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THE COVERAGE OF THE IRAQ WAR:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
AL-JAZEERA AND THE CNN

BY

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Malaysia

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of
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International Islamic University
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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how the CNN and Al-Jazeera represent their national interests in their coverage of the Iraqi War. It is assumed that the CNN and Al-Jazeera would express different attitudes towards the war since the former belonged to a country supporting the conflict and the latter to the countries that opposed it. Based on the indexing hypothesis and existing literature on war coverage, it is expected that the media would reflect their respective national perspectives on foreign policy in such a crisis. To test this hypothesis, stories from the two channels from the start of the war on March 20, 2003 and to the officially declared end of the war on May 1, 2003 were sampled. A sample of 246 stories was used for content analysis. Overall, the results satisfied the initial expectations of the study. The CNN emphasized the U.S. war efforts, citing primarily U.S. officials, while Al-Jazeera devoted more space to the war victims and to antiwar voices, citing primarily Arab non-official sources. Overall, these results suggest that the CNN had a more pro-war tendency, while Al-Jazeera reflected more antiwar stance. Thus, national interest became an important factor influencing media coverage of conflicts. Considering the overall findings, the CNN followed the interests of an attacking the country, whereas Al-Jazeera reflected the interests of an attacked the country. Thus, the former emphasized the combat U.S.-led construction of post-war Iraq, military operations and the war victims of coalition forces. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera devoted more space to antiwar demonstrations or responses, war effects on society, and the Iraqi casualties.

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APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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Revealed Knowledge and
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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DEDICATION

*To my dearest parents,
brothers, sister,
and brothers in Islam
who always wished me success in my life.*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The news media play an essential role in society by providing information to the public for both individual and collective decisions. It influences the public opinion. It can direct the public opinion towards a certain tendency. Moreover, "media has become a powerful player in international relations" (Ebo, 1997, p.43). In some countries, media is used by the government to spread and to enforce its own aims and objectives. For instance, Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that, the US media criticized the soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the interventions of the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, while at the same time they used "humanitarian" reasons to justify the US intervention in Vietnam and Grenada.

War coverage by the media plays a significant role in the process of forming people's attitude towards a war. The aim of this study is to investigate how the CNN and Al-Jazeera reflected their own national interests in their coverage of the Iraqi War. This will be done by exploring the features of the war which were emphasized by both news channels and the kind of information sources used by the two news channels. This study is influenced by the fact that reporters, as much as they may claim to be objective, mainly base their choice of sources on their preferences, and possibly individual biases, and this could slant the issues and change the truth. According to Rouner, the bias is a "perceived attribute of a news source whereby the individual news source, or the group the news represents, has a clear, vested interest in a cause or action relative to maintaining or changing the status quo" (Rouner, et al, 1999, p. 43). Of a similar importance to choosing sources is the feature of the images news subject of the highlighted and emphasized by certain news channels. For example, the coverage

media portrayed Vietnamese as "fanatical," "suicidal," "savage,"(Hallin, 1986, p. 158). Television coverage emphasized their terrorism against the civilians. Thus, this "had the important effect of putting them outside the political realm, making them appear more as criminals than as a political movement or rival government" (p. 158). Thus source selection and emphasizing subject's features must reflect equality and balance through equal coverage.

The present study will investigate the coverage of the Iraq war for the period between March 20 and May 1, 2003. This study has special importance because it tries to investigate the effects of national interest on the way news are projected by Al-Jazeera and the CNN, both of which participated in the coverage of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. In this regard, this study will be the first of its kind that will analyze the sources used by the two channels.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Media analysts and critics have pointed out that U.S. mainstream media coverage of wars and conflicts has been flawed due to problems such as journalists' ethnocentric biases, press control by military forces, heavy dependence on official sources, and lack of critical reporting (Downing, 1988; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Iyengar & Simon, 1994; Kellner, 1993; Mowlana, 1992; Pedelty, 1995; Reese & Buckalew, 1995). According to Pedelty (1995), the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, the Salvadoran government press office, and the Armed Forces Press Service were very important news sources for foreign reporters who were covering the clashes in El Salvador. The US newspapers, The New York Times and The Washington Post, were heavily dependent on U.S. officials in their coverage of the U.S.-Nicaragua conflict (Dickson, 1992). Furthermore, the greater part of news stories about

the clashes were reported by the staff of both papers, while less than a fourth of the stories were reported by the papers' correspondents based in Nicaragua or Latin America (p. 565).

Many researchers emphasize that in reporting international conflict or war the media highlights particular aspects of reality, particularly those that favor the official spokesmen (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 1991; Herman & Chomsky, 1998).

The new U.S. government has recognized Arab media as a source of anti-Americanism. Donald Rumsfeld, for example, accused Al-Jazeera station of encouraging Islamism by broadcasting beheadings of hostages in Iraq, a charge the station denies (<http://www.washtimes.com/community/20040506-085117-7996r>). In his State of the Union address in 2004, President George Bush focused on Arab television stations which he claimed were responsible for “hateful propaganda” against the U. S. According to the Administration, the stations distort news and show explicit images that produce anti-Americanism (<http://english.pravda.ru/main/2001/12/11/23390>). Thus, such phenomenon needs to be studied. Therefore, this study is important since it investigates the national interests advocated by both Al-Jazeera, (which represents the Arab world), and CNN, (which represents USA), by analyzing the sources of news in both channels and the features that had been emphasized within the period of the Iraq war in 2003.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The last few years were rich in wars, conflicts and violent events. Moreover in the last two years the United States of America waged wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. These atmospheres became a good condition for scholars to carry their studies. Indeed these wars pointed out the importance of mass media in wars.

As Dickson pointed out, the press tended to serve the U.S. government line in a foreign policy crisis (1994, p. 817). On the other hand, the Arab press was more critical of U.S. interests in the Gulf region. According to Mowlana et al. (1992), The United States was described as "leading a Western conspiracy to gain control of the economic and political climate of the Middle East for its own gains and prestige" (p. 170). Furthermore, the control of oil resources and the destroying of Arab unity were portrayed as the two most important goals behind the U.S. intervention. Moreover, to show a strong opposition to the war, the Jordanian press linked the Gulf crisis to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reflecting the stance of a national population largely composed of Palestinians (Mowlana et al., 1992, p. 171).

The researcher conducted such study due to the conflicting position between the Arab media and the U. S media in covering the Iraq war 2003. It also investigates how the Arab media, represented by Al-Jazeera, and the U.S media, represented by the CNN, cover the Iraq war and how they reflected their national interest in their coverage.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how The CNN and Al-Jazeera reflected their own national interests in their coverage of the Iraqi War. The study covers the Iraq war in the period between March 20 and May 1, 2003. This study has special importance because it tries to study and investigate the effects of national interest on the way news are projected. This is evidenced by Al-Jazeera and CNN in their coverage of the American-led invasion of Iraq. This will be done by analyzing both channels in the coverage of the conflict. In this regard the study will be the first of its kind, analyzing the sources of both channels.

The specific objectives of this study are:

The features of the war were emphasized in Al-Jazeera and CNN.

What sources have the two channels used?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study investigates:

RQ1 How did Al-Jazeera and the CNN cover the Iraq war?

RQ2 How did the news channels reflect their respective national interest?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study examines the media coverage of the Iraq war by Al-Jazeera and CNN during the period between March 20 and May 1, 2003. It focuses on how both channels represented their national interest in their coverage of the war. The study focuses on the news segments which were derived from the news archives of both Al-Jazeera and CNN.

LIMITATION

To answer the primary questions and keep the length of the study within reasonable limits, some of the limitations encountered in this thesis must be defined. There are two limitations that can be highlighted with regard to this study. The first limitation is time. The time of analysis is limited to the period between March 20 and May 1, 2003, which is the period of "active battle" beginning with the expiration of the U.S. ultimatum for Iraq and ending with President Bush's declaration of the end of "major battle." The second limitation is the number of media organizations studied, which is limited to Al-Jazeera and CNN.

DELIMITATIONS

During and after the 2003 Iraq war many articles and studies related to the war were published in newspapers, magazines and journals. Some of these articles analyze the war in general (Sabine Wilhelm: Covering the war in Iraq) while other studies were more specific

(Sean Aday: The Real War Will Never Get on Television). However, these articles did not examine the issue of national interest as presented in the media coverage of the Iraqi war. Therefore, this study investigates the issue of national interest in the coverage of the Iraqi war that was carried out by Al-Jazeera and CNN channels.

OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

Media content analysis is a specialized sub-set of content analysis, which is a well-established research methodology. Neuendorf describes content analysis as the "primary message-centered methodology" (Neuendorf, 2002, p.9) and cites studies by Riffe and Freitag (1997) and Yale & Gilly (1988) that reported that "In the field of mass communication research, content analysis has been the fastest-growing technique over the past 20 years or so." (Neuendorf, 2002, p.1)

Berger (1991) says: "content analysis... is a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular form of art" (p.25).

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate how CNN and Al-Jazeera reflected their own national interests in their coverage of the Iraq War, the content analysis as a research method is an appropriate concept to scan and code the selected stories from Al-Jazeera and CNN.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE TERMS USED

War efforts: Stories describing the process of combat and the function of weapons used in the war, dealing with weapons of mass destruction or interviews of American soldiers in the process and showing their heroism.

War effects: this contains stories describing the economic, environmental or other effects of war on society or any consequence of war on society.

Antiwar voice: This includes stories covering collective behaviors, voices, or opinions, which demonstrate antiwar or anti-United States attitudes. The assessment of U.S. strategic, diplomatic, and national interest in the war and of U.S.-led construction of post-war Iraq are addressed this category.

U.S. officials: This category includes President Bush, military officials, FBI, CIA, Congress leaders, and nameless government sources such as administration officials or authorities.

Arab officials: This contains officials of Arab nations.

National interests: A country's goals and ambitions whether economic, military, or cultural. The concept of national interest is often associated with political realists who wish to differentiate their policies from the "idealistic" policies that seek either to inject morality into foreign policy or promote solutions that rely on multilateral institutions that might weaken the independence of the state.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The study is organized into four chapters. These chapters are briefly described below.

Chapter One provides an introduction, background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the research and its questions, the significance of the study, its assumptions and limitations, brief methodology and finally an organizational outline of the study.

Chapter Two is devoted to the literature review on current research related to media coverage, national interest and mass media sources and the features that were emphasized.

Chapter Three describes in greater details the opposing positions of both CNN and Al-Jazeera.

Chapter Four presents the results of the study based on the content of news in both channels.

Chapter Five presents the conclusion along with the implications of the study for the future and recommendations for further research.

SUMMARY

This chapter includes the background of the study, its introduction and research problem, and objectives. This study provides a better understanding of how media reflected their national interest in their coverage of the Iraq war, and how national interest affects the way news is projected in the Al-Jazeera and the CNN.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into four main parts. The first one is the conceptual framework which shows how the media reflects its national interest through the sources it selects and the features it emphasizes. It also focuses on how the national interest affects the media war framing. The chapter also outlines the nature of two media organizations, namely Al-Jazeera and CNN, and how both channels frame the war.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Many studies have argued that national interest plays an essential role in affecting media accounts of international conflicts (Herman & Chomsky 1998; Lee & Yang, 1995; Yang, 2003). In many studies the media tend to impose self censorship when it comes to international conflict or war. The government position is that an “untrammeled media may stab the military in the back, and that unregulated images generate intrinsically anti-war effects. As a result states have taken considerable pain to manipulate the presentation of war” (Carruthers, 2000, p. 9).

Donald Rumsfeld referred to the stories coming out of Iraq as “slices” of news, suggesting that there are bound to be ambiguities and hidden elements. “You take every bit of information that you have from embeds, and you treat it as a tiny slice of the battlefield. You compare that to what you’re getting from the military briefings, Al-Jazeera, Iraq Television, and every other conceivable source and you weigh each piece depending on the source, and talk to your analysts. Then you drop it all in a big

bag, shake it up, and hope that what you come up with is some sort of clarity” (McClellan, 2003, p 1).

Story Emphasis

According to many studies, the media likes to follow the foreign policy of their governments in covering war between countries (see Bennett, 1990; Dickson, 1992, 1994). As Yang (2003) notes, journalists choose and prioritize the flow of international news events from the position of their country, finally framing these events on the basis of their own country's ultimate interest (p. 234). W. Lance Bennett (1990) developed the "indexing hypothesis", one of the theories used to explain why the media follow the foreign policies of their countries. As Bennett said: "mass media professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (p.106). Bennett (1994) has shown that news coverage of war and foreign policy are indexed to the limited range of elite opinions, at least in the short run. In his study Liebes (1992) discovered that journalists' treatment of their country's wars was different from the way they handled wars in other countries.

According to Liebes, Israeli television coverage of Intifadeh did not mention the numbers of Palestinian deaths and injuries and did interviews only with Israeli officers, while it excluded Palestinian officers. Moreover Israeli television labeled the Palestinian fighters with terms such as "face-covered," "lawbreakers," and "Molotov-cocktail throwers" (p.53). Israeli deaths or injuries were reported in detail with names and ages in Israeli television. Social and historical contexts were minimized in the Intifadah. On the other hand, "the coverage of American networks ABC and NBC of the Palestinian uprising provided a cumulative account of Palestinian victims and