

ANALYSIS OF THE BBC NEWS ONLINE COVERAGE OF THE IRAQ WAR

DANIELA V. DIMITROVA

The BBC and its coverage of the 2003 Iraq War have received much criticism as well as much praise around the world. Some observers have attacked the news coverage of the BBC, claiming it was clearly biased in support of the war, serving as a propaganda tool for the British government. Others have credited the BBC for its in-depth reporting from the war zone, juxtaposing it to the blatantly patriotic U.S. news coverage. This chapter examines the news coverage the BBC provided on its Web site during the 2003 Iraq War and analyzes the themes and Web-specific features used to enhance war reporting.

THE BBC AND THE IRAQ WAR

The BBC, a respected news source worldwide, was established as a radio station in 1922 when it began medium-wave services from London (Wikipedia, 2004). The BBC was founded as the British Broadcasting Corporation and remains a publicly funded broadcaster.

BBC provided the first television broadcasts of entertainment programming to a limited number of homes in 1936, long before the Americans, but suspended them in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II, fearing the transmissions would act as a homing device for enemy bombers. The first regular television news broadcasts were transmitted in 1954. The BBC began to air broadcasts overseas shortly after that (Wikipedia, 2004). The online service is among the many branches of the BBC, founded in 1997 by Mike Smartt, a BBC television reporter. The BBC news Web site was established in November 1997 and began with only a staff of 30 (BBC, 2004). It has grown substantially since then. Today it has an estimated global user base of around 30 million, according to its director of new media and technology Ashley Highfield (Kiss, 2004).

Immediately after the start of the 2003 Iraq war, the BBC news audience increased substantially. Traffic statistics show that the online BBC audience skyrocketed with a 103% increase during the first week of the war (Nielsen NetRatings, 2003). The BBC News World Edition Web site recorded 400 million page views for the first two weeks of the war (BBC Press Office, 2003). The online traffic of the site increased not only at home, but also abroad — by 41% in United States and 10% in Canada (BBC Press Office, 2003). In sum, BBC News World Edition Web site became a major news source visited by audiences all over the world immediately after the war broke out.

Covering the Iraq War and the build-up to the war presented some challenges for BBC reporters and executives, which, among other things, included the resignations of the BBC managing director, its board chairman and a defense reporter. On May 29, 2003, reporter Andrew Gilligan said in an interview on the Today Programme of BBC Radio 4 that the British government probably knew some of the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) were wrong or questionable and published them in a 2002 dossier anyway. The government fired back with a rebuttal and accused the BBC of anti-war reporting. In a subsequent investigation by Lord Hutton (named the Hutton Inquiry), the conduct of BBC was investigated along with some other issues, the central of which was the apparent suicide of Iraq weapons expert Dr. David Kelley. The conclusions of the Hutton Report were that Gilligan's allegations on the BBC Today were "unfounded" (Hutton Report, 2004). The report also concluded that BBC management failed to investigate complaints that the Gilligan broadcast was inaccurate and, further, that BBC executives failed to make proper investigations if Gilligan's report was actually supported by his sources (Hutton Report, 2004).

In sum, the Hutton Inquiry found that Andrew Gilligan's accusation that the British government was "sexing up" reports on WMDs in Iraq before the war began was unfounded (Hutton Report, 2004). Two days after the Hutton Report was released, the BBC Director General (managing director) resigned on January 30, 2004 (Wikipedia, 2004). In addition to managing director Greg Dyke, the chairman Gavyn Davies as well as Andrew Gilligan also resigned from the BBC. The Hutton Report criticized the standards of journalism at the BBC, specifically the editorial system that allowed Gilligan's report to go to air and the internal system through which complaints were investigated. The incident did not seem to substantially harm BBC's global reputation.

Contrary to some expectations, the BBC online coverage was not

supportive of the war and sometimes seemed anti-coalition in nature. The justification of the war was questioned and the news reporting frequently showed the dark side of war, focusing the reporters' camera on the lives of everyday Iraqis, children in the street, wounded in hospitals, and civilian casualties of war. That is evident from the themes present on the BBC News Web site; in particular, through the violence of war frame. Similarly, the human-interest frame, which was also common, brought to the fore personal stories of Iraqi families.

Another tool worth analyzing is the use of Web-specific features to augment the reporting about the Iraq war. Online visitors from around the world could not only read about the events in Iraq, they could see the pictures of the victims, hear interviews with the main actors, watch videos of military briefings, and learn about the perspective of the journalists covering the war through their Web diaries.

The rest of this chapter shows in more detail what kinds of themes were discussed and what other online features were employed to present the online audience with a comprehensive picture of the war. The first half of the chapter examines the themes in the online war coverage while the second half focuses on the use of online features. The chapter is based on content analysis methodology of the BBC Web site. It focuses on the BBC News World Edition available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, which provides continuous coverage of news events. The BBC News home page was downloaded and saved during the official period of the war, March 19, 2003 to May 1, 2003. The analysis of the online news reporting on the recent Iraq war suggests that despite some skepticism, there is hope for thorough and balanced reporting of war. The chapter leads to the conclusion that other news media can emulate BBC's comprehensive reporting, which offered multiple perspectives on its Web site and used online features skillfully to augment traditional news coverage.

THEMES IN BBC ONLINE WAR COVERAGE

Media frame events for the public, focusing on some aspects of the event while ignoring other aspects. Just like a video camera pointed at a specific scene of interest, journalists can capture only a limited amount of reality in their reporting. Where they focus the camera, what they zoom in on, becomes of concern to the general public, which relies on media coverage to form their interpretations of the event. In a democratic society, we trust news media to tell us what is happening in the world and why.

When news media cover controversial events, however, their role as

an objective observer and government watchdog is put to the test. Journalists who cover war and international conflict often find it difficult to remain neutral and may offer diverse, disparate coverage of the same event. In fact, previous research has shown that Coalition and non-Coalition countries provided different framing of the 2003 Iraq war in their national media (Dimitrova, Kaid, & Williams, 2004). Because of such differences in coverage, it is not uncommon for people who live in different countries to see the event through different angles as a result of reading reports that focus on different themes and actors, cite different sources, and vary in tone of news coverage.

Scholars have labeled this different construction of the same event in the media text *framing* (e.g., D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 2004). While different paradigms exist in framing research, all agree that framing is important to study and may influence audience cognitions, attitudes, and beliefs (D'Angelo, 2002). According to D'Angelo (2002, p. 873), "news frames are themes within news stories that are carried by various kinds of framing devices. The content of the frame amalgamates textual items (words and images) with the contextual treatment that they receive from framing devices." Frames are important because they have been found to shape public opinion in general as well as individual cognition (D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 2004). The process of framing is complex and results from multiple external factors around the journalist who writes the media text. These factors include the surrounding culture and ideology and journalistic values and practices. The government administration, other elite, the news media as well as the public at large all contribute to the development of news frames (Entman, 2004). Internal influences such as individual journalists' attitudes and schemas also impact news framing. These influences, however, are beyond the scope of this chapter.

The BBC News World Edition Web site represents a prominent and respected news source worldwide available to global audiences via the Internet (Wikipedia, 2004). As shown above, it became a popular online news destination during the 2003 Iraq war. That makes it even more interesting to see how it framed the war, a controversial international event, which received limited support outside of the Coalition of the Willing. Even within the Coalition countries, the public was split and sometimes the majority opposed government decisions to send troops to Iraq. We begin the examination of the online war framing by first looking at the main actors in the online BBC coverage.

The Actors

The online news reporting on BBC was, of course, focused on its domestic political leaders such as Tony Blair and the British position on the war. The official position of the U.S. government and its political and military leaders were also covered closely and frequently. At the same time, the BBC journalists did not ignore the views from the rest of the world.

Articles on the Web site often focused on the Middle East, Russia, and other European countries. Foreign political leaders such as Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin were often cited. Among the countries mentioned in the BBC war coverage were Australia, France, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Somalia, South Korea, Syria and Turkey. The positions and views of the Arab world were often discussed, both in text and in pictures. The perspectives of international organizations such as the European Union and United Nations were also mentioned.

The Sources

Staff reporters wrote all articles published in the online BBC edition. The main sources cited within the articles were government officials and military personnel. Some criticized the fact that official sources were quoted most frequently. As Entman (2004) notes, however, top administration officials are regular sources for the news media. Thus, they contribute to framing of events in certain ways. According to Entman's cascading activation model, that is one way in which the current administration and other national elite influence how the news media frame events.

Reasons for War

The BBC's online journalists rarely discussed the reasons for war. It seems that the causes for the military action as well as responsibility for the war and its consequences became "nonissues" in this case. One of the few reasons for war mentioned on the BBC News Web site was that "America does not tolerate dictators." This was one of the rare occasions in which the righteousness of military action was implied.

Tone of Reporting

Understanding that objectivity is difficult to achieve in a war situation, when access to sources is most challenging and journalists have to protect their own lives, we attempted to measure the tone of the online reporting.

Overall, BBC journalists stayed objective, avoiding explicitly stating either support or opposition to the war. The online news coverage rarely contained positive or negative moral terms. The content analysis showed that explicit support or direct condemnation of the war was absent.

Frames

Despite the fact that BBC journalists refrained from voicing biased opinions about the war and their own attitudes about the conflict, they certainly presented war frames. War reporting, as expected, incorporated discussions of military action and strategy, military advances and losses. This type of framing exemplifies the *military conflict frame*, where the journalist focuses on military strategy and action on the field.

Another common frame on the BBC news home page was the *violence of war frame*, which zoomed in on the violence of the conflict, presenting human casualties of war as well as destruction of cities, roads and other infrastructure. The BBC online coverage portrayed a comprehensive picture of the destruction caused by the war. Pictures and text showed the negative consequences that resulted from war violence, touching everyday Iraqis and soldiers.

A third common frame was the *human interest frame*. BBC reporters who brought to the attention of the online reader the personal stories of those involved in the war — the Coalition soldiers, the Iraqis, and the journalists themselves — used it skillfully. Even though the human-interest angle often ignores the broader context of the war and provides only isolated snapshots of reality, it allows readers to empathize with the actors as they see deeply personal stories and reactions of everyday people faced with the harsh realities of war.

Another interesting frame was the *anti-war protest frame*. The BBC home page often included stories about anti-war marches not only in the U.K. but also abroad. The March 23, 2003, home page, for example, included a story (with a photo) about demonstrations against the war in Asia titled “Thousands March for Peace.” The home page contained as many as three stories about anti-war protest in some cases.

Another noteworthy war frame was the *prognostic frame*. This frame is exemplified by discussion about the future consequences of the war, both for Iraq and other countries or regions. Such analysis was common in the BBC online coverage even during the time of war when official military actions were not declared over. The prognostic frame provides the audience with a more comprehensive picture of the war, portraying the short-term and long-term effects it may have on people, countries, and

international relations in general. BBC journalists offered a comprehensive look at the possible consequences of the Iraq War.

WEB-SPECIFIC FEATURES USED TO AUGMENT ONLINE REPORTING

The BBC News World Edition Web site was applauded as an “exemplary news site” immediately after the war began. According to the Poynter Institute, the BBC online had planned its online coverage well in advance and, as the war broke out, offered a large amount of war content that combined text, photos, video and audio in an impressive way (Poynter Institute, 2003). Below, we discuss how various online features contributed to rich, comprehensive online coverage of the war.

Hyperlinks

The BBC News Web site offered multiple sections about the war, starting with its home page and letting the user browse further for more in-depth information. While most links took the online reader within the BBC’s own Web site, the sheer number of links about the war was impressive. During the official war period, March 19-May 1, 2003, the number of war-related links ranged from 24 to 30 and often exceeded 26. Some links took the user to a special section with in-depth coverage dedicated to the war — “War in Iraq: In Depth” — while others linked to multimedia, video, or audio features, photo galleries, or audience opinion polls. Each of those Web elements is briefly analyzed below. The number and position of the links were consistent from day to day, which allowed easy and quick browsing throughout the BBC site.

Web Diaries

One of the most innovative reporting tools on the BBC Web site was a section titled “War Diaries.” This section was prominently featured on the BBC News home page. It included journalists’ diaries, which represented a creative way of reporting.

The BBC online editors chose to enrich war reporting by allowing their team of journalists to share brief chronological reports in a log format. Entries were provided in reverse chronological order. These “mini-blogs” allowed the online reader to experience the war from a first-person perspective, seeing through the eyes of the journalist and realizing that what was actually going on in the battle field was often unclear,

leading to questions, conjectures, and mixed expectations. The Weblog of the team of BBC correspondents stationed in the Gulf region was perhaps the most notable feature of the Web site, because it combined traditional reporting with an innovative blogging perspective. It also allowed reporters from various locations to share their impressions: for example, online visitors to the BBC site could read the entries from journalists in Northern Kuwait, Qatar, Baghdad, and Amman simultaneously. According to the Poynter Institute, this feature was “really excellent” and should be emulated by other news sites (Poynter Institute, 2003).

Photos

Another, more traditional, feature of the online reporting was the use of visuals. The BBC News Web site incorporated a large number of photos, ranging from four to seven only on the home page. Sometimes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Therefore, it is worth examining the content of the BBC photographs.

Instead of merely focusing on military action and victory for the Coalition of the Willing, the BBC News Web site always included thumbnail pictures of ordinary Iraqis. The faces of Iraqi children orphaned by the war were often pictured on the site. BBC photographers also showed the reality of war in pictures from local hospitals, schools, and mosques. The site often featured slide shows of still photos from the war region. The BBC News home page presents a good example of how photography on the Web can be utilized to supplement traditional media coverage.

Multimedia

Another noteworthy feature of the BBC News Web site was the use of multimedia and interactive elements to enhance their online coverage. The site employed *audio and video-related material* regularly, creating links to interviews and video coverage of war progress in Iraq. The site featured as many as three video segments.

Examples of typical links include live broadcasts of Coalition war briefings, latest war coverage, and live videos from the streets of Baghdad. Audio links to interviews with American military or political leaders were also frequently provided. These audio and video features presented the online audience with a more complete picture of the war. Of course, adding substantial video and audio material will be a challenge for smaller media organizations.

The BBC News Web site also allowed online readers to express their opinions about the war via online polls and surveys. The site often offered a section called “Have Your Say,” in which users could post their comments about current developments in Iraq. That was a unique feature of the site. In addition to engaging the online user, it also allowed BBC editors to gather audience feedback and thus better tailor their online content.

Among the online features used by the BBC News Web site was the ability to sign up for e-mail alerts. That was another way to personalize the BBC online content to individual interests and preferences.

Other Online Features

The BBC News World Edition home page offered an excellent example of a well-designed and well-structured Web site. The daily hierarchy of news was clearly outlined. Multiple sections about the war were provided to the online user, combining text, pictures and multimedia elements in innovative ways. The site always included a summary section titled “Iraq Latest: At-a-glance,” which presented the latest news from Iraq in reverse chronological order. This section of the site can be used for chronological purposes as well as a pointer to the latest developments in the war.

Another way in which the BBC site appealed to diverse audiences was by allowing customization of the site in different languages—for example, the site content is available in Arabic, Russian, and Spanish. The BBC online content also attempted to offer multiple perspectives originating from different geographic areas such as the Middle East and Asia. News stories did not focus only on U.S. and British perspectives on the war.

CONCLUSION

This chapter analyzed the online content of the BBC news coverage of the 2003 Iraq war. We found that, overall, the Web coverage was substantial, balanced, and presented international perspectives on the ongoing Iraq War. The online reporting was also inclusive of multiple war frames. The four major frames that emerged from the content analysis were military conflict, violence of war, human interest, and anti-war protest. These four frames dominated the BBC News online content. As most national news media, the BBC relied mostly on official sources — government representatives and military personnel. At the same time, the online coverage attempted to incorporate views from around the world.

The BBC Web site also used online reporting elements in innovative ways. The most interesting elements, which contributed to a richer picture of the war, were the reporters' Web diaries and the use of multimedia. The large amount of hyperlinks and photographs was also impressive. These online features can and should be incorporated by other news sites whenever possible in order to augment their own online reporting.

The analysis of the BBC war coverage was limited to the BBC News World Edition home page. It was also limited to news coverage published online during the official war period. Extending the analysis to the whole Web site and examining a longer time period may enrich this analysis. Comparisons with other countries' news media as well as other types of media are also recommended.

REFERENCES

- BBC Press Office. (2003, April 11). More people turn to the BBC for news of war in Iraq. Retrieved Dec. 26, 2004, from http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2003/04_april/11/iraq_audiences.shtml
- BBC. (2004, Dec. 9). BBC website founder picks up OBE. Retrieved Dec. 30, 2004, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4082733.stm>
- D'Angelo, P. (2002). News framing as a multiparadigmatic research program: A response to Entman. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 870-888.
- Dimitrova, D. V., Kaid, L. L., and Williams, A. P. (2004). The first hours of the war: Online news coverage of Operation "Iraqi Freedom." In R. D. Berenger (Ed.) *Global Media Go to War* (pp. 255-264). Spokane, WA: Marquette Books.
- Entman, R. (2004) *Projections of power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nielsen NetRatings. (2003, March 27). Round-the-clock news coverage of the war in Iraq draws surfers online. Retrieved Dec. 26, 2004, from http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_030327.pdf
- Kiss, J. (2004, Sept. 2). Global BBC site could be pay per play. Retrieved December 30, 2004, from <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/story1037.shtml>
- Lord Hutton. (2004). Hutton Report. Retrieved Dec. 30, 2004, from <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/report/huttonreport.pdf>
- Poynter Institute. (2003, March 20). A special war edition of e-media tidbits. Retrieved December 26, 2004, from <http://poynteronline.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=25856>
- Wikipedia. (2004). BBC. Retrieved Dec. 30, 2004, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do you think the BBC's coverage of the events leading up to the 2003 Iraq War enhanced or tarnished its image as a premier news organization, particularly in the wake of Andrew Gilligan's reports and

the controversial suicide of Dr. David Kelley, who was “outed” by the news organization as its news source on Iraq’s WMD program?

2. Why do you think the BBC’s Web site differed in its news coverage of the war from the coverage offered by CNN and Fox News Web sites? In what ways was the coverage different?
3. Increasingly news consumers are turning away from the traditional mediums and getting their news from Web sites like the BBC, especially for fast-developing news stories. How are Web sites, like the BBC’s, adjusting to this new-found popularity?
4. News organizations’ Web sites feature a variety of converged multimedia devices like video and audio to augment the printed words. What new challenges do these communication techniques pose for new journalists and journalism trainers?
5. Web pages change frequently, often several times a day — or more often if breaking news requires. What are the limitations and problems these Web pages face in forming an historical record for Internet users to research? How are Web sites meeting these challenges?