

The Propaganda Model and The News Coverage of the War on Terror

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### Abstract

This thesis analyzes the media coverage of the War on Terror by comparing it to the Propaganda Model by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. It argues that the five filters presented by them; corporate funding, advertising, sourcing, flak, and fear, can be applied to the post-9/11 media coverage. Chomsky and Herman argue that the media reflects the preferences of the powerful elites, as media corporations are intent on making profit rather than producing qualitative news items. During the War on Terror, the media and the Bush administration had shared interests due to these commercial values of the media. This problem was reinforced by patriotism following the attacks of 9/11, a feeling shared by American journalists who, consequently, presented the news on the War on Terror from a pro-war perspective. Moreover, the news coverage led to the misunderstanding of crucial issues about the 2003 Iraq War, which could have been avoided if the media had been critical about the sources that were presented to them by the government.

**Key words:** Propaganda Model, War on Terror, media coverage, misperceptions.

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## Introduction

On September 11, 2001, the world was shocked by the news that two hijacked planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York, a third plane crashed into the Pentagon, and a fourth one crashed in Pennsylvania. Soon, the perpetrators of the attacks were identified as members of the Islamic extremist organization al Qaeda. The 9/11 attacks were more severe than previous terrorist attacks in the United States regarding casualties and destruction. As a consequence of this, President Bush adopted a strategy of preemption, which was “promoted as the only way to maintain the vitality of the universalist mission of the US, and security through regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq (Scott 579).” The US invaded Afghanistan directly after the attacks on the World Trade Center, in order to remove the Taliban from power, who provided a safe haven for al Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden and other members of the terrorist group. In 2003, the US government also started a war in Iraq, while many Americans were under the impression at that time that Iraq’s leader, Saddam Hussein, had links with Al Qaeda and possessed weapons of mass destruction.

After it became clear that the links between Hussein and al Qaeda and Iraq’s possession of WMDs were based on false allegations, many Americans felt that they were misled by the government: 60 percent of them had misperceptions about the 2003 Iraq War (“Misperceptions, the Media...”). The post-9/11 media coverage played a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and responses of Americans to 9/11 and Bush’s policy of preemptive war. Correspondingly, as Simon Cottle argues, it played “an integral part [in] the mediatized war on terror” and “an indispensable part of the struggle for the democratization of violence”(Cottle 44). After 9/11, the US media overwhelmingly supported a pro-war position. The mainstream media’s response was not only that many journalists took a subjective perspective on the war in their news items, but also that their interests and those of the Bush administration were aligned when it came to war in the Middle East.

This thesis examines how the media’s patriotism and commercial values shaped the post-9/11 coverage to the benefit of the Bush administration. The media directly worked together with the government to gain support for the War on Terror, and in the process the public was misled. In making this argument, this thesis builds on the Propaganda Model presented by Chomsky and Herman, which argues that media corporations are structurally interested in profit rather than qualitative news stories. The coverage of the War on Terror was censored by what Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman presented as the “five filters” in their book *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* from 1988.

These filters; corporate funding, advertising, sourcing, flak, and fear, distort mainstream media reporting, leading in this case to the news being framed from a pro-war perspective.

The method that I have used to examine the media coverage of the War on Terror is the qualitative research method. I used this method to analyze how the media in the United States works in general, and how the attacks of 9/11 influenced the media coverage during the War on Terror in an exceptional way. In order to examine the shared interests of the media and the government, I analyzed the role of the media in the US by comparing the liberalist-pluralist approach to the Marxist approach. Then, I applied the news coverage of the War on Terror to the five filters of Chomsky and Herman's Propaganda Model. After that, I examined the reasons for the climate of support for the War on Terror and the background of the US foreign policy after 9/11. Finally, I analyzed the media's contribution to the misunderstanding of issues on the War on Terror. Drawing on a variety of scholarly materials on this subject, the analysis of these different perspectives on the media coverage of the War on Terror provided me with a deeper insight into that media coverage.

This thesis contributes to the academic field, because it analyzes the media's role in times of crisis. Originally, the media is considered to function as a watchdog in the United States; its purpose is to be critical about the government and inform the people accurately. The media in the US does not always function the way it should, as the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index shows. This index compares a nation's press freedom to other countries, and the US scores relatively low compared to other western democracies. In 2003, the US was in 31<sup>st</sup> position, lower than for example Benin, Uruguay, and South America. Other democracies like Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany scored higher in the Press Freedom Index. The aftermath of 9/11 showed that the media and the government had similar interests to promote the War on Terror, which was undemocratic. The pro-war perspective of the media caused misperceptions, and the role of the media should have been to inform Americans more adequately to avoid the misunderstanding of crucial issues. Therefore, this research is relevant, as it helps the readers understand the impact that a crisis like 9/11 has had on the interplay between media, politics, and public opinion.

Extensive research has been carried out that examines the media coverage after 9/11. The Propaganda Model, however, has not received much attention from media scholars (Corner 371). Jeffery Klaehn even argues that the model is "generally excluded from scholarly debates on patterns of media behavior"(147). Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* offers a set of case examples which include the legality of the Vietnam War, and the favorable media coverage of elections in El Salvador and Guatemala.

However, Chomsky and Herman themselves have not applied the model to understanding media coverage after 9/11. In examining media coverage and applying the model developed by Chomsky and Herman, this thesis contributes a crucial perspective to current scholarship, while at the same time it builds upon the work of Chomsky and Herman.

### Media Theories

Substantial research has been carried out on the effect of the media on the public and the role of the media in society. Many theories have been developed on how the media operates in society: for example, the Agenda Setting Theory, the Hypodermic Needle Theory, and the Cultivation Theory. Because of limitations in time and space, this thesis focuses on the contrast between the Marxist approach of the media and the Liberal-pluralist approach only.

The liberal-pluralist approach of the media describes an ideal situation in which the media serves as a watchdog of the government, whereas the Marxist approach argues that the media is profit-based and its content is determined by powerful elites. The Marxist debate reflects the nature of a class-based society; laws and policies are formed to “maintain ruling-class domination” and therefore reflect “social inequality in media representations” (Mullen 674). This is also the primary focus that Chomsky and Herman take in their Propaganda Model. Structurally, corporate ownership of the media makes the media prioritize commercial values, therefore the media is dependent on funding and advertising.

The liberal-pluralist theory of the media, on the other hand, holds that the media functions as the fourth estate, and this theory therefore argues that the media is part of the US system of checks and balances. Moreover, the theory emphasizes the right of free speech, which encourages both profit and non-profit organizations to debate about issues. The liberal-pluralist approach of the media contains the notion of a “marketplace of ideas” in society; the public is free to choose between different opinions and policies, and consequently, the media coverage reflects the preferences that the public has (qtd. in Mullen 647). This conforms to the capitalist idea of society in Liberal democracies; the role of the government is limited and the market and the private sector play a more prominent role (Hallin and Mancini 228). However, this ideology ignores relations of power and other impediments on mass communication. It claims that the media is objective and professional, but it neglects that the market itself can also censor the media (Karppinen 8). The media therefore often does not function as a watchdog, as it does not always critically inform citizens about events taking place outside the United States, nor does it represent an objective account of events within the

US. A 2011 study by James Curran showed that the American media underperformed compared with European countries. The media in the US covered less news about the rest of the world, and paid low attention to “hard” news in general (60). This caused the public to be more ignorant about the world and public life (Curran et al. 60). Therefore, the theory is describing an ideal situation, but not the reality in which the media works in the United States.

Chomsky and Herman’s Propaganda Model has been criticized and it received minimal attention from media scholars. The Propaganda Model was dismissed as a “conspiracy theory” and it was criticized for its “overly deterministic view of media behavior” (Klaehn 147). Chomsky already anticipated this reaction to their work, as it goes against the interests of the powerful elites, which actually confirms the Propaganda Model (qtd. in Klaehn 169). Chomsky and Herman also refute the idea that the Propaganda Model is a conspiracy theory, because the media should be considered as a “free market with the results largely the outcome of the workings of market forces” (qtd. in Lukin 100). Another critic, Eli Lehrer, former editor of *American Enterprise*, claimed that the Propaganda Model is not accurate, stating that the disagreements between papers like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* show that the media do not express one sided viewpoints. Professor Daniel Hallin expressed the same critique, as he stated that the model does not take into account media professionalism and objectivism (Herman 105). The Propaganda Model does, however, state that media institutions have some limited autonomy, and allow for some dissent and alternative viewpoints, but this dissent is kept within boundaries so that it does not conflict with the “domination of the official agenda” (Chomsky and Herman 12).

The Propaganda Model can be applied to the media in the United States, as the media tends to take the side of the dominant party, which causes the news to be biased. This political polarization and the media bias, especially during times of crisis, results in misunderstanding of critical issues, and the bias has a significant impact on elections (Park 2). Extensive research has been carried out on the media bias in the US, but scholars do not agree on whether the US’ news slants to the left or right of the center. Some have argued that there is a liberal bias, like Tim Groseclose and Jeff Milyo in 2005, and Jim A. Kuypers in 2002. Others have claimed that the media has a conservative bias, like Eric Alterman in 2003 and Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon in 1990. The reason why scholars disagree is that the news outlets often change their position on issues, as the media chooses the side of the most powerful sources (Kellner 135). A 2010 study by David M. Entman shows that the slant shifts over time and this “results from the interaction of real world developments, cultural norms, and journalistic decision rules with the sometimes proficient and other times maladroit efforts of

competing elites to manage the news” (398). Another study by Arvind Diddi, Frederick Fico, and Geri Alunit Zeldes confirmed that the slant shifts, as it showed that ABC, NBS, and CBS changed the party of their favor during the elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008. The news coverage of ABC for example, was more favorable about the Republican party in 2000, whereas the channel favored the Democrats during the 2004 elections (172).

Many scholars do agree, however, that journalists’ individual ideology explains this bias. They claim that reporters’ voting habits explain the media bias (Entman 394). For example; Elaine Povich found that only seven percent of Washington reporters voted for the Republican Party during the 1992 elections, whereas 37 percent of Americans in general voted for the Republicans represented by George W. Bush (Groseclose and Milyo 1193). Other studies by Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter in 1986 and Weaver and Wilhoit in 1996 have showed similar results during earlier campaigns, and they argue that this explained a liberal bias at that time (Groseclose and Milyo 1193).

The media coverage after 9/11 made clear that the media did not work according to the liberal-pluralist media theory. In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, journalists were criticized for being too trustful on the government, and did not further investigate the sources that were presented to them. Lance Bennett claims that the media chooses the side of the most powerful sources; in the case of post-9/11 these were the conservatives, who were the dominant party then (Kellner 135). They also argue that the oppositional party did not offer a wide range of alternative viewpoints, so that the dominant party determined the debate (135).

#### The Five Filters Applied to Media Coverage After 9/11

The mainstream media contributed to America’s widespread support for the War on Terror, especially during the controversial Iraq war. Even though there is an idea that the media works independently from the government, the media has a history of supporting foreign wars (DiMaggio 40). The widespread public support for the Spanish-American war in 1898 was fueled by cartoons that were printed in the media. These cartoons mocked President McKinley for his indecisiveness and promoted military aid of the Philippines in their fight against Spain. Also, the US blamed Vietnam to have attacked the United States during the incident at the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, and it was the main reason for declaring the war on Vietnam. It was later discovered that it had been started by the Americans. However, the media published the government’s side of the story even though they had information that the US started the attack (DiMaggio 40).



Since the Vietnam war, the media played an important role to gain public support for military intervention. When the American government lost the support of the people for the Vietnam war, the war was practically over, because so many people opposed the war due to its the negative portrayal by the media. Without the support of American citizens, the Bush administration would not have been able to start the war in Terror.

### Chomsky and Herman's Five Filters

The Propaganda Model by Chomsky and Herman in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* argues that there news items are filtered by five filters before being published (11). Firstly, news has to be adapted to the will of large media conglomerates who own the companies. Secondly, proposed news items are determined by the interests of the advertisers; the funders. Thirdly, journalists are dependent on information sources, especially the government, that are tended to be taken as credible sources which makes further research unnecessary. Fourthly, "Flak", which is defined by Chomsky and Herman as negative reactions to statements in the media which are often expressed by business organizations. The established power tries to dispute people or organizations who disagree with their point of view in order to benefit from it. Lastly, the dominant ideology in a country also serves as a filter of news items. In the original Propaganda Model this was the fear of communism, but Chomsky and Herman adapted to model to contemporary American society, this filter is referred to as "fear", groups or phenomena that pose a, sometimes exaggerated, sense of threat. Nearly all news items regarding the Iraq war were filtered by these elements, which meant that the media was aligned with the US government in trying to win the support of the public for the War on Terror.

### Ownership and Funding

The war in Iraq was supported by owners of giant media conglomerates, this resulted in a majority of news items that were framed from a pro-war perspective. According to Anthony DiMaggio, the pro-war framing of mass media is the result of the design of media institutions (41). Media corporations have to promote the interests of economic and political elites, which is also referred to as the "political economy of the mass media" by Chomsky and Herman (DiMaggio 41)." The most influential media conglomerates are in the hands of the largest profit-based companies in the world, this results in the aim of the media to make as much profit as possible, regardless of their integrity. The Telecommunication Act of 1996 allowed for media-cross-ownership. According to the Federal Communications Commission,

the aim of the act was to deregulate the broadcasting and telecommunications market. As a result of this law, only six companies, Rupert Murdoch's news Corporation, Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, CBS and Comcast, control 90 percent of the media (Chomsky and Herman 13). These media conglomerates wanted to keep the government at their side, as they benefited from deregulations. The US military control in Iraq would also result in US media companies having a better position in Middle-East markets (Kumar 51). NBC, for example, was owned by General Electric during the War on Terror, a company that had interests in the Middle East. The company signed a 2.7 billion dollar contract to rebuilt Iraq after the war by providing the country with multi-fuel gas turbines (Reichelt par. 6). The easy access to petroleum resources in Iraq puts the US in a powerful position, according to Chomsky: "The profits from that must flow primarily to the right pockets, that is, US and secondarily UK energy corporations" ("Interview on the War in Iraq..."). Also, one of Viacom's largest stockholders is Westinghouse Electric, a company that is a defense contractor, and therefore directly profits from war. The Bush administration even went as far as to meet with CEOs of Viacom, Disney, MGM and others to discuss how these companies could contribute to the government's anti-terrorism strategy (Kumar 51). Therefore, many large media corporations had the same interests as the government and therefore showed a one-sided viewpoint on the war.

### Sourcing

Media corporations have tried to lower their costs, and thereby relied more heavily on cheaper or even free sources of information (Kumar 52). This resulted in reporters not accurately enough investigating the sources that were presented to them and relying too heavily on the government for sources. The main sources of cheap information are corporate public relations departments and the government (Kumar 52). These corporate public relations were often involved in military business. For example; a study by Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) discovered that 76 percent of the sources of ABC World News Tonight, CBS evening News, and NBC Nightly News in the month of October 2003 were current or former government or military officials (Whiten par. 3). These military and government officials manipulated the media to cover the war in a positive way, and influenced the news agenda. Research by Thomas B. Christie has concluded that there was a relationship between The White House and the media agendas on the issues terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the assembly of a coalition during a period of high public support for the War in Iraq (530). Also, an investigation by *New York Times* concluded that the Pentagon had meetings with news analysts; they were presented with special news and in

return the Pentagon asked them to speak favorably about the war in Iraq. Most of these analysts had a connection to military contractors that have interests in the war policies (Barstow par. 4). Bush's press secretary Scott McClellan published a book in 2008 in which he confessed that he had systematically passed lies to the media and that his superiors told him to do so. He confirmed that "the national press corps was probably too deferential to the White House, especially on the subject of the war in Iraq" (McClellan 156).

The coverage at the site of the Iraq war was manipulated through embedded journalism, which also made reporters dependent on the government for sources. Only a select group of reporters were allowed by the government to travel to war zones secured by the military once they had signed a contract that they would not report information that would harm unit positions, future missions, and classified weapons. Every item that they reported first had to be censored before it could be published. This was a direct collaboration between press and government, which hindered the right of free speech and democracy. Research by Michael Pfau that compared embedded and non-embedded reports from Iraq concluded that embedded journalism was more positive about the military, it portrayed the military personnel more favorably, and it used episodic frames more often. This "elicited somewhat more positive relational cues" (468). The Pentagon claimed that there were 750 embedded journalists in Iraq in 2003, which decreased when it became clear to media outlets that the war would not be over as quickly as they expected. Financial motives played a large role according to Pentagon's Whitman: "It was very costly and the decision [to reduce embeds] was a resource-driven decision to a large degree" (Vaina par. 9). Therefore, the media's profit-based structure also accounts for the dependence on cheap sources. The media was dependent on sources from government or military officials, at home as well as in the field in Iraq, which also led to the highly supportive position of the media.

### Flak

After 9/11, there was a climate of support for the War on Terror, which resulted in flak and self-censorship. There was a sense of misplaced patriotism on some news channels, especially Fox News, as critique on Bush and the US government could not be allowed, since it would threaten the unity of the country. "Numerous pundits and commentators have demonstrated strong skepticism of anti-war views throughout the Iraq war, as a "Fox Effect (DiMaggio 140)."" Fox broadcast patriotic news messages and opponents of the war were criticized. Neal Cavuto, anchor of Fox News, for example, directed a message to "those who opposed the liberation of Iraq" saying that "you were sickening then, you are sickening now"

(Rutenberg par. 17). Dissenters of Bush's anti-war strategy were intimidated by storms of protest, like Peter Arnett, who worked for NBS and reported the war from Baghdad. He granted an interview to Iraqi TV where he openly criticized the war. His remarks were contested by many Americans, which is why some people threatened him and sent hate mails. NBS defended him at first, but later that same day they fired him and said that "It was wrong for Mr. Arnett to grant an interview with state-controlled Iraqi TV, especially at a time of war and it was wrong for him to discuss his personal observations and opinions" ("National Geographic Fires Peter Arnett" par. 5). Peter Donahue's television show Donahue on MSNBC was also cancelled as a result of his opposition to the Iraq war (Mirkinson par.1).

Stephen Kull claims that many people in the media business also felt that it was not their place to criticize the war and even that they should take a pro-war stance (593). Dan Rather from CBS admitted that his network actively supported the war: "Look, I'm an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win. .... Now, I can't and don't argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced (qtd. in Kull et al. 593)." The media was broadcasting a highly supportive message for the war in Iraq, and there was little dissent presented to Americans. Research by FAIR on 393 on-camera sources on nightly news on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS, discovered that during one week before Collin Powell's presentation at the United Nations Security Council and one week after, only 3 sources displayed anti-war messages (Rendall par. 3). "show specifically that television news powerfully influences which problems viewers regard as the nation's most serious (qtd in DiMaggio 9)". The majority of the news business benefitted from taking a pro-war stance, their view on the war was therefore also shown in the news, which resulted in a climate of support for the war in Iraq.

Many reporters were also afraid to criticize the Bush administration and felt under pressure by the media corporations, and therefore applied self-censorship. Fox News was the network that promoted the war the most actively. Their reaction to the pressure of media conglomerates and the government was to practice self-censorship: reporters censor their work because they fear negative responses from media owners and the government. Christiane Amanpour, top-reporter at CNN, admitted that she was "intimidated" by the Bush administration and Fox News, stating that "they put a climate of fear and self-censorship" ("CNN's Self-Censorship"). Another CNN reporter, Jessica Yellin, also claimed that "the press corps was under enormous pressure from corporate executives, to make sure that this was a war presented in a way that was consisted with the patriotic fever in the nation and the

president's high approval ratings" (Rothschild par. 4). Dan Rather also claimed that "the media engaged in "self-censorship" and that he was scared to be critical of the government after 9/11. He said it was "patriotism run amok" (Engel par. 1).

### Fear

The discourse of fear was also an important filter in the coverage of the Iraq war. Fear was used by the media to draw attention to the war. The media, especially television, elevates levels of fear and risk (Huddy et al. 264), which attracts people because they see it as a form of entertainment (Cantor 151). The disaster news of the 9/11 attacks stimulated the support for the Bush administration. According to Pantti, "News media provide an interpretive framework that allows subjective emotions to become public aspirations and to lead to collective moral or political action (223)." So, news media shows people with which emotions they have to respond to the event, but also which moral action they should take (Pantti 223). In the case of 9/11, the coverage of the disaster led US citizens to unite, and collectively support president Bush and his counterterrorism strategy, also by the media.

In conclusion, Chomsky and Herman's five filters are can indeed be applied to the media coverage after 9/11. Media outlets were owned by only six companies that represented the interests of the government because of their dependency on profit. The media was also reliant on the government for their sources, which were not properly investigated. There was a climate of support for the War on Terror, and many journalists applied self-censorship because of the pressure from the government and media outlets to take a pro-war stance. Also, the media benefitted from the fear of the public, as people generally find it entertaining. Therefore, the media coverage after 9/11 confirms the Propaganda Model.

### US Foreign Policy After 9/11: The War on Terror

The widespread support for the US government after the attacks of 9/11 resulted in support for the War on Terror by both the American public and the media. Directly after the attacks, the Presidents' approval rates increased to 90% ("Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush"). 88% approved of Bush's way of dealing with terrorism, and 72% supported military action (Huddy et al. 270). The main reason for support for Bush's foreign policy was the concern of future attacks. Americans rank acts of terrorism as the primary challenge to national security (Herron and Jenkins-Smith 32). A 2008 study by Herron and Jenkins-Smith evaluated the perceived threat that terrorism posed in the view of American citizens directly after the 9/11 attacks until 2007. Americans had to rank the threat of terrorism on a scale of 1 to 10; directly after 9/11 they ranked it almost as a 9, and in 2003 the

perceived threat had slightly decreased, but the public still gave it a 7 (32). US citizens perceived the threat of future attacks as very high, which explains why they supported military intervention. If Americans' dominant reaction to 9/11 would have been fear, they would have wanted to avoid a foreign policy with military action in the Middle-East. Leonie Huddy confirms this, as she argues that reactions of fear result in "less clear information processing, overestimation of risk, and greater risk aversion" (Huddy et al. 274). Their research therefore shows that fear was not the main reaction to the attacks of 9/11. The concern about attacks in the future was more prevalent than fear, because the majority of Americans approved of Bush' confrontational anti-terrorism strategy (274).

Leaders have used this perceived threat of terrorism to gain support from its citizens for policies that would otherwise not be approved of. According to Robert Douglas, "governments may have political reasons for deliberately exaggerating the threat, and a mixture of availability, the seduction of worst- case scenarios, and institutional cultures may also lead governments astray (25)". The Bush administration adopted controversial new laws in order to combat terrorism. The PATRIOT act, adopted directly after 9/11, is a law that enabled the government to strengthen security control. The law is regarded as controversial as it is argued that it went too far and invade the privacy of American citizens (Baker par. 1). Also, the Homeland Security Act was adopted, which created the Department of Homeland Security, a new department that reorganized the government and has the primary function to protect the United States. However, this reorganization is criticized for its bureaucracy and secrecy. As Christopher Cooper, who is a national political correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, argues; "Instead of steam lining Washington's ability to perform, the department clogged it up with new layers of bureaucracy and stovepipes of information" (15). As Norman Solomon, journalist and longtime associate of the media watch group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) argues: "After 9/11, the label of terrorism quickly became so elastic that it could be stretched to suit the administration's preferences at any time" (Solomon 14).

### Afghanistan

Directly after the 9/11 attacks, the US invaded Afghanistan in order to fight the Taliban that harbored the terrorists who accomplished in the planning of 9/11. Bush demanded the Taliban to hand Osama Bin Laden over to the United States. When the Taliban refused to hand over Bin Laden and other terrorists, the United States and the United Kingdom started Operation Enduring Freedom on October 2001, later joined by other forces. They did not use regular ground troops, but instead used special forces to tackle the Taliban. In a relatively short time, the US succeeded in tackling the Taliban. In 2003, the US claimed

that they had killed approximately 3000 al Qaeda members (Tan 24). However, regular warlords came to power, which threatened the central government installed by the US and the unity of Afghanistan. The government in Kabul was unable to maintain control over the country, which gave the Taliban opportunities to regroup and gain back their power. The majority of Americans approved, and still approves, of the war in Afghanistan. In 2011, 57 percent thinks that the United States made the right decision to invade Afghanistan. This is because the attack on Afghanistan was a direct reaction to the attacks of 9/11, and was therefore justified for the majority of Americans (Tan 22).

### Iraq

The American government used 9/11 as a motive for invading Iraq in 2003. They claimed that al Qaeda had bonds with Saddam Hussein and therefore Hussein should be brought to justice. As Bush states in his speech on September 21, 2001: “Terror, unanswered, can not only bring down buildings, it can threaten the stability of legitimate governments. And you know what - we're not going to allow it.” However, the US government did not only start the war to fight terrorism; it tried to consolidate its own interests and legitimacy, as plans to start a war in the Middle-East existed long before the attacks of 9/11. In September 2000, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), an American think-tank that focused on US foreign policy, released the document “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century”, which stated that America’s foreign policy of the twenty-first century was going to be focused on intervention in the Middle-East. A passage in the document stated: “We cannot allow North Korea, Iran, Iraq or similar states to undermine American leadership, intimidate American allies or threaten the American homeland itself. The blessings of the American peace, purchased at fearful cost and a century of effort, should not be so trivially squandered (75).” The report also stated that “some catastrophic or catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor” was necessary to start those wars in the Gulf Region (51). Also, in 1998, the PNAC already wrote a letter to the President Clinton suggesting the strategy to attack Iraq and the Hussein regime, which “should aim, above all, at the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime from power” (Dolan and Cohen 44). Therefore, the initial reaction the attacks was Bush trying to find links between Hussein and al Qaeda.

The government accused Mohammed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, to have bonds with the Hussein regime. Vice-President Dick Cheney stated during his Meeting the Press appearance on December 9, 2001: “It's been pretty well confirmed that [Mohamed Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in Czechoslovakia last April, several months before the attack.” This resulted in almost 70

percent of Americans believing that Saddam was involved in the 9/11 attacks. However, a briefing by the CIA the day before Cheney's Meeting the Press appearance, concluded that Atta never travelled to the Czech Republic. The government was therefore well-informed that the allegations were false, but still provided the public with incorrect information.

In order to promote the War on Terror, Bush created several institutions that were responsible for the propaganda. Propaganda items are defined as "interest-linked communications" but also as "a weapon to be exploited in the service of some system of power (Miller and Sabir 76)." In 2002, Bush created the Office of Global Communications (OGC), which was an institution that was created "to formulate and coordinate messages to foreign audiences". It was based on the Coalition Information Centers (CIC) that drew upon propaganda expertise of the British government. The OGC was the institution that presented the false information on Saddam Hussein (Miller and Sabir 80). Journalist Ron Suskind even goes as far by claiming in his book *The Way of the World* that the White House pursued the CIA to forge a letter from General Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti to Saddam Hussein discussing the training in Iraq of Mohammed Atta (Allen par. 7).

NSA employee Collin Powell also provided UN delegates with incorrect information on Hussein-al Qaeda links during his speech at the United Nations Security Council as well. He provided the delegates with false information of the link between Hussein and al Qaeda by arguing that Iraq harbored terrorists. He supported the claim by showing photos of poison and explosives at a training camp in the North of Iraq, which was supposed to be operated by al Qaeda. A 2004 report by the Iraq Survey Group, however, concluded that these allegations were false. Powell commented on this new-found information by saying that; "There were some people in the intelligence community who knew at that time that some of these sources were not good, and shouldn't be relied upon, and they didn't speak up. That devastated me" ("Colin Powell on Iraq...").

The US government has misled to public before to gain support for foreign policies and domestic policies that would otherwise not be supported. The Tonkin gulf incident is another incident of the government twisting facts to their own advantage. President Johnson already had plans to start a war in Vietnam, and the two attacks on a US submarine in the Tonkin gulf were an opportunity to legitimize this. However, a 2005 report by the National Security Agency demonstrated that the first attack was provoked by the Americans, and the second attack had never occurred. Also, the Iran-Contra scandal showed that the US has kept information from the public before the War on Terror as well. The Reagan administration secretly provided Nicaraguan contra rebels with money that they obtained by selling weapons



to Iran. There was strong opposition against the aid of the contra rebels in Nicaragua, and the Boland amendment prohibited the government to provide them with military aid. The government used the National Security Council to by-pass these laws and to supply the Nicaraguan rebels with military aid. The main operatives of the NSC were also responsible for the secret shipment of arms to Iran.

#### Consequences of the Iraq War

The war in Iraq was a low point in the history of the United States. The country was destabilized by the war that the US began, and this provided ISIS, a new terrorist group, with fertile grounds. Insurgents opposed the occupying forces and the new government that the US installed. Al-Maliki, Hussein's predecessor, gave Shias more privileges than Sunnis, which caused conflicts between the groups. Even though the civil armed conflict was not over, the US withdrew in 2011. Nearly 5000 Americans died in the war, and it is estimated that almost 100.000 Iraqis died a violent death as a result of the war. The war cost about 3 trillion dollar, and many Americans wonder if that cost was worth the fight (Tan 100).

#### Misperceptions on the Iraq War

The media bias after 9/11 resulted in the misunderstanding of crucial information about the War on Terror. Souneil Park, Seungwoo Kang, Sangyoung Chung, and Junehwa Sung developed a theory that analyzes the news production process of media bias. They claimed that fact selection, writing style and presentation style contribute to media bias (Park et al. 2). A study by PIPA confirmed the media bias; 60 percent of Americans had more than 1 misperception on the war in Iraq. The three misperceptions that they studied were: 1) that al Qaeda had links with Hussein; 2) that Iraq possessed WMDs; and 3) that the rest of the world supported the war in Iraq ("Misperceptions, the Media..."). Also, a Pew Research poll from 2002, showed that 66 percent of Americans believed that Hussein was directly involved in the attacks of 9/11 (Zeller par. 3). Therefore, the media did not do its job during the War on Terror because it did not critically challenge the government's perspective on the war and ask enough questions, which led to the widespread support for the Iraq War.

The omission of important information caused US citizens to be misinformed. The news often focused on probabilities, for example, it gave widespread attention to the possibility of a link between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. However, when these allegations were refuted, many news outlets did not present that news. In 2003, *Newsweek* published an article on Hussein Kamel al-Majid, Iraqi weapons chief and brother-in-law of Saddam Hussein. Reporter John Barry obtained a transcript which stated that Kamel had confirmed in

1995, a year before his death, that Iraq had destroyed its WMDs and missiles (“Top Iraqi Defector...”). This information seriously contradicted Bush’s allegations that Iraq possessed chemical or biological weapons, but the story was not published by major news outlets (Solomon par. 7). Also, *the Observer*, an English newspaper, broke the story that the NSA had spied on UN officials before the Iraq war had begun, but this story was ignored by the majority of American news outlets as well (Solomon par. 13). The media ignored the history of Hussein and the United States as well. Hussein was an ally of the United States, and the US provided Iraq with chemical weapons in the 1980s, but the media did not pay attention to this story, with a few exceptions like *the Washington Post* (Kumar 59). Crucial information that citizens needed in order to form a well-informed opinion on the war was therefore omitted.

The rhetoric of the Bush administration contributed to misperceptions and the media did not offer enough alternative viewpoints. According to Norman Solomon, many reporters were not skeptical enough and went along with the images of terrorism that the Bush administration’s rhetoric provided (14). The media coverage used the images of the enemy and ideals of America in the way that they were represented by the Bush administration. Bush’s rhetoric focused on the ideals of freedom and democracy, which were represented as good, whereas terrorists were portrayed as evil (Kellner 137). Bush used certain frames in his speeches to “construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner” (Kuypers 8). The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were portrayed as barbarians who were less civilized than Americans. Bush claimed in a speech on September 21, 2001 that “They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other”. He did not focus on individual Americans but on the collective concept of freedom (Merskin 378). Countries in the Middle-East like Afghanistan and Iraq were labeled by Bush as the “axis of evil”, whereas the US was described as “the brightest beacon of freedom”. As Merskin argues; “the carefully selected words in President Bush's speech were grounded in powerful connections to universal notions of enmity” (380). The problem of terrorism was personified, as Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were the embodiment of evil and needed to be punished for their crimes. Execution without any evidence, and even torture, was more than legitimized. The US public supported this: in a *Washington Post* poll of December 16, 2014, 58 percent of respondents state that torture of suspected terrorists was justified after 9/11 (“Majority Says CIA Harsh...”). However, the government as well as the media only focused on who committed the attacks of 9/11, but never really raised the question why America was attacked (Solomon 14). In Bush’s “Address to the Nation” on September 20, 2001 he only

raises the question who was responsible for the attacks: “Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking, “Who attacked our country?”” Therefore, the media did not ask enough questions and kept a passive role in the post-9/11 coverage, which led to a one-sided view of the crisis.

Also, the Bush administration often repeated fallacies and indirectly linked 9/11 with Iraq/Hussein, leading to misperceptions that were not challenged by the media. Bush never explicitly confirmed that the US had found evidence of a relationship between al Qaeda and the Hussein regime, instead he continually stated that “The Hussein regime has longstanding and continuing ties to terrorist groups, and there are al Qaeda terrorists inside Iraq.” These assertions do not prove anything, but by repeating it, American citizens started to believe that there was actual proof of the link. Bush also connected September 11 to Iraq by mentioning the two in one paragraph or even one sentence. A 2005 study by Gershkoff and Kushner showed that of the 13 presidential speeches from September 12, 2002 to May 2003, 12 speeches mentioned Iraq and 9/11 in the same paragraph, and in 10 speeches the two words were in the same sentence (527). The biased media coverage of the War on Terror consequently resulted in misperceptions, because in June 2003, 52 percent of Americans believed that the US had found evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda (“Many Americans Unaware...”). Also, even when the news intensively stated that there were no chemical or biological weapons found in Iraq in June 2003, 34 percent of Americans still believed that these WMDs had been found, and 7 percent was unsure about it (“Many Americans Unaware...”).

#### Consequences of Misperceptions Regarding the War on Terror

Bush’ accusations of Saddam Hussein’s links with al Qaeda were proven wrong, which caused the US government to lose its credibility. A 2008 Gallup poll demonstrated that 53 percent of American believed that the Bush administration deliberately misled the public (“Iraq”). In a report of the 9/11 commission that appeared in 2004, it was revealed that Saddam Hussein had no relations with the terrorist group, and he did not possess nuclear weapons either. In the Gallup poll on the Iraq war, 57 percent of the respondents stated that it was a mistake to send troops to Iraq. Also, approval rates of President Bush staggered from 90 percent directly after 9/11, to only 34 percent at the end of his presidency in 2009 (“Presidential Approval Rates”). Misperceptions were not the only reason for the widespread support of the Iraq war, but they did play a crucial role. As Steven Kull from the Program on International Policy (PIPA) argues; “It is more likely that it is one key factor that interacted with the desire to rally around the President and the troops. However, it does appear that it

would have been significantly more difficult for the President to elicit and maintain support for the decision to go to war if the public had not held such misperceptions” (597).

### Conclusion

The interests of the US government and the media were indeed aligned during the War on Terror, as Chomsky and Herman’s five filters; ownership, funding, sourcing, flak, and fear, can be applied to the media coverage. The six media corporations that control 90 percent of the media industry took a pro-war stance and this affected the news coverage of the War on Terror. The media was also dependent on military and government officials for their sources, which caused it to be biased. Journalists relied too often on only one source, and did not investigate their story properly. Because of that, many Americans misunderstood the information that the Bush administration provided on Saddam Hussein’s link to 9/11 and Iraq’s possession of WMDs. Some journalists who opposed the war were fired, and the media criticized media personalities who did not support the government during the War on Terror. The media adapted to the fear of Americans and journalists were put under intense pressure to produce positive news messages.

The War on Terror, with emphasis on Iraq, would not have been met with this much support if the media had not assisted the government in spreading positive news items about the war. Of course, the main reaction of Americans to the attacks of 9/11 was to support the government and a foreign policy that included military action overseas. However, the war in Iraq was framed from the perspective of the government, as it was not directly connected to 9/11. The US government had plans to attack the Saddam Hussein regime long before the attacks had taken place, and they desperately tried to link Hussein to al Qaeda, even though they were using false information.

It remains the duty of the media to serve as a watchdog and provide Americans with truthful information about the government and its plans. The “political economy of mass media” leads therefore to censorship and practices that should not happen in a democracy. The media bias and the news coverage of the War on Terror show that the US seriously needs to change their media institutions because the news coverage is structurally undemocratic. Post-9/11 news coverage should therefore be regarded as a warning to both the government and the media that journalists have to remain neutral and not lose their integrity. Chomsky offers a solution to challenge the Propaganda Model, namely that individuals need to remain critical and skeptical about what they read: “It’s got to get to the point where it’s like a reflex

to read the first page of the L.A. Times and to count the lies and distortions and to put it into some sort of rational framework” (qtd. in Klaehn 172).

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