

The Framing of the Iraq War on the Cover of the New York Post

An Examination of Headlines Through Framing Theory

Mikko Rytö
Bachelor's Thesis
Department of English
School of Languages and Translation Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Turku
December 2025

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Bachelor's Thesis

Degree Programme, Department: Department of English

First name Last name Mikko Rytö

Title of the thesis The Framing of the Iraq War on the Cover of the New York Post:
An Examination of Headlines Through Framing Theory

Number of pages: 25 pages

This thesis examines The New York Post's covers in the lead-up and during the Iraq war. The covers are investigated through the lens of framing theory, leaning on prior research on the subject. Episodic framing, which focuses on the salience of individual people and cases, and thematic framing, which focuses on that of underlying societal causes, are looked at separately.

The Post is found to have featured the war less as it went on. Its covers and headlines routinely use sensational, emotional, and unabashedly biased language. The Post has a clear preference for the use of episodic over thematic framing. This is unsurprising due to the effectiveness of episodic framing, in conjunction with the aforementioned style of language, is more potent than thematic framing in creating attention grabbing and sensational headlines.

Key words: Framing Theory, Frames, Iraq War, New York Post, Headlines, Media.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Theoretical Background and Materials	7
2.1	Theoretical Background	7
2.2	Material and Methods	8
3	Analysis	10
3.1	Thematic Frames	11
3.2	Episodic Frames	13
3.3	Framing of Events and Themes Spanning Multiple Covers	15
3.3.1	Portrayal of Saddam Hussein	15
3.3.2	Abu Ghraib	16
3.3.3	American Superiority and Arab Inferiority	18
3.3.4	Coverage During the 2004 and 2008 Elections	18
3.3.5	The End of the War	21
4	Conclusions	23
	References	25

1 Introduction

In March 2003, the United States, alongside coalition forces, began the invasion of Iraq following an ultimatum to do so unless Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein stepped down and left the country. The invasion and subsequent occupation were officially codenamed Operation Iraqi Freedom. Even though there was no declaration of war the conflict is better known as the Iraq war, which is also how I will refer to it. The primary justification for the war was the allegation by US president George W. Bush's administration that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the international community, led by the US, needed to defend themselves with a "pre-emptive strike" (Holsti 2011, 47). The administration and media had also linked Hussein to the 9/11 terror attacks (Ibid). In the immediate aftermath of the attack the US had invaded Afghanistan in search of the responsible Al Qaeda operatives, and the action in Iraq was to be another part of a larger War on Terror (Holsti 2011, 11).

The WMD's that purportedly made the Iraq war necessary never materialized, and many of the claims made by the Bush administration and propagated by the US news media have since been called into question and disproven (Holsti 2011, 120). The war dragged on for almost a decade and became widely unpopular (Holsti 2011, 63).

Many publications in the US news media have been widely lambasted for their uncritical reporting of the war and the Bush administration's assertions. According to Williams (2003, 177) journalists "quickly abandoned all pretense of objectivity and became the uncritical mouthpiece of the US state". In the years since, it has become a widely circulated talking point that news media aided the administration in manufacturing support for the war, and shares responsibility for the results. These claims are backed up by research, such as Danny Hayes' and Matt Guardino's article, which shows two-thirds of all supportive statements in the studied media during the pre-war period were attributed to administration officials (2010,73).

The New York Post is a New York City based, heavily right-leaning newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp. Similar to its British sister-tabloid The Sun, it is known for its often sensationalist covers and headlines, but it also asserts itself to be a serious source of political news and editorials. As stated in the Post's editorial standards: "Our mission is to inform, with style and flair. We take strong stands. We write provocative and sometimes hilarious headlines. We do not shy away from controversy, nor do we equivocate. We always

tell it like it is” (New York Post), The Post is self-aware of its image but does not want to forfeit its credibility.

In this thesis I aim to investigate the presentation and promotion of the Iraq war. The New York Post is an interesting case study in that wider phenomenon because of its specific place within the American media landscape as well as its editorial style. The Post is known for, and as the above quote shows, is proud of its headlines and covers. For these reasons I have chosen the headlines on the Post’s cover as the material for this thesis and will examine the uses of framing in them. I will also seek to determine whether the Post has a preference between the uses of episodic and thematic framing, which I will explain in the next section.

In Section 3 I will start by giving a quantitative overview of the data and then analysing particular thematic and episodic frames of note, after which I will examine the framing of selected events and themes featured in the Post’s headlines.

2 Theoretical Background and Materials

2.1 Theoretical Background

This thesis will approach the material through framing theory. Robert Entman writes that framing theory has lacked consensus in its conceptualization (Entman 1993, 51). He notes terms like “frame” and “framework” being used often outside scholarly discourse with similar connotations, and that framing is often loosely defined, “with much left to an assumed tacit understanding of reader and researcher” (Entman 1993, 52).

The nature of framing theory as a “fractured paradigm” (Entman 1993) can be seen in the research I use as background. Articles use greatly disparate methodologies and even slightly different definitions of terms. I will explain my evaluation of them, and what parts I have chosen to include in this thesis, but first I will examine the definitions of framing theory that I will work with.

Entman defines framing as involving selection and salience (Entman 1993, 52). Essentially any subject can be viewed from a multitude of perspectives, but some perspectives are almost always presented as more important than others, or, notably, treated as more important as if by default. For example, in policy discussions welfare programs are often viewed through the frame of cost and where funds are to be found. Discussions of increased defense budgets, while similarly concerning matters of public spending, are often not subject to similar close inspection. The issues are presented with different frames, and different facts are given salience. In news headlines, where space is limited, the distinction of what is being given salience is often heightened, which is a large part of the analysis of this thesis.

I will investigate the Post’s coverage with a focus on Shanto Iyengar’s distinction between episodic and thematic frames. I have chosen this as the main framework for this thesis due to the political nature of the material, and Iyengar’s claim that almost all political news coverage falls necessarily into these frames (Iyengar 1991, 2).

Episodic frames give salience to individual people and events. They often do not provide larger context, and focus on the experiences of the people directly involved in the situation rather than wider implications. (Iyengar 1996, 62). In a modern news context, episodic framing can turn coverage into “only a passing parade of specific events” (Iyengar 1991, 140).

Thematic framing puts events into a general or abstract context, and presents collective or general evidence (Iyengar 1991, 14). According to Iyengar, most stories include some of both types of framing, but generally one will clearly predominate (Ibid).

Iyengar notes that episodic framing, due to its lack of context, can make the public less likely attribute responsibility to political actors (Iyengar 1991, 3). This idea is extremely relevant in the context of the Post's war coverage.

As mentioned above, previous case studies have differed in their application of framing theory. Some have sought to identify a number of distinct frames in news media (Human interest, responsibility, prognosis) and analysed this data quantitatively, like Daniela Dimitrova et al. (2005). Others have analysed framing through markers of positioning and stance, for example, who is addressed in text and who is not, or if the text conceptualizes itself as playful or serious (Gordon 2015).

I will make use of these methodologies where particularly salient, but the majority of my analysis will focus on the Iyengar's distinction between episodic and thematic frames.

2.2 Material and Methods

The primary material for analysis in this thesis was gathered from the New York Post's online archive. Every front page from 1.1.2003 to 31.12.2011 was examined and their headlines assessed for relevance to the Iraq war. Covers containing relevant headlines were archived separately for further analysis, and note was made of whether these headlines were presented as a primary or a secondary point of the cover. The relevant material under further inspection consists of 161 headlines, differentiated by primary headlines which are meant to grab the attention of the reader to the main story of the issue and are often accompanied by pictures, and secondary headlines which usually take up less space on the page and are mostly plain text. This is not a strict rule as the formatting of the Post's cover often varies, and in some cases where the distinction was not immediately clear the category had to be determined subjectively. Six covers of the over 3,000 daily editions published during the relevant timespan were missing from the archive, making the set of material incomplete. I consider this an acceptable amount of missing data and do not believe it notably affects the results of the study.

Headlines concerning the war, its causes and effects, or the politics surrounding it were considered relevant. Headlines relating to terror threats and specifically Al-Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden have not been automatically included, but it should be noted that they can be seen as a part of the thematic frame of a larger effort to justify the war. Similarly, “war hero” pieces were left out unless they were about Iraq war veterans in specific, but articles about veterans from the Afghan war can obviously be seen as part of the same continuous effort of maintaining a positive and uncritical image of the armed forces. Headlines about the War on Terror in general were included. In cases where a cover included text or images which seemed to refer to the US military, the Middle East or other possibly overlapping subjects the specific articles were found in the New York Post’s archive and inspected for context.

I qualitatively analysed the remaining set of 161 relevant covers for cases of framing which were indicative of larger trends or notable on their own.

3 Analysis

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the frequency of headlines relating to the Iraq war on the cover of the Post.. For the sake of legibility, the data is divided into two figures. Figure 1 covers the five years where the majority of headlines appeared, including the lead up and beginning of the war. Figure 2 shows the later years where occurrences become much scarcer.

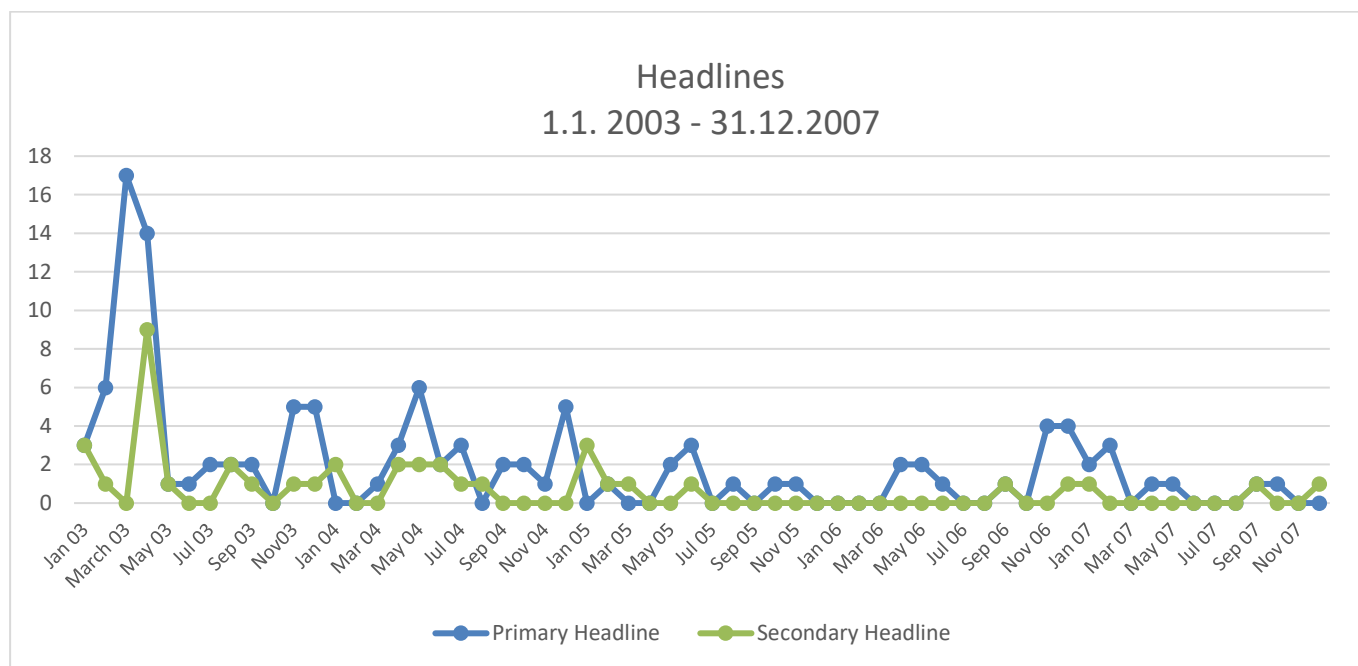


Figure 1. Frequencies of primary and secondary headlines concerning the Iraq war on the cover of the New York Post 2003-2007

It is not surprising that the biggest impact of the war on the Post's cover was around its beginning stages. 47,8%, meaning 77 of the total 161 headlines, occurred in 2003, with 17 (10,5%) in March, when the war started. Going forward, the rate remains steady for a few years, then slowing down until 2007, when a spike in coverage happens due to President George W. Bush's troop surge and its political aftermath.

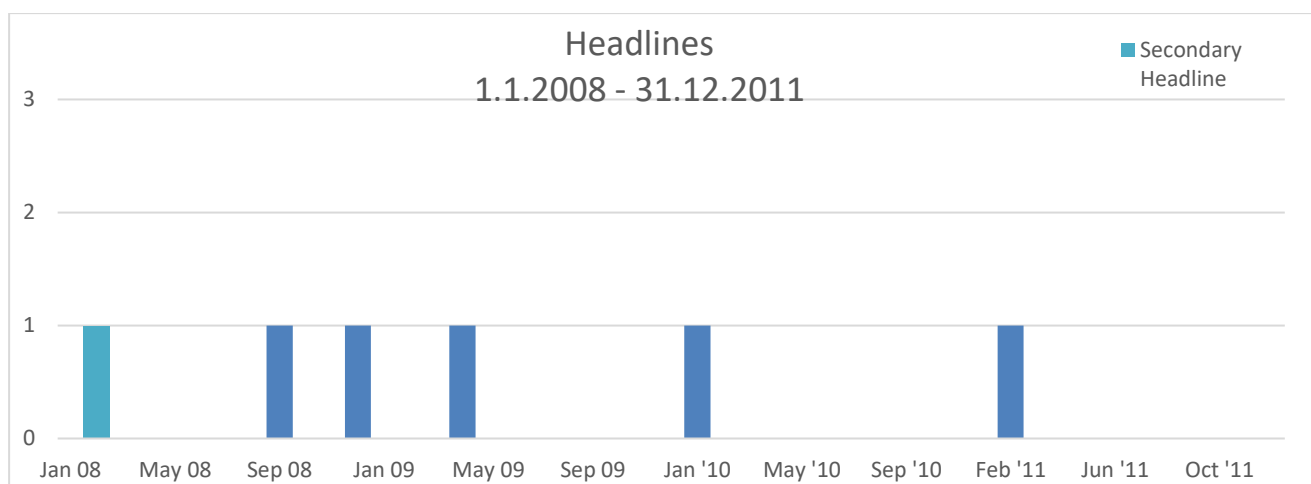


Figure 2. Frequencies of primary and secondary headlines concerning the Iraq war on the cover of the New York Post 2008-2011

After the start of 2008 the war almost completely lost its place on the front page.

One might assume a controversial war would be a major point of contention during election season, but the general election in November 2008 does not correlate with a spike in coverage. This is part of a general trend, as the financial crisis dominated the news cycle and discourse during that election.

Throughout the period under investigation the war was consistently far more likely to be covered in primary headlines, which made up 74.5% of the data.

In the following section I will examine thematic framing in the material. These are frames that I see the Post establishing over continued coverage of issues.

3.1 Thematic Frames

In the lead up to the war the Post's cover included several headlines which functioned as general warnings of Iraq's supposed capacity for weapons of mass destruction. I see all of these as parts of a larger effort to create a thematic frame of the Iraqi threat. The headlines included an announcement of "Iraq's chem arms found by the U.N." (17.1.2003), which in the fine print below are specified as being "empty chemical warheads" (Ibid), a call for Americans to wake up as secretary of state Colin Powell "warns of nightmare" (21.1.2003), and warning that "Iraq warheads could be tip of the iceberg" (26.1.2003). None of these headlines or events individually prove the Bush administration's claims of weapons of mass destruction and certainly do not justify an invasion of a sovereign country, but the inundation of news with general accusations of Iraqi wrongdoing and speculation on its extent creates a thematic frame. This is in line with Rampton and Stauber's description of the administration's

PR strategy of think tanks, commentators and the administration itself producing “a steady drumbeat of allegations and insinuations” which would come to be accepted as true even if “often false or misleading” (2003, 80). Repetition has been recognized in framing theory as a method of giving information salience (Entman 1993, 53).

The effort to create a thematic frame of the dangerous and clandestine nature of Iraq also links Iraq to terrorism more broadly. This has the effect of any news of actual or potential terror attacks further justifying military action in Iraq. This is done most bluntly by a full-page cover on Bush’s 2003 State of the Union speech proclaiming ”WAR CRY – Bush ties Iraq to terror” (29.1.2003), but also by “Feds quiz 50.000 Iraqis living in U.S.” to “find terrorists and spies” (26.1.2003).

Another thematic frame is the responsibility for the war being placed on Iraq and Hussein. In the prelude to war the United States set numerous ultimatums and deadlines for Iraq and the UN. The phrases “game over” and “time’s up” are used several times to frame the coming invasion as an inevitable consequence of Saddam Hussein’s alleged actions. Similarly, the US’s final demand for a UN resolution for “immediate and unconditional disarmament” is not treated as a threat of a war of aggression beyond the bounds of international law, but as Bush “giving the U.N. last chance to act” (17.3.2003).

Another related frame is a broadly defined, some might say paranoid, concern for national security.

The actions of countries opposing war in the UN, specifically France and Germany, are never framed as honest efforts with even theoretically worthy goals. The “so-called allies” (14.2.2003) UN representatives are portrayed both verbally and literally with edited images as weasels, and are accused of stonewalling. Salience is always given to the weight of the evidence and allegations the administration has presented, as well as the magnitude of the supposed danger. Concerns for international law, the possible disastrous consequences of the war, or even skepticism of the allegations, are seen as completely secondary at best and perfidious at worst. France in particular is portrayed as being motivated by cowardice. One contemporary accusation was that countries like France were avoiding the burden of culpability for the war by agreeing to a UN resolution and therefore pounding off the responsibility to the world’s lone superpower. The frame here was the perceived necessity of the war, and the salience of the evidence. If those frames were accepted the only possible motives of disagreement were cowardice and malice. Possibly the height of this framing was a

full-page cover featuring a graveyard permeated with white crosses, sandwiched by the text “SACRIFICE: They died for France, but France has forgotten”, accusing France of not returning the favor of America’s effort in World War II and “appeasing” the “modern Hitler”, Hussein (10.2.2003).

In the previous examples the framed possibilities are a war with the backing of the UN or a war without it. The possibility of backing down and not invading is not given the salience of a serious alternative. These patterns in the framing of news and politics before the war are directly brought up by Entman (2009). He argues that news frames have self-reinforcing power (2009, 55). Media and politics have (often unwritten) bounds of acceptable discourse and opinions that are taken seriously. Views outside these norms are viewed as not likely to influence policy and as such not worthy of coverage (Ibid.). Entman also notes the social power exerted by frames concentrated in specific terms or talking points. Once a frame is widely accepted, to differ from it is to risk harming one’s credibility (Ibid.). This phenomenon is visible in the Post’s headlines reinforcing the war and redoubling efforts towards it, such as “Bush vows to finish war against terror” (21.1.2004), and the lack of opposing views.

The thematic frames discussed in this section comprise a framework of justification, featuring the threat Iraq was thought to pose, the inevitability of conflict that threat caused, and the responsibility Iraq held for the war. In the next section I will discuss episodic frames found in the covers.

3.2 Episodic Frames

In this section I will examine two salient uses of episodic framing in the Post’s coverage.

One interesting case is the different framing of casualties on different sides of the war. Difference in reaction to the deaths one’s countrymen versus those of enemy combatants is arguably almost universal. The Post’s framing of casualties is still noteworthy in its blunt and emotional bias. Headlines covering US victories tout Iraqi casualties as celebrated signs of military superiority. Examples of these include “WIPEOUT: GIs kill 300 Iraqi troops without losing a man” (26.3.2003) and “SMASHED: One-third of elite division wiped out” (29.3.2003). Iraqi-caused American casualties, however, are not treated as legitimate parts of war, but as terrorism. One example is “HELLFIRE: Iraqis kill 10 GIs in brutal day of riots and attacks” (5.4.2004). Notably these attacks are described as “brutal”, whereas US

offensives have salience given to their success, not their degree of violence. It should also be noted that the Iraqis are fighting an invasion of their country, whereas the US troops are executing an illegal war of aggression. It might be assumed that this should have the inverse effect on the perceived legitimacy of violence.

Cynthia Gordon describes microfeatures and “membership categorization devices” which can be used to signal membership of an ingroup, such as nicknames (2015, 334). The Post continuously, as in the previous examples, uses the colloquial term “GI” for American soldiers. Similarly, the headlines often refer to Iraqis as “thugs”, which I see as part of a process of positioning described by Gordon, where the in-group is created and defined by its contrast to the features of the out-group.

The Post’s way of talking about violence on both sides of the war is an indicator being part of the same ingroup. This is, again, not surprising for a nation in a war.

Another interesting case is the single cover on the battle of Fallujah. Few individual battles or operations in Iraq demanded as many American casualties as retaking the city of Fallujah from “insurgents” (Holsti 2011, 45). The episodic framing of The Post is at its most cartoonish in its reporting of the results of this battle, to the point that were the cover a century older few would question calling it propaganda. The full-page cover on November 10, 2004, features a close-up picture of a handsome soldier, with a dirty and bloody face, smoking a cigarette and being partially shrouded by the smoke. The image would not look out of place in a Hollywood blockbuster. The headline is “SMOKIN’: Marlboro men kick butt in Fallujah” (10.11.2004) The ingress reads:

Bloodied but unbowed, a leatherneck from Charlie Company of the U.S. Marines First Division, 8th Regiment, takes a drag of a well-deserved smoke yesterday after he and his comrades stormed the terrorist stronghold of Fallujah, wiping out bands of bloodthirsty guerillas. (Ibid)

Here we see an interesting inverse relationship between the number and salience of casualties; the death of a single soldier might be on the Post’s cover for several days, including biographical stories and interviews with family and friends, yet the bloodiest battle of the war warrants only discussion of its success. This may at least partly be a result of the Post’s preference for episodic framing and human-interest stories. It is difficult to give a face and a story to hundreds of killed or wounded.

The primary point of salience for the text is heroism of the US armed forces, especially the marines who are specified both with the slang term “leatherneck” and the unit. The word “comrade”, which is not often used without sarcasm or derision in American politics, serves to evoke the unity and shared purpose of the soldiers. The phrase “bloodied but unbowed” in conjunction with the featured photograph create an image of a sort of tenacious frontier chic.

The ingress also contains a textbook example of giving salience to the faults of one’s enemies while seeing them as at worst neutral in oneself and one’s allies. The contrast between calling a group of people “bloodthirsty” while exalting the act of “wiping out bands” of them is unmistakable.

3.3 Framing of Events and Themes Spanning Multiple Covers

In the following section I do not examine specific frames, but the framing around selected events and themes. These are events that both spanned multiple covers and also served as fruitful examples of the Post’s framing, such as the Abu Ghraib scandal and the end of the war, as well as overarching themes in the reporting, such as assumptions of American superiority.

3.3.1 Portrayal of Saddam Hussein

Much of the continuity of the Post’s coverage of the war is contingent on the person of Saddam Hussein. This is a relevant connection since as the dictator of Iraq he would be responsible for the alleged procurement of weapons of mass destruction and terror program, and it had been the US’s official policy since 1998 to remove Hussein from power. The war also started after Hussein’s refusal acquiesce to the Bush administration’s ultimatum for him and his sons to leave Iraq.

The Post’s portrayal of Hussein changed during the examined time period. Before the war salience was mostly given to the criminality and untrustworthiness of Hussein and his sons, Uday and Qusay. This representation in the headlines was often in tandem with the Bush administration’s claims of knowing the alleged weapons programs were real, and lack of evidence being presented as proof of their clandestine nature. The portrayal served to support these claims as well as the severity of the possible threat, were the weapons to materialize.

After Hussein was no longer effectively in power but had not yet been captured the framing stayed mostly similar, attempting to corroborate previous claims about weapons and links to terror.

Once Hussein had been captured and was awaiting his trial and eventual death penalty by hanging, the framing shifted. While he was still regularly referred to as “Butcher” or “the Butcher of Baghdad”, the main point of the coverage became his degradation or at best thinly veiled giddiness at his upcoming execution. One cover included a full-page photo of Hussein in his cell in his underwear, and his hanging was referred to with puns several times. On the day his execution was carried out, the cover featured a full-page photo of the noose being tied to his neck, with the headline “GOOD KNOT: Revealed: Saddam’s last gasp” (31.12.2003).

Hussein served a role in the Post’s framing: a dictator whose cruelty and unpredictability, when given salience, made him a shorthand for the threat of Iraq and terrorism. He was the focal point of many of the thematic frames discussed in section 3.1.

3.3.2 Abu Ghraib

In April 2004 the US military presence in Iraq suffered a massive blow to its public image as photographs emerged depicting the abuse of detainees in a prison complex in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. The abuse of the prisoners included physical and sexual assault, torture, rape and murder. The scandal took up five headlines on the Post’s cover in May 2004.

The Post’s coverage focuses on Lynndie England, a military police private at the prison who was shown in some of the released photographs holding a leash tied to the neck of a crawling naked Iraqi prisoner. While the first cover, accompanied by the photograph of England, featured the headline “WORSE TO COME: Abuse on video” (8.5.2004), and therefore acknowledged that abuse was not limited to this one incident and certainly not this one perpetrator, the coverage overall is focused on their episodic framing.

The aspect of the scandal that the Post gives the most salience is not its brutality, illegality, or wider implications on the execution of the project in Iraq, but salaciousness. Another cover featured England and the headline “LEASH GAL SEX PICS: Iraq prison guard romps for camera” (13.5.2004). The ingress for the story said England was “also photographed in sex acts with multiple partners”, including in front of prisoners, as well as reporting of “Iraqi women forced to expose their breasts, and naked prisoners tied together on the floor” (Ibid).

The sexual abuse and humiliation of prisoners is of course a poignant part of the entire scandal, but it is notable that the Post gives it salience over all other abuse, including torture and murder. The last of the five headlines “SEX CELLS: GI orgies in Abu Ghraib” (14.5.2004) is not even strictly related to the abuse of prisoners but on the personal vices of the personnel.

I see this as a case of episodic framing not only taking the place of thematic framing but directly undermining it. A thorough examination of the occupation forces conduct, and the program of “enhanced interrogation” can be discarded as unnecessary and potentially disruptive when the perversion of a few individuals is regarded as the most salient factor of the scandal. The only instances of continuity and more in-depth examination of the root causes of the scandal focus on the personal lives and history of the implicated individuals, all three of whom were low-level staff.

The coverage of Abu Ghraib gives a highly practical glimpse into some of the framing practices of the Post’s covers in general by offering contrasting examples.

On both May 9th and 10th, the Post’s cover included a headline of a member of Abu Ghraib personnel being court martialled. The first headline, “EXPOSED, Army MP charged with snapping sicko photos” (9.5.2004), concerned the case of Sabrina Harman and the second, “TRIAL BY FURY: “Abuse” GI faces rap” (10.5.2004), Jeremy Sivits. Both are accompanied by pictures of the defendants, Sivits’ with the text “Jeremy Sivits is believed to have taken prison photos”. The contrast between being charged with “snapping sicko photos” and being “believed to have taken prison photos” is glaring in its amount of moral judgment. Sivits is also standing trial, where Harman is “exposed”. Furthermore, Lynndie England was previously referred to as “Abuse soldier” without the equivocative quotation marks, in contrast to Sivits’ ““Abuse GI””. While outside the scope of this study, this could be part of further research on gender differences in the Post’s reporting.

There is a clear contrast between the Post’s reporting on American and Iraqi war crimes. For example, I will examine the Post’s cover from 24.3.2003, four days into the war and approximately a year before the abuse at Abu Ghraib became public. The full-page cover includes a picture of an Iraqi man turning to smile at the camera while standing next to what are presumably the bodies of dead American soldiers. The headline reads “SAVAGES: Iraqi fiends execute American POWs” (24.3.2003). The condemnation of the Iraqi actions is continuously emphasised with the use of strong adjectives. In the photograph’s caption the

man is described as “cruelly smirking over the bodies of slain Americans” and the featured ingress paragraph describes the acts as “a barbaric violation of the Geneva convention” (Ibid). This is part of a larger pattern of the Post using dehumanizing and racially charged language to describe Iraqis and Arabs.

3.3.3 American Superiority and Arab Inferiority

In “The Iraq War as Contemporary History”, his review of almost a dozen books on the subject, Andrew Preston describes many of the fundamental causes for the Bush administration’s failure to stabilize Iraqi society after the invasion (2008). One of the most remarkable of these failings was the administration’s deliberate cultural ignorance (2008, 802). The administration had failed to account for ethnic and political differences in a post-Hussein Iraq, believing the Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds would set aside their differences and past injuries as well as give up previously gained privileges for the sake of the stability of a new occupied state. In addition, their actions were generally “unplanned because they were guided by a strain of triumphalist, cultural hubris predicated on assumptions about US superiority and Arab inferiority” (Preston 2008, 800).

These same assumptions can be seen clearly in the Posts framing and portrayal of Iraqis. They become especially evident in case like the one mentioned at the end of section 6.2, where Iraqis are accused of violence. The language used is often dehumanizing and presents the subjects as inferior not just on a moral level, but on a civilizational one. The perpetrators are almost as a rule referred to as “thugs”, “fiends”, or “savages”. “Thugs” is treated at times by the Post as a general term for Iraqis who are not accused of a specific crime on the cover in question but are seen as being part of a larger pattern problem behaviour. For example, “U.N. TERROR FUND: Oil-for-food million\$ go to Iraq thugs” (10.7.2004).

The similar attitudes and assumptions of American superiority being present in government, military and media speaks to the phenomenon of media propagating the administrations messaging uncritically, but also suggests the attitudes might have simply been wide-spread.

3.3.4 Coverage During the 2004 and 2008 Elections

In this section I will look at the Post’s war coverage during the 2004 and 2008 general elections. I will note that there were mid-term elections in 2002 and 2006 which certainly

were affected by the war and the build up to it, but I have chosen to omit them due to the limitations of the scope of this thesis.

In 2004 the war was still a fixture on the Post's cover. In addition to major events featured in this thesis, like the Abu Ghraib scandal and the retaking of Fallujah taking place that year, the cover was inundated with reports of violence and several hostage crises in Iraq. The dehumanizing language I discussed earlier was on full display in these headlines; the perpetrators almost always being referred to as thugs or fiends.

There were also some headlines about the administrations continued war effort. These included "Bush vows to finish war against terror" (21.1.2004), "Bush promises more troops in Iraq" (14.4.2004), and "CLEAR CHOICE: Bush sets out vision for Iraq" (25.5.2004). The first of these headlines refers to the president's annual State of the Union speech, where Bush repeatedly said the US was on the offensive against any threats, and spoke of not leaving "our work unfinished" in relation to the war on terror (Bush 2004). On the part of both the Post and the Bush administration, this is a common framing of the subject, giving salience to resilience and the will to finish what you started, while not focusing on what the end of that project would look like or how it would be defined.

Similar framing and omission happens in the third headline. In a headline covering a televised speech to the nation, Bush "setting out a vision for Iraq" is framed as a determined forward-thinking act, further highlighted by the word "vision". The Washington Post's Pentagon correspondent Thomas E. Ricks has described the administration's lack of plan for the occupation after the invasion as "the original sin" of the war (Preston 2008, 805). Setting out a plan for a country a full year after invading it is arguably closer to hindsight than vision.

In October 2004 the cover featured two headlines which were relevant to the framing of the war in the general election. The first "SLUGFEST: Bush rips Kerry on Iraq and tax cuts" (8.10.2004) covered the previous night's presidential debate on, October 8, between Bush and John Kerry, the Democratic candidate. The headline frames Bush's perceived victory in that debate, specifically giving salience to the president's signature policies.

The second October headline, the last before the election, is a full-page cover reading "DEAR JOHN: an open letter to John Kerry from a proud dad whose son is off to war" (26.10.2004). It is penned by a Post writer who "worries deeply about what will happen if John Kerry

becomes the new president” (Ibid). The cover features a photograph of the father’s arms wrapped around his son, who is wearing a uniform. The cover serves as a vote of no confidence in Kerry in the upcoming election by the Post, which typically does not do national endorsements.

It is true that by 2008 the unpopular war had dragged down President Bush’s approval numbers, and that the candidates of the 2008 election were vocally on opposite sides of the issue. Barack Obama had opposed the war for years, and John McCain had emphatically supported it since the beginning, even championing the controversial troop surge in 2007 (Holsti 2011, 65–68.). The 2008 election was, however, dominated by the financial crisis and economic issues. (Holsti 2011, 136.)

Obama’s landslide victory can certainly be seen as a part of the larger trend of the American public having turned against the war, but one should not make the mistake of assuming the election was a referendum on that issue.

As Figure 2 shows the Post only featured the war on its cover three times in 2008. The first was in January, with a secondary headline relating to Democratic primary debate between Clinton and Obama, “Hill & ‘O’ in clash over Iraq” (1.2.2008). This would have been fairly unremarkable at the time, but I see this as relevant in building the narrative of Obama’s opposition to the war being a major part of his campaign pitch.

The second instance is more relevant to the election, as it features a full-page photo of McCain’s running mate governor Sarah Palin walking arm in arm with a uniformed army colonel. The headline is: “CALL TO ARMS: Sarah talks tough as son goes to war” (12.9.2004). The ingress tells of Palin escorting her son to join the war and mentions her taking “a hard line on Russia, Iran and the terrorists ‘hellbent on destroying America and our allies’” (Ibid). The fact that this story is given a full-page cover is noteworthy. It covers the war in an episodic frame of the familial drama. It is extremely similar to the Dear John headline of October 2004, except for the focus being on a politician. However, when placed in the context of the McCain campaign, it serves the purpose of reasserting its commitment to the war. As a notable sign of things to come, in a comment about her son joining an ongoing war, Palin names two completely different countries in addition to “the terrorists” as threats against which she “took a hard line”. This shows the rhetorical position the Iraq war had started to fulfil in American political discourse. It had become background noise with

disagreement taking place over whether it should go on, but even its supporters were not truly making a case for the importance of its success, or what that success would look like.

3.3.5 The End of the War

As shown in Figure 2, from January 2010 to the official end of the Iraq war in December 2011, the Post's cover featured only two headlines that were included in my dataset. In addition, even these two are fringe cases not directly tied to the situation in Iraq. The first, on January 8, 2010 featured headline, stylized as being created by bullet holes: "THEY WANT TO KILL US!: President finally connects the dots" (8.1.2010). It concerns Obama's reaction to a terrorist attack, saying "We are at war against al Qaeda", and "we will do whatever it takes to defeat them" (Ibid). The Post's main focus is on the reaffirmation of the importance of the wider War on Terror.

The second headline is also secondary and reads "Columbia heckles war hero" (20.2.2011).

The most interesting and relevant cover in these two years is one that has nothing to do with the Iraq war. It was published on October 21, 2011, the date of Obama's announcement that the last US troops would leave Iraq by the end of the year, in essence the declaration of the official end of the war. (White House 2011). It features a full-page photograph of a disfigured face covered by bloody wet hair and presumably gore, straddled by legs in bloodied khakis. It is accompanied by a smaller photo of a young man in a baseball cap holding a gilded handgun.

The headline reads: "KHADAFY KILLED BY YANKEE FAN: Gunman had more hits than A-Rod" (21.10.2011).

The face belongs to Muammar Gaddafi, the former ruler of Libya who had recently been deposed in a US-led military operation, now recovered from hiding, violently killed and degraded on the cover of the Post. His was a fate very similar to Saddam Hussein's.

The full-page coverage of Gaddafi's death left no room for the announcement.

By the end of 2011 the Iraq war had lasted almost nine years. As Entman points out, most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include (1993, 54). By the day its end was

announced, the US had entered another foreign conflict which had inherited its salience in media coverage.

4 Conclusions

In the investigated coverage, the New York Post shows a deep-running general preference for episodic framing over thematic framing. Dimitrova et al. noted that US media was singular in its lack of focus on the responsibility for the war. Countries who opposed the invasion were the most likely to give salience to responsibility, but even among its allies the US stood out, preferring instead to focus on the “nitty gritty of the attack” and human-interest stories. (2005,35). The Post can be seen as being a clear part of this trend. Giving a conclusive and definite reason for this preference is beyond the scope of this thesis but based on the included material I posit one reasonable interpretation.

The main reason I see playing a role is the nature of the Post as a tabloid magazine. Episodic framing with its focus on individual psychology and emotion is better suited for attention grabbing and colorful headlines. An extravagant human-interest story can be seen as more appealing to a wider audience than a sober and exhaustive investigation of issues. The “increasingly competitive nature of the news business” has already been seen as contributing to the predominance of episodic framing in television news (Iyengar 1996, 62), and here the same incentives can be seen affecting print media.

Iyengar has also concluded in prior research, that episodic framing in news makes viewers less likely to consider social or political causes for political issues, and that this effect was particularly potent in the framing of terrorism (1991, 45). This is significant in light of the Post’s presentation of most resistance the US met during the Iraq war as terrorism, leading to a portrayal of an offensive war where violent response from the invaded party is delegitimized. The Post’s preference for episodic framing served to obfuscate responsibility for the war.

Thematic framing can make viewers more likely to consider political actors responsible for social and political issues, as well as more informed on them (Ibid). How, if at all, could thematic framing work in the context of tabloid press would be a potentially fruitful subject for further research. It is not obvious that such a mix would be desirable for the commercial interests of the magazines, but studies on this subject have thus far been sparse could prove useful as media in the digital age further incentivises attention grabbing headlines.

References

- Allen, S. A., Rich, J. D., Bux, R. C., Farbenblum, B., Berns, M., & Rubenstein, L. 2006. "Deaths of detainees in the custody of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2002 to 2005". *MedGenMed: Medscape general medicine*, 8(4), 46
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1868355/>
- Bush, George W. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union" Speech, Washington, DC, January 20, 2004. The American Presidency Project. Accessed 21.12.2025.
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-24>
- Chomsky, Noam, and Edward S. Herman. 1995. *Manufacturing Consent*: Vintage.
- Chong, Dennis and James N. Druckman. 2007. "Framing Theory". *Annual Review of Political Science* vol 10.: 103-126
- Dimitrova Daniela V, Lynda Lee Kaid, Andrew Paul Williams, and Kaye D. Trammell. 2005. "War on the Web the Immediate News Framing of Gulf War II". *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* Vol10, Issue 1: 22-44
- Entman, Robert. 1993. "Framing: Toward Clarification of A Fractured Paradigm". *The Journal of Communication*. 43. 51-58.
- Gordon, Cynthia. 2015." Framing and Positioning". In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton and D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. 2nd Ed: 324-345: Wiley Blackwell.
- Hayes, Danny, and Matt Guardino. "Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq." *Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600903502615>.
- Holsti, Ole R. 2011. *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*. 1st ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto. *Is Anyone Responsible?*. 1991.

Iyengar, Shanto. "Framing Responsibility for Political Issues." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546, 1996: 59–70.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1048170>.

New York Post Cover Archive, 2003-2011.

<https://nypost.com/covers/> Accessed 10 December 2025.

New York Post Editorial Standards.

<https://nypost.com/editorial-standards/> Accessed 10 December 2025.

Obama, Barack. "Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq." Speech, Washington, DC, October 21, 2011. Obama White House. Accessed 21.12.2025.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq>

Preston, Andrew. "The Iraq War as Contemporary History". *The International History Review*, vol 30, no 4, 2008. 796-808.

<https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.utu.fi:2443/stable/40213732?seq=5>

Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber. 2003. *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq*.

Williams, Bruce. A. 2003. "The New Media Environment, Internet Chatrooms, and Public Opinion Discourse after 9/11". In *War and the Media*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman, 176–89. London: Sage