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What is This?

Framing the War on Terror

The internalization of policy in the US press

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ABSTRACT

The War on Terror was the label assigned by the Bush administration to its national security policy, launched in response to the attacks of 9/11. The cultural construction and political rationale supporting this slogan represent a powerful organizing principle that has become a widely accepted framing, laying the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq. We examine this framing where its sponsors intersect with US journalism, as illustrated by news texts. Broadly, we examine trends in how news reports refer to the War on Terror and provide an interpretive analysis of stories in *USA Today*. From the period of September 2001 to early 2006, these news texts suggest that the frame was internalized by the US press. News and editorial reports went beyond 'transmitting' the label as shorthand for administration policy, to 'reify' the policy as uncontested, and 'naturalize' it as a taken-for-granted common-sense notion.

KEY WORDS ∎ 9/11 ∎ framing ∎ ideology ∎ news routines ∎ news texts
∎ war on terror

The challenge of political violence has grown with new means of global co-ordination and access to weapons of mass destruction. The Bush administration's response to this threat, following the now iconic policy reference point of 11 September 2001, has had far-ranging implications for national security strategy, relations with the world community, and civil liberties. Labeled the 'War on Terror',[1] the policy was framed within a phrase now part of the popular lexicon, becoming a natural and instinctive shorthand. More than phrases though, frames are 'organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world' (Reese, 2001). As would any policy advocate, administrations seek compelling frames to define the issues and help win the discursive struggle, as opponents, in turn, seek to resist those definitions and find more favorable ones (Pan and Kosicki, 2001). As a particularly powerful organizing principle, the War on Terror created a supportive political climate for what has been called the biggest US foreign policy blunder in modern times: the

invasion of Iraq. Thus, in the scope and consequences of its policy-shaping impact, the War on Terror may be the most important frame in recent memory (Reese, 2007).

Study purpose

In this article, we consider how the War on Terror became a socially shared organizing principle through its transmission via the US press. Captivated by a powerful master narrative after 9/11 and in the run-up to the Iraq war, American journalists found it difficult to resist being drawn into the national anxiety and general pro-Bush patriotic fervor. Since Iraq, of course, the criticism of administration policy has been widespread, including a host of books (e.g. Isikoff and Corn, 2006). But that critical scrutiny was most needed *before* major decisions were made and the public enlisted. While the explicit cultural components of the frame have been carefully assembled by its sponsors in policy documents and presidential speeches, we are concerned here with precisely how the War on Terror has been absorbed into media (and therefore public) discourse and grown beyond its original policy usage to take on a life of its own. Arguing that the news media have been active participants in propagating the framing, we examine reporting of the War on Terror from its launching after 9/11, as represented by a prototypical national newspaper (*USA Today*), and we confirm our inferences from news discourse by interviewing some of the journalists who wrote the stories. In our model of the interpretive framing process, we differ from the view of frames as a lower level construct with more specific, clearly competing recommendations for short-run political action. Instead, we regard the War on Terror as a macro level cultural structure that functions in its scope as an ideological expression: in Thompson's (1990: 7) expression, 'meaning in the service of power'. We describe the key components of the frame, and we examine how that structure was assimilated by the press, a process that can be seen in news texts and journalists' own reflections on them. More specifically, we examine the extent to which professional routines and cultural assumptions led the media to internalize the frame: indications that ranged from simple transmission, to reification, and to naturalization.

The Bush policy frame

In the now well-known evolution of the administration's policy, influential neo-conservatives within the administration had advocated regime change in

Iraq for some time, but the events of 9/11 gave them a compelling way to fast-track their ideas and justify a new policy of pre-emptive war, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (White House, 2003) defined 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 identified the enemy as terrorism, an 'evil' threatening our 'freedoms and our way of life' (p. 1). The related *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (White House, 2006) clearly divides 'us' from 'them', linking terrorism to rogue states that 'hate the United States and everything for which it stands' (p. 14). Presenting himself as God's agent, Bush's Manichean struggle pitted the USA and its leader against the evildoers (Domke, 2004).

Arguably, the most significant outcome of the War on Terror construction was in giving a rhetorical (if not empirical) rationale for the invasion of Iraq. Gershkoff and Kushner (2005) showed how Bush clearly framed the Iraq strategy within the War on Terror by juxtaposing Iraq and 9/11. 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 and Benedetto, 2003). Indeed, public support for the war hinged crucially on whether or not one believed the link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, which a majority of Americans did.[2] This linking continued to provide retroactive justification for the invasion. Vice-President Cheney, for example, claimed falsely on 14 September 2003 that success in Iraq would strike a major blow at the '*geographic base* of the terrorists who had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11' (*Meet the Press*, 2003).[3] In a 2004 news conference responding to continued resistance in Iraq, President Bush declared that 'the terrorists have lost … an ally in Baghdad …' (Bush, 2004a). Bush argued that 9/11 taught the lesson that threats must be anticipated before they materialize, and that he had seen such a threat in Iraq (e.g. Bush, 2004b). This non-falsifiable 'lesson' expanded the scope of the frame even further.[4] Although the terminology showed signs of strain, Bush could not easily abandon the slogan after using it as justification for Iraq.[5]

Conservatives have largely embraced the underlying principle, but others more skeptically bracketed the policy in ironic reference: 'war on terrorism' or Bush's 'so-called' war on terrorism, signaling that the framing itself is flawed – an argument made even by critics in the national security community (Brzezinski, 2004; Record, 2003). Critics on the left regard it as a front for an imperialistic project and reject the uncritical celebration of American life. In spite of such resistance, the War on Terror received wide acceptance across the political spectrum. In terms of Entman's (2003) model of White House

influence, the administration achieved 'frame dominance' among official elites with no evidence of a viable competing narrative. The success of this dominance needs to be better understood.

A model for interpretive framing

As Smith (2005) argues, war is not just something that elites decide to do with the help of public relations techniques. They make use of pre-existing cultural resources, codes, and genres of interpretation to mobilize support and legitimize military action. As an expression of power, wars happen when policy actors successfully align their goals with favorable cultural codes. This supports our view of framing as an ideological process within a larger political context, with the task for analysis one of showing more precisely how these meanings are connected and support certain interests (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). The sweep of the War on Terror calls for this more interpretive approach – which we contrast with other research comparing issues presented more narrowly within one frame or another – as suggesting a specific problem definition and policy response. Entman (2003), for example, ostensibly considers the War on Terror, but identifies a problem solution within it as war-with-Iraq, as opposed to the 'counter-framing' war-with-Saudi Arabia suggested by influential journalists Seymour Hersch and Thomas Friedman. But this discourse still occupies boundaries set by the larger macro-frame, which is given no viable competitor. Bennett and colleagues criticize the press for failing to challenge official framing during that time, but again they operate at a more specific level – whether, for example, Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal was referred to as 'torture' or 'abuse' (Bennett et al., 2006).

Like Hertog and McLeod (2001) we emphasize a broader cultural approach to frames, which they regard as 'structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts' (p. 140). Underlying master narratives structure those concepts and guide the processing of new content. This approach emphasizes the dynamic aspect of frames, which are used to assimilate and make sense of new information. Regarding the present case, the familiar metaphor of war has been applied before to more abstract social problems including poverty and drugs (e.g. Lule, 2001). Although asymmetric warfare has no 'front', identifiable armies, or fixed duration, the President insisted on declaring Iraq the 'front line', a claim made easier within the controlling metaphor, which in turn enables connections to other conflicts deeply rooted in American psychology. Concerning terrorism itself, official definitions such as the FBI's reinforce the role of government as the protagonist: '*unlawful* use of force or violence' excludes state-sponsored,

presumably 'lawful' terrorism. These definitions allow even repressive states to classify challenges to state power as 'terrorism'. Framing terrorism as the global equivalent of a hijacking brackets off criticism of state actors as they reassert their authority in dealing with threats to security.

Journalists and the War on Terror

The War on Terror describes a vague enemy, opposes a 'tactic', has no clear measure of success, privileges the state and the status quo – who 'we' are vs. who 'they' are – and thus lifts the problem out of political, economic, and historical context. But these concerns have received little attention from the US press.[6] In fact, journalists have easily adapted to this perspective, with all of its discussion of allies, fronts, borders, and national threats. (The Tyndall Report, which monitors the news broadcasts of the major networks, called the 'War on Terror' the top story of 2002.) But to what extent do US journalists remain committed to a frame even after its validity has been so seriously challenged? Journalists often follow official namings, but this must be done carefully, lest reports no longer describe the administration's 'war on terrorism' but how things are going in 'America's war on terror' (Reese, 2007). In reporting, for example, the combat death of a former National Football League athlete, a *Los Angeles Times* story described how Pat Tillman 'was mourned as a fallen fighter in the war on terrorism … and hailed as a hero' (Farmer et al., 2004).

Numerous other examples suggest that the frame became uncritically accepted as a way of viewing the world. The ultimate closing of the loop came when journalists, after having helped brand the policy, labeled the frame as public opinion: 'the struggle that most Americans call the war on terrorism' (Hoagland, 2002). Other clues include the writings and statements of high-profile journalists who express the common wisdom. NBC's *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert spoke out, sounding very similar to the President himself:

> We are at war, and all of us must come together as never before … Simply put: there are those who want to destroy us, our people – men, women and children – our institutions, our way of life, our freedom. (Johnson, 2001)

Self-reflection among professionals, at think tanks and elsewhere, provides other clues. In their resulting book from a Brookings and Harvard-sponsored Forum on the Media and the War on Terrorism shortly after 9/11, Hess and Kalb (2003) acknowledged that the War on Terror served as a framing device for the media, but then quickly emphasized *how* it had been covered. They declare 9/11 as '*day one* of the war on terror' (p. 183) and that 'the war on terror *erupted* on 9/11' (p. 223). This dehistoricizes the problem and conceals

any US responsibility for what the editors described as the circumstances 'the US *had been thrust into*' (p. 2).

Problem statement

The administration constructed its framing of national security policy and gave it a name, but *how* was this framing communicated by the press, and to what extent was it taken for granted? To answer these questions, we assume that any reference in news discourse to the War on Terror signals an engagement, critical or (most often) not, with the administration's policy framing. We focus our attention on these engagements as a way to identify the relevant news texts. Although we focus on journalists' own word choices, we want to identify overall features of the discourse; so, whether attributed statements or the reporter's own words, we assume that any reference to the War on Terror communicates a framing choice on the part of the journalist (Van Gorp, 2007). Beyond frequency and emphasis, the particular power of a frame lies in it being an organizing principle, guiding (even if mentioned in passing) policy discussions through its resonance with supportive cultural elements. We examine the extent to which the frame was reinforced and internalized, as suggested by features within journalistic texts and from responses by journalists themselves about their work. Here we are not concerned with whether media did the leading or simply indexed elite opinion, but with how the news media *participated* in this framing. We take then the administration's framing of the War on Terror as a starting point and examine how it was, in turn, communicated.

With its emphasis on the dramatic, easily summarized conflict, television news, and Fox news channel in particular, have embraced the War on Terror from the start as an on-screen organizing device. Print media, however, provide a more nuanced view of how journalists respond to administration framing. Specifically, we focus on the Washington-based *USA Today*, with the largest daily newspaper national circulation and a publication that seeks to speak with a national voice.

Tracking War on Terror coverage

The main period of interest lies between the immediate post-9/11 declaration by President Bush of the 'War on Terrorism' and the three-year anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war in the first quarter of 2006. We identify as the sampling unit the various combinations of 'war' and 'terror' or 'terrorism' (including War on Terror, War against Terror, War on Terrorism,
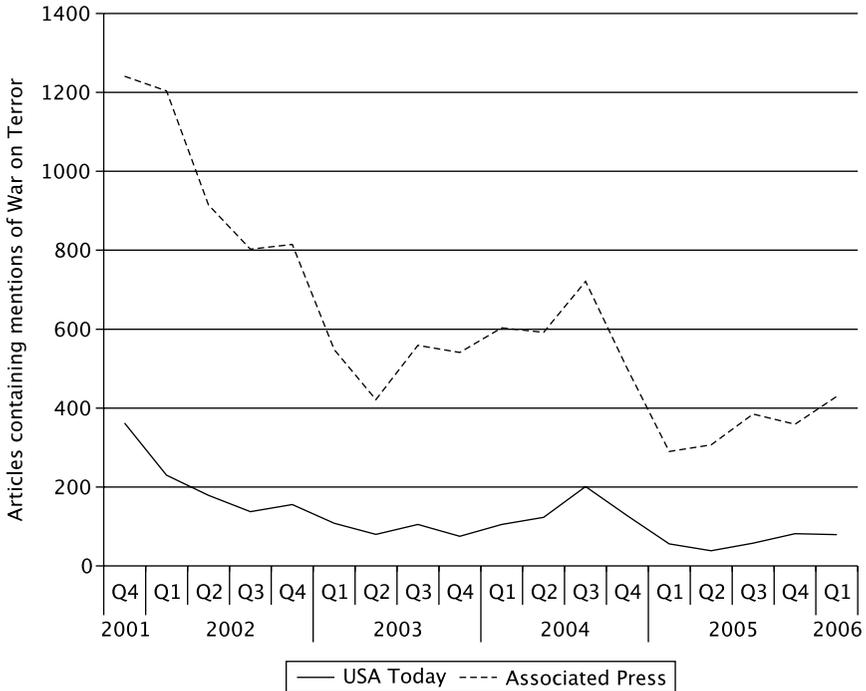
Figure 1   Tracking the War on Terror in *USA Today* and the Associated Press

Note: Pearson's correlation: r(18) = 0.92, p < 0.01 (two-tailed)

and War against Terrorism), whether mentioned in a headline or the main text. To track the frame over the study period we examined a census count of *USA Today* stories (*N* = 2303) and compared it against a similar group of un-duplicated Associated Press items to confirm that it tracked the general flow of mainstream press output (Figure 1).[7] In overall frequency, the War on Terror was most often mentioned in the aftermath of 9/11, declining sharply after-wards for both news media, before holding relatively steady from 2003 through the first quarter of 2006, with a significant bump during the 2004 presidential election in which the issue played a prominent role. Clearly, the frame label has seen continuous use since launched by the President.

To obtain a manageable sample of *USA Today* excerpts for more in-depth textual analysis, we selected the first full week of the middle month of each three-month quarter during the period of all mentions of the War on Terror permutations. Each of 226 mentions, in both news articles and editorial com-ments, was examined with its surrounding context and full article. Little was found taking issue with the frame itself, no use of quotation marks to indicate its tentative labeling or use of ironic distancing phrases, such as 'so-called'.

There were only four such critical references: one attributed to Senator Robert Byrd, two letters to the editor, and an op-ed piece. In only one other case did an editorial reference come close to being critical, and then only in reference to the linkage to Iraq: 'When he's the target of criticism and his poll ratings decline, Bush tries to *reframe* the debate … describing Iraq as the "central front" in the broader war on terrorism' (Benedetto and Keen, 2004). Given this overwhelming tendency to take the War on Terror at face value, how was it used, in what context, and with what implications for the frame's absorption into the national debate?

A careful reading showed that engagements with the frame were not easily classified into conventional, mutually exclusive coding categories. References to the phrase did not necessarily signify uncritical adoption, as we may have assumed. Ironic or passing references to the policy were often included in an otherwise critical context. Seeking indications of the degree to which the frame was accepted, we distinguished, through an inductive process, among three types of engagement: (1) transmission, a shorthand reference to specific national policies; (2) a reification of that policy, dropping any sense of its constructed aspect; and, most problematic, (3) a naturalized, uncritical way of seeing the world. These are meant to be more interpretive than definitive, but suggest that journalists engaged with the War on Terror on different levels throughout the period, ranging from the least troubling, as a simple description of policy, to the most taken for granted, a 'condition of life'.

Transmittal

At the most basic level, the frame is simply transmitted by its sponsors, in the words of either the President or administration officials. They speak it directly, either quoted or paraphrased.

> They face complicated legal questions that have arisen since President Bush declared war on terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. (Locy, 2004)

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

Journalists report administration policy, and the War on Terror became a shorthand way of making reference to actions set in motion under its name – including spending, reorganization, legislation or shifts in international relations. (The majority, 126 of the references, could be said to fall into this category.) Of course, that's why so much work goes into labeling policy in the first place; choosing the words that the news media must rely on controls the discourse at a basic level. So when the War on Terror is mentioned in news texts, it is often as a straightforward statement of policy fact, even a

reasonable substitute for a longer description of the formal programs out-lined in the President's speeches or policy documents. For example:

> Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Bush has made the war on terrorism the central focus of his administration. (Wolf and Jackson, 2006)

> And the establishment of a National Counterterrorism Center would end the CIA's leading role in the war on terrorism. (Keen and Diamond, 2004)

Journalists don't always feel compelled to use the labels of frame sponsors (e.g. 'Defense of Marriage Act'), but that they did in this case is revealing. The War on Terror was a governmental policy, but also much more than that.

Reification

Beyond simple transmission lies reification, treating something abstract and unobservable as though it were concrete. Reification turns a contested policy idea itself into an accepted material fact. In referring, for example, to 'a popu-lar Republican president fighting a war against terrorism' a text carries the language *and* the assumption that it properly describes what Bush is doing. It becomes uncritically routine, taking the frame on its own terms, emphas-izing instead the actions that flow from it.

Editorial graphics embody this notion in grouping news under headline guides ('What happened Wednesday in the war against terrorism'). The policy appears more broadly reified when only loosely attributed to its sponsors, and when depicted as just another issue or 'event'.

> Each side wants to use the war on terrorism and the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for political ends. (Schaeffer, 2004)

> This time, Bush and Kerry are miles apart on issues from taxes and stem cell research to Iraq and the war on terror. (Editorial, 2004b)

Reification is perhaps best seen when Bush's policy becomes 'America's' policy.

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

> 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)

The slightly more accurate 'US-led war on terrorism' at least described the policy as a product of the national government, but this usage was found only three times.

Journalists' emphasis on 'horserace' issues and tactics when covering politics allows them to comment without taking sides. In assessing the political advantage to be gained from the War on Terror, journalists seemed to easily absorb claims for success as the 'common wisdom'. In some instances, these tactical successes are loosely attributed to administration figures, who obviously have a vested interest.

> Bush advisers say *his stewardship of the war on terrorism will help GOP candidates*, and he mentions it in each speech. (Keen, 2002)

But in others these attributions disappear, leaving only the common wisdom behind.

> 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)

By emphasizing a moral dimension in the War on Terror, Bush made his 'steadfastness' itself a circular test for the 'rightness' of the policy, contrasted with his opponent's 'flip-flopping' (Spielvogel, 2005). News discourse seemed to internalize this criterion, including an op-ed from a retired journalist: '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). A news analysis mirrored this view:

> [Question & Answer section] Q: 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*. (Hall, 2004)

Vice-President Cheney's so-called 'one-percent doctrine' justified US action 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 preceding that absence, a fallacious *post hoc* reasoning mirrored in the following analysis:

> 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 et al., 2006)

During this period policy actors no longer questioned the validity of the problem statement, but competed on how well they could 'execute' the solution. As journalists tracked this debate, they reinforced the reification of the dominant frame. This is suggested in part by the self-justifying modifiers in news references to fighting a 'vigorous' war on terror or a 'just' war on terror. Other examples arose particularly in the 2004 presidential election, with Democratic candidate Bob Graham, said to be 'running for president for the most sobering of reasons: He believes the nation is in deep trouble from a sputtering war on terrorism …' (Shapiro, 2003). As front-runner, John Kerry was unsuccessful in staking out a competing position because he remained within Bush's discursive arena.

> We must succeed in Iraq. I defended my country as a young man, and I'll defend it as president. I will fight *a smarter, tougher, more effective war on terror*. (Kerry, 2004)

This only served to fix the frame in place as the candidates competed under its umbrella of assumptions. Kerry at times attempted to disentangle Iraq from the frame he had already endorsed.

> Nowhere is this more clear than in his catastrophic misjudgments in Iraq, where he pushed away our allies and rushed to war without a plan to win the peace, and his mistakes in the war on terror. (Kerry, 2004)

Astoundingly, however, as if finally surrendering to the framing Bush so effectively established, in his loser's concession speech Kerry re-linked them:

> Now, more than ever, with our soldiers in harm's way, we must stand together and *succeed in Iraq and win the war on terror*. (Kasindorf, 2004)

Reports of public opinion often contribute to this reification process. The issue is defined by administration labeling, the public asked to respond to it, and the results fed back to them through the media as received wisdom. A 2002 Pew Center poll, for example, reported that the public 'continues to be disposed to use military force in the war on terrorism' (cited in Hess and Kalb, 2003). In constructing such questions, the language of 'military force' and 'war' itself becomes a given, biasing opinions accordingly toward militarization of the problem. Journalists further confirm this when they reproduce these results: 'Mr. Bush has consistently received a much higher public trust rating on the war on terror than the Democrats' (Luce, 2006). Some references to polls are relatively straightforward, but other findings are used as a basis for further speculation, leaving unquestioned the object of that public opinion, whose construction should still be in doubt.

> Chalk up the narrower gap to a post-9/11 world. The 'soccer moms' of the 1990s who identified with Democratic social issues have morphed into 'security moms' who back Bush's war on terrorism. (Editorial, 2004a)

> There is more to President Bush's relatively high approval ratings than Americans rallying around the flag and his leadership in the war on terrorism, a USA TODAY/ CNN/Gallup Poll has found. (Benedetto, 2002)

Other analyses serve to reinforce Bush's own claims of historical equivalence, borrowing 'the Good War' image of the Second World War.

> Ten days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, 94% of Americans said they thought the war against terrorism would be difficult. In the week after Pearl Harbor, however, only 65% of Americans said they thought the war against Japan would be difficult. (Hampson, 2001)

Naturalization

A fully internalized, taken-for-granted description of the world emerges when news and editorial references naturalize the frame. This more pointedly ideological expression steps back even further than 'reification' from the immediate policy arena to describe more general social conditions. If reification turns a frame contest into a policy fact of life, naturalization turns it into a state of being – lifting policy into a larger narrative of struggle and heroism. Many political opinions fall into that category, as expressed by op-ed contributors, letters, and attributed comments in news articles, in addition to the 'debate' section of the newspaper or other 'analysis' where the institutional opinion is more openly expressed.

> 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, 2004c)

Bush himself encouraged this engagement 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)![8]

One report likened the War on Terror to an 'event', allowing it to be grouped together with the Iraq war and another mishap in the news.

> A *series of raw events*, including the economic downturn, 'the elusive War on ter-
> rorism, 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)

This takes an 'undecided' shuttle accident and compares it to war and policy
that were specific 'decisions' – including the decision about its duration.

> 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 con-
> tinues 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)

Equating the policy with sport (which itself revels in war metaphors)
also naturalizes because the goal of a game is simply to win, not to decide
whether the game is worth playing. A letter to the editor placed the War on
Terror within the context of the World Series, regarded as a healing moment
for a traumatized New York City:

> We, the people, will win this war against terrorism and will always remember the
> World Series of 2001, which for a few amazing days in October and November
> strengthened our resolve and eased our pain. (Glueck, 2001)

USA Today itself made a similar allusion to sport and a famous baseball figure
in its advice to readers!

> Real message: Go ahead, celebrate a terror-free Election Day. Just keep on guard. As
> Yogi Berra might have said, the war on terror isn't over till it's over. (Editorial, 2004d)

Suggesting that these kinds of issues have become 'distractions' further
underscored this naturalization of what should have been a hotly contested
frame: 'Hollywood may need all of its magic to capture the USA's attention
this holiday season, given the distractions of war and terrorism' (Seiler, 2001).
Ultimately, the naturalization of the War on Terror suggests that nothing can
be done to control it, and that citizens have little role in affecting policy.

Journalistic perspective on the War on Terror

We followed up on these insights to seek a better understanding of the
professional context of internalization. As an organizing principle, frames are
not manifested in texts alone, so we identified from their bylines the jour-
nalists responsible for the stories in our sample. In October and November of
2007 we were able to reach 13 who were still with the organization, appeared
to have significant experience with the relevant issues, and consented to

a structured interview of 10 to 30 minutes each by telephone. This group provided a mix of political, military, security, and general assignment writers. By introductory email they were told that we'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'. To begin the interview, they were told that we were particularly interested in the 'war on terror', and were asked: 'In your view, what do you think people mean when they use that phrase?' We also asked what qualms they may have had about its use by journalists, and whether they thought that, by its use, the administration and media were 'more or less talking about the same thing'.

These were thoughtful professionals, and all of them showed, in retrospect at least, critical awareness of the issues and the administration's interest in framing the policy debate. The War on Terror, now considered more 'politicized' with connotations of 'propaganda', was deemed 'amorphous', 'vague', 'too broad', and 'problematic'.

> K: It's a catchphrase that's frequently used. A lot of thoughtful people ask what that really means. It's a politically powerful phrase to say 'war on terror' … I think journalists are sensitive to the fact that this is political rhetoric.

So, how can this critical awareness be reconciled with our sense that the frame was internalized by US journalists? Because this awareness came after the fact, with the strongest objections raised to its use to encompass Iraq.

> N: 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.

> S: 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.

Faulty 'execution' in Iraq brought into disrepute the frame that made Iraq possible in the first place. Indeed, journalist comments implied that prior to Iraq, the frame was acceptable and neutral:

> K: In the aftermath of 9/11, the immediate reaction was not a political reaction … One thing that happens as a reporter is you find that *words that initially seem like neutral words* can be taken over by one side or another in a political situation and given resonance that then you have to be cautious about. [emphasis added]

At one level, these journalists saw the War on Terror as tagged early on to the administration and – as 'shorthand for a bundle of policies' – appropriate to reflect White House thinking: 'It's not part of the normal lexicon, so you're

only going to use "axis of evil" or "war on terror" in the context of the administration classifying things that way.' For a military reporter, the global War on Terror reflected Pentagon usage, referring to efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor could the 'catchphrase' be easily countered without seeming to be argumentative and biased. One said a distancing reference, such as 'so-called' War on Terror, would be like 'pissing on it'.

> K: But the struggle as a journalist is to *find language that's neutral* without emasculating yourself as a writer, because sometimes you have to call a spade a spade, or you have to use a phrase no matter how controversial it is.

On a professional level, journalists felt obliged to follow the administration's framing, to the extent that not using its wording could be deemed constraining, even neutering. This obligatory usage helped bring the War on Terror to life, which once engaged seemed to communicate something useful: 'a general meaning that people understand'.

> H: Honestly, I feel like every time I turn on cable TV they've got some huge banner about the 'war on terror'. I can almost hear it coming out of [CNN's] Wolf Blitzer's mouth every 10 minutes … It's shorthand and it's easy, and it's sort of all-descriptive … so that's why they continue to use it.

> W: It's become commonplace now as a journalistic catchphrase … 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.

Ironically, the frame's very ambiguity and flexibility as it shifted over time figured in its strength, making it more difficult to directly challenge.

> J: 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.

Thus, the paradox was that the War on Terror, while amorphous, still meant something – something larger than a specific policy. Even if journalists have become more sensitized to the War on Terror phrase itself, the underlying cultural assumptions are more difficult to uproot.

> W: I think we still cover things in a Manichean way, good vs. evil. It makes it easier to frame questions that don't lend themselves to an easy black-white, yes or no, such as laws on interrogation or legal advisories on interrogation or detention.

> N: It comes down to catching the bad guys. It's as simple as that. It's about getting to people who may be plotting acts of terror against the U.S. before they get to do it.

Summary and discussion

Although the War on Terror no longer dominates news discourse as it did after 9/11, the trends suggest that it still lives on. Our findings from the textual analysis and interviews suggest that the frame was internalized by the US news media – in ways beyond Entman's 'cascading' process of frame influence from White House to press (2003). In addition to simply repeating the preferred terminology of the President, journalists reified the policy – treating it as an uncontested 'thing' – and naturalized it, suggesting they accepted its use as a way of describing a prevailing condition of modern life. It's tempting to regard these as sequential stages, but elements of each were found throughout the period. Follow-up interviews with journalists from our sample suggested that, to the extent that it has become more deconstructed and politically controversial, they have used the War on Terror with greater care. From their comments, we conclude that the frame was quickly accepted post-9/11 and was vulnerable to challenge only after the 'execution' of one key component failed – after the administration lost credibility with Iraq (see also Lewis and Reese, 2009).

So, as we have argued, the War on Terror was more than a policy label; it was a powerful organizing principle and, to the extent that journalists shared that way of structuring the world as indicated in their reports and analysis, created a favorable news discourse climate for military action in Iraq. This status quo frame – pitting 'us' vs. 'them', obscuring concerns for state-sponsored violence, and casting a broad net of undifferentiated 'terror' – made it easier to regard Iraq as a legitimate response to 9/11. Mutual participation in that framing allowed both the administration and the media to disavow making such a link – the President because he never made it explicitly and journalists who could say they were only passing it along.

The post-9/11 consensus has been eroded, with Democrats now openly questioning its assumptions (Bai, 2007). The War on Terror, however, has resilience and its deep cultural structure was given renewed currency in the 2008 presidential campaign. Republican candidate Rudy Giuliani, for example, made 9/11 the centerpiece of his campaign, arguing that the War on Terror and Iraq were both examples of the country having gone 'on offense' to defeat terrorism (Bai, 2007). A well-funded advocacy group, Freedom's Watch, announced plans to support the war in Iraq as the solution to the '9/11 problem'. Former Bush press secretary and group leader Ari Fleischer acknowledged that Iraq was not responsible for 9/11, 'But 9/11 should be a vivid reminder to everyone about how vulnerable our country is, and that's why we need to win in Iraq' (Baker, 2007). Such illogical claims are hard to refute when packaged within the all-encompassing War on Terror.

Something fundamental about this principle lives on in news reports, especially on television. In a 2006 CBS News broadcast, Katie Couric introduced a story: 'Tonight, it was the first front in the war on terror, and in Afghanistan now the Taliban are back with a vengeance.' Reporter Lara Logan went on to say, 'For many Americans today, it was back to work and back to school, but in the war on terror, you have to wonder, is it back to the drawing board?' Couric, in the same newscast, confirmed the received wisdom of the 9/11-as-genesis: 'The war on terror began, of course, with the September 11th attacks on the United States' (CBS News, 2006). Similarly, NBC News anchor Brian Williams declared that we are a 'nation at war because of what happened in New York …' (Rich, 2006).

We posed our questions primarily at the professional level: How did journalists in the US press participate in reinforcing and internalizing a key administration frame? Making inferences about the internal psychology of journalists is always tricky, and not to be made solely on the basis of their outputs, which are institutional and cultural, as well as personal creations. In this case, their reflections coupled with their reporting helped reveal the process, which should provide an object lesson for the US news media and journalistic community. Even when the opposition party does little to mount an alternative counter-frame, competing instead on who can be toughest in execution, the news media cannot abrogate their responsibility to critically examine policy assumptions embedded in frames. The internalization of policy short-circuits democratic debate by allowing little space for deliberative scrutiny from citizens and meaningful action by elected officials. We need to understand better how dominant frames become so with the active participation of the news media.

Notes

1 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.
2 Concerning casualties in Iraq a month after the beginning of the conflict, one New Yorker compared the 88 American dead to the 3000 who died on 11 September 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 and Nagourney, 2003).
3 Italics have been added to some quotes for emphasis by the authors.
4 Overall Republican political strategy further amplified the link between Iraq and 9/11. Pollster Frank Luntz recommended always placing the war in Iraq within

the greater war on terror, arguing that it is better to fight it on the streets of Baghdad than New York, and adding, 'Don't forget the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. "9/11 changed everything" is the context by which everything follows' (Harris and Faler, 2004).

5 In the summer of 2005 reporters noticed a transition in the 'catchphrase', although 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' (Schmitt and Shanker, 2005). For the military, in any case, the global War on Terrorism (including Afghanistan and Iraq) remains an official theater of operation and category of service medals.

6 Among the rare criticisms within the professional community, Levenson (2004) reinforced the view of our journalists by arguing that the press malfunctioned when continuing to use without questioning the label beyond its original rationale for Afghanistan.

7 Articles were obtained through the following search of Lexis-Nexis Academic: war on terror OR war against terror OR war on terrorism OR war against terrorism.

8 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).

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