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Compiled by Professor Robin Mansell and Dr. Bart Cammaerts

The end of the media's "war on terror"? An analysis of a declining frame

Dominik Cziesche,
MSc in

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ABSTRACT

A common notion among media scholars holds that in the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001 the Bush administration was able to establish the "war on terror"-frame as a single-sided account of reality. Mainstream media compliance with the official interpretations in this view allowed the discourse to develop a pervasiveness and sustainability only comparable to the cold-war frame. This dissertation seeks to examine if media coverage patterns have changed significantly since. At the heart of the research design is thus the question if the single-sided frame has broken down, hence, if the "war on terror" in the media is over. In applying a quantitative content analysis to print media coverage of the three largest national newspapers (New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal) it is investigated if criticising the administration's "war on terror" has become a frequent pattern after the official end of the Ira

Introduction

Six years after the attacks of September 11th, 2001 the threat of terrorism still plays a key role in the US's public discourse¹. Almost permanently, succeeded or uncovered bombing plots are reported from around the world; often they are linked to the events of 9/11. Scholars examining US media coverage in the years after the attacks of New York and Washington have overwhelmingly concluded that the White House was able to take advantage of these a

effort to fight, jail or kill (alleged) terrorists, it has meanwhile been associated with a number of negative events and policy failures as well.

A content analysis can quantify the frequency of dissent and its broad patterns, it however cannot explore to what extent the meaning-making of counter-narratives diverts from the official framing. Therefore, an additional discourse analysis is carried out, examining a presidential speech on the one hand, and a selection of newspaper editorials and commentaries to compare the official account with on the other hand.

While this pape

Literature review

The aim of this literature review is first to introduce the dominant discursive elements of the White House's "war on terror"-frame. Then explanations for the emergence or contestation of a single-sided frame will be examined.

The "war on terror" frame

The "war on terror" itself can hardly be defined as discourses are never fixed (Carpentier, 2007: 15). Since its emergence the concept has been stretched over a variety of issues, including anti-terror legislation, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a number of international conflicts that involve political violence, such as those in Chechnya or Palestine. Similar to the cold war-frame, the "war on terror"-frame is thus categorising these issues using a single familiar concept – in this case, international terrorism (Norris et. al., 2003: 4).

The core function of the "war on terror" frame according to Carpentier (2007: 15) is to

Conceptual Framework

The key insight from the discussion thus far is that the practices and linguistics of the “war on terror” are interlinked. Although this is a theoretical assumption rather than a falsifiabl

exception: Many documents an

Methodology: Rationales and Procedures

To examine whether the White House's practic

event becomes predominant. The selection of the periods was guided by the assumption that "milestone"-events usually cause a higher level of media attention and invite journalists to reflect issues within a broader historical and societal context. Given the research question, this should facilitate the investigation of critique. Generally, it is not sought to cover the time span between 9/11 and the start of the Iraq war here as much research has already been dedicated to this period.

The sample is drawn from the New York Times (NYT), the Eastern Edition of the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) and USA Today, the three US national papers with the largest circulation. They can be seen as agenda setters for other news outlets and the electronic media; this should soothe the negative effects caused by the omission of an electronic media sample. Together the three papers represent an interesting variety. The Times is traditionally a liberal paper whereas the WSJ represents a conservative perspective. Unlike the NYT and the WSJ, USA Today seeks to mix tabloid with broadsheet elements.

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discourses have remained unchanged (Hall, 1997: 32), we need this update of the government's "war on terror"-frame. One particular speech from May 2004 is chosen because it comprehensively summarises key positions of the administration towards Iraq at this particular time and thereby includes also the Abu Ghraib incidents that played a role in the sample for the content analysis. In general, a presidential speech in particular in war times is of utmost relevance as the president is the supreme commander of the military.

Then, a small selection of editorials, commentaries and analyses *critical* of the government are chosen in order to establish whether they substantially divert from official accounts. The limited number of units examined here does not allow drawing any conclusions about a larger population, neither can we make assumptions which of these discourses is more dominant. However, the sample texts were chosen because the author assumes that they are "typical of certain discourses" (Meyer, 2001: 25).

In contrast, a content analysis appears more objective due to the random selection of units.

This includes clarifying my own background. Having worked as a journalist covering international terrorism for five years, through my research I repeatedly learned about disingenuous declarations and illegal practices of the Bush administration, including the kidnapping of a suspect I had interviewed before by the CIA. This in mind, I may have a particular critical view of the White House. I am aware of this process and unlike critical discourse analysts seek to avoid a deliberate subjective reading wherever possible, although this is rather an ideal than a realistic goal.

As for the methodological perspective, the focus lays on a micro- and meso-level analysis. On a micro-level, word choices and grammar will be examined to identify how linguistic features unfold social functions (Kroger and Wood, 2000: 23). On a meso-level, the speech and the newspaper articles are compared to determine the degree of congruence between their discourses, narratives and word choices.

On a macro-level – where necessary for the understanding of a discourse – some references to larger political and historical contexts will be made (Meyer, 2001: 15). However, the broad contexts of the “war on terror” are so recent th

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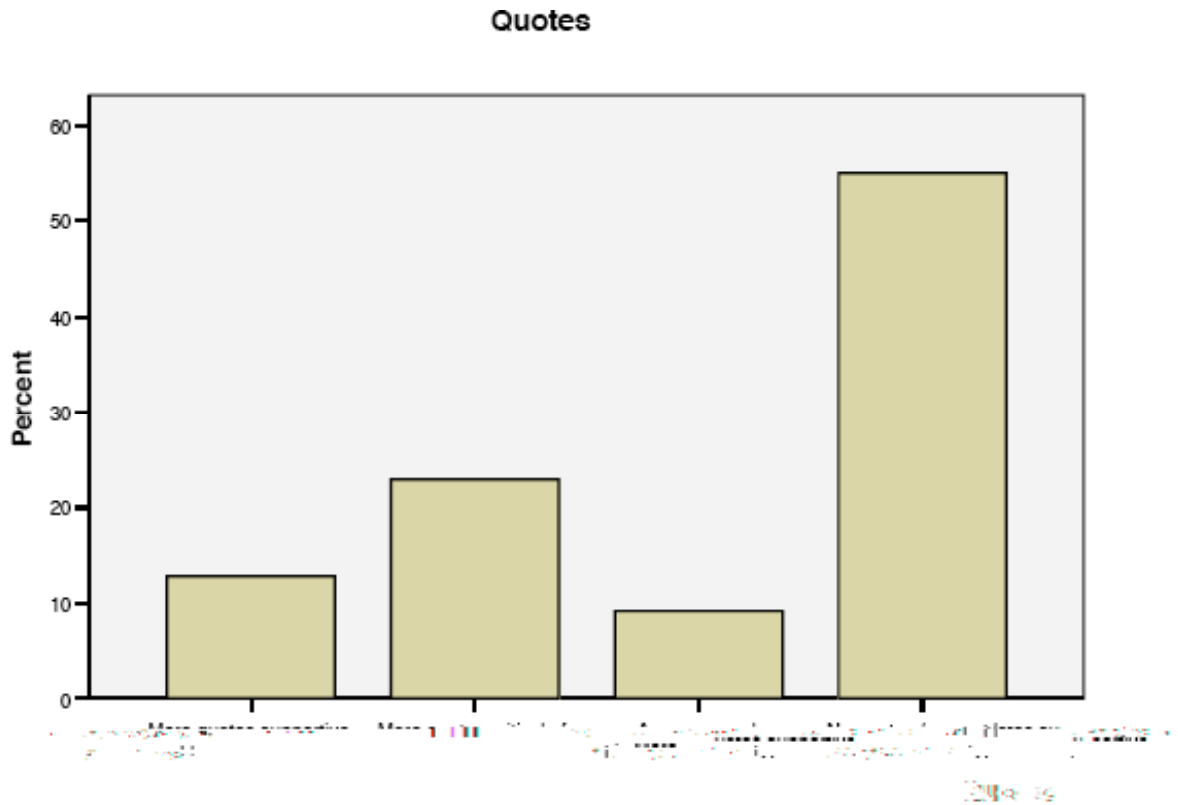


Table 5: Proportions of different types of quotes

However, the greater attention to the government's voices does not necessarily mean that officials were allowed to argue obviously in favour of the White House: In 22.9% of all types of articles there were more quotes critical of the

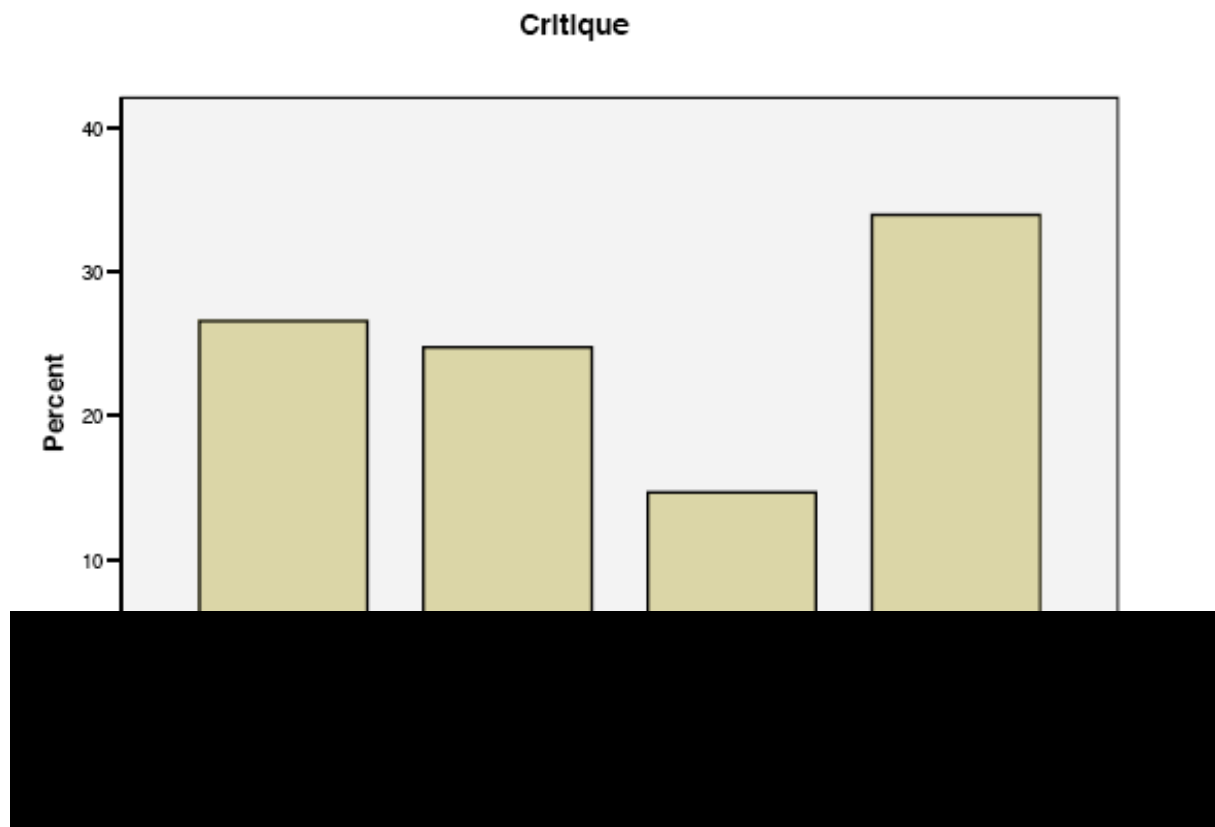


Table 6: Source of the critique

There are differences to be reported between the three papers. The NYT has produced far more critical articles in the sample than the two other papers (55.6 % of the NYT texts were overall opposing the government as compared to 27.3 % of the US Today and 13.6 % of the WSJ texts). The WSJ in turn published the highest ratio of supportive texts: 13.6 %.

Finally, some data is calculated for each period separately to examine if themes have changed over time, calculated again within the category “analyses/ commentaries/ editorials” (valid per cent). Most significantly, there is considerably more critique against the “war on terror” practices after the Abu Ghraib-scandal broke: 63.3 % of the articles are critical, 10 % are supportive. In the period after the official end of the Iraq war, however, only about one third of the opinion pieces overall oppose the US government (35.3 %), 11.8 % are supportive; for the time span after the ISG-report the ratio is 50 % opposing to zero supportive. We should not overvalue these results as the samples for each period are relatively small, however they indicate rough trends.

Analysing the focus of the critique reveals some shifts between the three periods. Here, again valid percentages are presented (i.e. only within the group that did voice critique). For the first period the decision for the war as such was the most frequent focus (25%), followed by the civil and human rights variable (20 %). For the Abu-Ghraib-period the latter

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government and by repeating

Discussion

After 9/11 it has been established that the Bush government's framing of the "war on terror" served the political purpose of pursuing a particular set of counter-t

little attention has been given to the possibility that journalists might be making independent contributions to critical policy discourse.” (Althaus, 2003: 385)

Unfortunately, the only study that compares pre-, post-, and during-the war coverage was conducted for UK media (Tumber and Palmer, 2004). A similar approach should be adopted for the US to determine if the breakdown of the single-sided frame started earlier or even if its strength per se has been overvalued.

The remainder of this section will be devoted to a discussion of possible reasons for the contestatd

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Appendix 1: Coding Schedule

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