defined the War on Terror and rationalized its use in the press. The frame’s naturalization becomes evident as we consider that these reporters found little distinction between what the Bush administration and the news media were saying in using the phraseology, as Journalist K indicated: “If you think about combating terrorism, I think they [the administration and the press] *mean the same thing*.” Thus, the implication is of a shared understanding—activated by War on Terror terminology—that exists among the administration, the press, and the American people. As several journalists seemed to suggest: “We all know what we’re talking about here.” Or do we?

Conclusion and Discussion

The War on Terror may no longer be the defining and dominating frame that it was in the build-up to war in Iraq. Yet, the interviews of this study, coupled with earlier findings from our textual analysis, suggest that it remains a powerful organizing principle, the effects of which are still playing out in U.S. military and security policies at home and abroad. The War on Terror meta-frame not only shapes much of foreign and domestic policy, but also defines the terms of debate, hedging public and media discourse within its framework. To what extent does the personal discourse of journalists resonate with and reinforce the primary engagements with the War on Terror frame—*transmission, reification, and naturalization*?

On the whole, the reporters’ perceptions of the War on Terror connected with those overarching themes. With regards to *transmission*, the journalists generally agreed that they and their press colleagues had adopted the War on Terror language of the Bush administration out of convenience and constraint: The shorthand was easy to use, easy for readers to understand, and fit nicely within the limited space of a *USA Today* article. At the same time, nearly all the journalists expressed reservations about the War on Terror and how the Bush administration had used it to justify the invasion of Iraq. Yet, even in this critical turn against the frame, the reporters *reified* it, questioning the extension of War on Terror policy to include the Iraq war rather than questioning the very root of the issue—whether or not military action, or a War on Terror, was appropriate from the beginning. In other words, the War on Terror as it existed pre-Iraq came into being fully formed. Finally, when presented with examples of the phrase appearing in their own news articles, journalists became

detached and defensive, adopting the professional norms that allow them to distance themselves from the things they cover. This suggested that the press contributed to the War on Terror's naturalization as it absorbed the discourse of powerful figures.

These interviews highlight the undercurrent of criticism for Bush and his War on Terror frame within the press corps, even if such a critique is not readily manifest in the "objective" text. Most striking, however, were the contradictions in this criticism. Reporters seemed well attuned to the political machinations of War on Terror rhetoric, yet felt constrained to use the phrase as shorthand, perhaps concluding that they had to go along with the presidential wording for fear of being biased and argumentative. They questioned whether Iraq belonged inside the War on Terror tent, yet often lumped Iraq and Afghanistan together in their top-of-the-head reflections on what constitutes the War on Terror. Indeed, even when most critical of Bush and his policies, they scrutinized the Iraq war rather than the War on Terror meta-frame from which it was born. They recognized the branches but missed the root. Invading Afghanistan was fine; Iraq was not. As such, the journalists treated the Bush administration's framing of the military response to 9/11 as a reified, naturalized starting point, a fixed node in policy debate.

In saying this, however, let us be clear: The purpose of this study was not to hold these journalists up for scorn; they are intelligent and expert, many of them seasoned in the workings of foreign policy, counter-terrorism, and the military. They were thoughtful and reflective in the interviews, volunteering to participate in large part because they cared about the issues involved and wanted to improve media coverage of the War on Terror. Rather, their conflicted responses suggest something important about the malleability of the War on Terror frame, which makes critiquing it difficult without contributing to its reification. More broadly, and of concern for scholars, this study contributes to the literature on framing by going beyond the text alone to reveal some of the sense-making through which frames are negotiated and naturalized by media gatekeepers. As such, these were not merely words, passed along to readers without any ownership on the part of the transmitters. Rather, these interviews reveal something of the journalists' own deep-seated assumptions about the War on Terror, and thus shed new light on the framing process generally.

Even if we fully unpack the War on Terror, the larger lesson for the news media extends beyond this particular frame. The internalization of the War on Terror in the U.S. press reminds us that, even when there appears to be little effort on the part of the political opposition to counter-frame the prevailing wisdom of public officials, journalists have a responsibility to challenge and scrutinize—to avoid policy catchphrases that circumvent democratic debate, and to provide space for public dissent. To that end, we must better understand not only the framing process and its effect on public life, but also better comprehend the psychology of individual journalists (and their news organizations) who play a crucial role in the frame contests.

NOTES

1. In our terminology, War on Terror (capitalized with no italics) is a catchphrase for the Bush administration's military, political, and legal policies to combat terrorism after the 9/11 attacks—the overarching frame under study in this paper. The phrase appears lowercased in quotations from journalists to better delineate between their words and ours.

2. Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11," *Political Communication* 20 (4, 2003): 415-32.

3. Stephen D. Reese, " Militarized Journalism: Framing Dissent in the Gulf Wars," in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, ed. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (NY: Routledge, 2004): 247-65, 247.

4. Stephen D. Reese, "The Framing Project: A Bridging Model for Media Research Revisited," *Journal of Communication* 57 (1, 2007): 148-54.

5. Entman, "Cascading Activation"; Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6. Stephen D. Reese, "Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research," in *Framing Public Life*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001), 7-31, 10.

7. Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki, "Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse," *Political Communication* 10 (1, 1993): 55-75;

Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki, "Framing as a Strategic Action in Public Deliberation," in *Framing Public Life*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001), 35-65.

8. Stephen D. Reese and Seth C. Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror: The Internalization of Policy in the U.S. Press," *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* (in press).

9. Noam Chomsky, "Journalist from Mars: How the 'War on Terror' Should Be Reported," *Extra!* 15 (2, 2002): 10-16.

10. Quoted in Entman, "Cascading Activation," 415.

11. George W. Bush, "Freedom at War with Fear," address to a joint session of Congress, Washington, DC, September 20, 2001, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (accessed January 14, 2009).

12. Reese, " Militarized Journalism."

13. George Lakoff, "'War on Terror,' Rest in Peace," Rockridge Institute, available at http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/research/lakoff/gwot_rip (accessed May 1, 2007).

14. Compare with W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (NY: Guilford Press, 2001); Jack Lule, "War and its Metaphors: News Language and the Prelude to War in Iraq, 2003," *Journalism Studies* 5 (2, 2004): 179-90; Ann S. Pancake, "Taken by Storm: The Exploitation of Metaphor in the Persian Gulf War," *Metaphor & Symbolic Activity* 8 (4, 1993): 281-95.

15. Richard W. Stevenson, "President, Marking Anniversary of War,

Urges World to Unite to Combat Terrorism," *New York Times*, March 20, 2004, sec. A, p. 7.

16. Chomsky, "Journalist from Mars"; Jill A. Edy and Patrick C. Meirick, "Wanted, Dead or Alive: Media Frames, Frame Adoption, and Support for the War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Communication* 57 (1, 2007): 119-41; Entman, "Cascading Activation"; Mark Falcois and Michael Silk, "Manufacturing Consent: Mediated Sporting Spectacle and the Cultural Politics of the 'War on Terror'," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 1 (1, 2005): 59-65; Jacob Levenson, "The War on What, Exactly? Why the Press Must Be Precise," *Columbia Journalism Review* 43 (4, 2004): 9-11; Nel Ruigrok and Wouter van Atteveldt, "Global Angling with a Local Angle: How U.S., British, and Dutch Newspapers Frame Global and Local Terrorist Attacks," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12 (1, 2007): 68-90.

17. Levenson, "The War on What, Exactly?" 10.

18. Michael Ryan, "Framing the War against Terrorism: U.S. Newspaper Editorials and Military Action in Afghanistan," *Gazette: International Journal for Communication Studies* 66 (5, 2004): 363-82.

19. E.g., Chomsky, "Journalist from Mars"; Falcois and Silk, "Manufacturing Consent"; Philip W. Graham, Thomas Keenan, and Anne-Maree Dowd, "A Call to Arms at the End of History: A Discourse-Historical Analysis of George W. Bush's Declaration of War on Terror," *Discourse & Society* 15 (2/3, 2004): 199-221; David Hoogland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7 (3, 2004): 339-65.

20. Most notably "From the Editors: The Times and Iraq," *New York Times*, May 26, 2004, sec. A, p. 1.

21. E.g., Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2006); Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* (NY: Penguin Press, 2006).

22. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 356; see also Bob Woodward, *The War Within* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

23. Jill Abramson, "The Final Days," *New York Times*, September 28, 2008, sec. BR, p. 1.

24. Edy and Meirick, "Wanted, Dead or Alive."

25. David Domke, *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House, The "War on Terror," and the Echoing Press* (Ann Arbor, MI: ML Pluto Press, 2004).

26. Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, "Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (3, 2005): 525-37, 526.

27. Levenson, "The War on What, Exactly?" 9.

28. William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach," *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1, 1989): 1-37.

29. Kevin M. Carragee and Wim Roefs, "The Neglect of Power in Recent Framing Research," *Journal of Communication* 54 (2, 2004): 214-33;

Reese, "The Framing Project."

30. Baldwin Van Gorp, "The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In," *Journal of Communication* 57 (1, 2007): 60-78, 63.

31. Paul D'Angelo, "News Framing as a Multiparadigmatic Research Program: A Response to Entman," *Journal of Communication* 52 (4, 2002): 870-88.

32. Reese, "Framing Public Life," 11.

33. Gamson and Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power."

34. Christian Spielvogel, "'You Know Where I Stand': Moral Framing of the War on Terrorism and the Iraq War in the 2004 Presidential Campaign," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (4, 2005): 549-69.

35. Levenson, "The War on What, Exactly?"

36. Reese, "Framing Public Life," 11.

37. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), xv.

38. W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 8th ed. (NY: Longman, 2008).

39. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (NY: Random House, 1979); Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: DC Heath, 1973).

40. Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Gaye Tuchman, "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected," *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (1, 1973): 110-31.

41. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (NY: Free Press, 1978); see also Robert A. Hackett, "A Hierarchy of Access: Aspects of Source Bias on Canadian TV News," *Journalism Quarterly* 62 (summer 1985): 256-65.

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43. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, "None Dare Call It Torture."

44. Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002, 2d ed.), 173.

45. E.g., Pablo J. Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*; Gans, *Deciding What's News*; Chris Paterson and David Domingo, eds., *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production* (NY: Peter Lang, 2008); Tuchman, *Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected*; Gaye Tuchman, "The Production of News," in *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*, ed. Klaus B. Jensen (NY: Routledge, 2002): 78-

46. E.g., Mark Deuze, "Popular Journalism and Professional Ideology: Tabloid Reporters and Editors Speak Out," *Media Culture & Society* 27 (6, 2005): 861-82; Seth C. Lewis, "News, Nationalism, and the Imagined Community: The Case of Bilingual Journalism in Spain," *Journalism Studies* 9 (3, 2008): 409-28; Bill Reader, "Distinctions that Matter: Ethical Differences at Large and Small Newspapers," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83 (winter 2006): 851-64; Sue Robinson, "'Someone's Gotta Be in Control Here': The Institutionalization of Online News and the Creation of a Shared Journalistic Authority," *Journalism Practice* 1 (3, 2007): 305-21.

47. Names and identifying information have been excluded from this paper, as stipulated in the interview request. Those interviewed hereafter will be referenced as "Journalist A," "Journalist B," and so on. Please contact the first author for additional details about those interviewed.

48. Reese and Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror."

49. Among the questions we asked: What comes to mind when I mention "war on terror"? In your view, what are some of the issues or events that tend to fall under that label? In your view, what do you think people mean when they use that phrase? Do you think the administration and the press, when they use the "war on terror" phrase, are more or less talking about the same thing? (If so, in what respect?) Now that "the war on terror" has become such a common phrase, do you have any reservations about whether it describes the issues adequately? Do you have any qualms about how journalists have used that phrase—or thoughts on how they ought to use it? The President often has expressed that "everything changed after 9/11." What would be your thoughts on that position? It seems like a subtle distinction, but would you see any major difference between the "war on terrorism" and the "war on terror"? Are there any in-house style guidelines on using that terminology? Do you think journalists' usage of those phrases has changed over time? Finally, reflecting back on media coverage of administration policy following 9/11, what lessons do you think journalists may have taken with them from this period?

50. While our initial study introduced some of the findings from these interviews, it did so only as a complement to the textual analysis, leaving underexplored the full range of meaning-making on the part of these journalists.

51. Reese and Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror."

52. In an e-mail exchange, one journalist identified "war on terror" as part of his beat reporting assignment after 9/11, as if it had been an official job label.

53. Reese, "The Framing Project."

54. Journalist C later said: "The most powerful thing about the war on terror is that it fits into a headline really nicely. [Laughs] It doesn't have a lot of letters. That's probably the biggest reason it caught on. It's a great headline phrase."

55. Across the major news outlets, according to our electronic retrieval search, there were about as many articles containing mentions of the War

on Terror between 9/11 and the Iraq invasion on March 20, 2003, as between that date and the end of the first quarter of 2006: the *New York Times* (2,191; 2,132); *The Washington Post* (3,121; 3,072); *Wall Street Journal* (1,325; 1,130); ABC (192, 272); CBS (228, 261); and NBC (560, 602).

56. Reese and Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror."