

Taking on a Complicated Process

My research project for University Writing challenged me academically more than any other previous research assignment in high school. I was not expecting to learn nearly as much as I did in relation to seeking out sources and using available library resources. I grew significantly as a writer by contributing to an area of scholarship: war journalism. I became engrossed in this topic for months. However, I now understand I still only scratched the surface in my research, focusing on a particular range of issues. My research question and argument focused on the interaction between the U.S. government, media, and public during two wars, the civil war in El Salvador and the occupation of Iraq.

During high school, my research strategies were vastly different from the ones I developed this year. I would determine a vague topic, search my library's database to find five or six books to create a simple, easy to support argument, and write my paper from there. This project completely altered my idea of a thesis as I realized the entire point of an argument is not to be safe and say what has already been said but to argue an idea that will make others think about or want to dispute it. In order to reach this goal, I had to embrace the complexity of my research. There were so many directions I could take and so many issues to choose from. During my process, I changed my project question twice and reworked my argument late in my progression, which was both terrifying and frustrating for a writer who always took the safe route.

My original project question reflected my weaknesses. It asked whether the U.S. government manipulated the media during war. It was likely the broadest question I could have asked and I remember writing it because it seemed guaranteed to lead me to a straightforward argument. After this point, my research took a turn. I started off solely researching the conflict in El Salvador and I continued to focus on historical data such as major events reported by newspapers

and accounts from journalists about what it was like to be in the field. As I read these scholarly articles and newspaper clips, I became fascinated by the dynamic interaction between authority figures, especially government officials, and the media. I was intrigued by how one influenced the other and vice versa and how they seemed to compete for the public's attention.

I then focused heavily on authority itself and my method source for a working draft was a psychology paper on authority figures. I altered my project question and argument to key in on public distrust of government officials especially since the Watergate scandal. However, this argument had blatant logical flaws and my draft still lacked a strong connection between the civil war in El Salvador and the war in Iraq. By then, I had already been researching and writing for weeks. Through workshops in Gelman Library, I learned how to use ArticlesPlus and Google Scholar to find scholarly articles. These sources aided my paper by giving authority to my claims about the tone of coverage during the wars. I received searching tips through "Ask a Librarian" and librarians at the reference desks both at Gelman and Eckles libraries. They helped me navigate research databases and the stacks of the libraries. My professor and a librarian demonstrated how citations pages at the end of articles and books can offer sources on similar subjects and this guided a great deal of my research and allowed me to connect ideas.

Especially crucial to my research were Lexis Nexis and Gelman's microfilm archives. I needed these resources to read and gain a sense of the entire basis of my project: newspaper articles. Through microfilm, I could read through pages and pages of newspapers and acquire an overall feeling of news coverage during a certain period of time. With Lexis Nexis, I could search for specific events that pertained to my interests. I employed these articles in my project to give examples to my reader and to demonstrate how I analyzed each journalist's writing. I had put so much effort into this research and now I found myself wanting to completely reconstruct

my argument. At first, this seemed impossible. I visited the Writing Center hoping someone would grant me an easy way out. Instead, my tutor told me changing my argument would be a difficult task but it would also be a great opportunity to grow as a scholar and write an even better paper.

While my draft needed to be reworked and more research added, I realized that research builds upon itself and since I had already worked so much to gain solid backgrounds in my conflicts, an understanding of their issues, and more skill in researching, making major changes to my paper was manageable. My argument might have been different, but since I had that original thesis, I already knew how to research what became an integral part of my final product: public opinion polls. These figures were concrete evidence of how the public's attitude towards the wars changed over time and I juxtaposed these facts with the change in news coverage tone. For this data, I relied on both academic articles and statistical reports from the Internet such as Gallup polls. I also changed my method source from a psychology essay to an article about the "information gap." This source inspired my argument because it fed my interest in the interaction between the government, media, and public. I could also see a clear connection or pattern between my two wars through this source. It helped me find my voice because I reacted to the piece emotionally as I found ethical problems in the interaction it described and I wanted to point these dilemmas out and offer my own solutions.

What I enjoy most about my paper is how it does not define issues in black and white and likely creates more questions in a reader's mind than answers. Through this project, I not only learned how to find sources and use them to make well-thought-out points in a paper. I also developed an attitude as a researcher to never fear complexity but to instead utilize it to make a substantial and interesting argument.

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UW1020: Covering Chaos

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Filling the Gap, Exposing Truth, and Strengthening Democracy

American media scholars often debate the influence of media coverage on public opinion of the president's foreign policy. Some commentators argue that the media can have a substantial influence on how citizens think about the government including its leaders and policies. Others refute this idea, claiming that American society's diversity prevents mainstream media from swaying the complex opinions held by the people. The case of foreign wars is unique because the news media and the government are practically the public's only sources for information about events overseas. Oftentimes, the information flowing from these outlets is diverse and even conflicting. The interaction of foreign policy, government, media, and the public is complex during wartime and ultimately creates questions about trust in the president and the role of the media in aiding democracy.

The civil war in El Salvador from 1980 to 1992 and the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 were both examples of times in which the media and the government gave conflicting accounts of what was really happening out of sight of the American public. Also in both cases, how the presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, respectively, were handling the foreign wars was a topic for American newspapers. Public opinion about these conflicts and how the president was handling them was not necessarily simply positive or negative, but actually changed over time as the media changed its way of covering the wars. How the American public felt about the president and the wars depended on how important it found the conflict, the media's tone as it covered the war and what kind of information it offered the public as time went on, and how the

news depicted the president and his abilities as a foreign policy leader throughout the conflicts. Passage of time was a clear factor in the tone of coverage and public opinion of the wars.

Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter argue in “The Relationships Between the Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis” that the media does indeed influence the public’s opinion of foreign policy. They claim that the public, political leaders, and the media all depend on each other but the media is a special case when it comes to influence. Baum and Potter write, “As such, the media’s framing of elite rhetoric has an independent causal effect on public perceptions of conflict characteristics, and through this process, on foreign policy.”¹ The media holds a great deal of power in the case of war coverage because it must take information from the government and present it to the public. The media therefore balances the demands of both politicians and citizens. It is the media’s duties to both transmit the president’s message, especially, to the people and to analyze his or her message as a watchdog of democracy and presidential accountability. Baum and Potter write, “Typically, public attention to foreign policy (and consequently demand for foreign policy news) is very low, resulting in an equilibrium favorable to leaders. This is especially true in the early stages of a military conflict [...] However, several factors – including casualties, elite discord, and evidence that leaders have ‘spun’ the facts beyond credulity (a concept we term the elasticity of reality) – can prompt the public to increase its demand for information from the media, thereby narrowing the information gap. This becomes more likely as a conflict drags on [...].”² Therefore, the government has the most influence on media coverage earlier during a war. A gap is caused by a combination of factors including government-spun facts, an apathetic public, and the media’s dependence on government sources for quick and “official” information. However, as more conflicting information emerges, politicians lose a great deal of their influence. The tone of this

information rather than its amount can have an effect on public knowledge and therefore opinion. Information is meant here as facts and analysis about events, people, officials, and issues involved in the war.

The media's role in filling the information gap during the El Salvador civil war and the Iraq war led to low public approval of the president's foreign policy. Despite some of the government's success in manipulating the dissemination of news and misrepresenting the wars at the beginning of each conflict, newspapers were eventually critical of the president's handling of the operations and this gave the public the opportunity to question its trust in the president as a legitimate leader and enactor of foreign policy. The decline in favorable public opinion was a positive development from a democratic standpoint as political leaders must and should be held responsible for their actions. Without accountability, the president would have limitless power and the media would simply be a profit-seeking and uncritical institution. However, in the case of the war in Iraq, the media filled the information gap more slowly compared to the media during the civil war in El Salvador. Therefore, despite leaps in media technology, public knowledge suffered from misconceptions about why the U.S. decided to occupy Iraq. The media should strive to narrow the information gap earlier and not allow the president's administration to have such a strong influence on war coverage early on in conflicts. By learning from the past, the media will be more skeptical of information coming from the government at the onset of conflicts and will better inform the public with accurate reporting instead of government-spun information. A public that better understands a conflict will be able to develop a more informed opinion about foreign policy, fulfilling its role in a democratic nation.

The civil war in El Salvador

President Reagan attempted to gain public approval for intervention in the civil war in El Salvador by managing the news and utilizing a Cold War enemy: supporters of communism. El Salvador was but one part in Reagan's overall foreign policy to fight communism and prevent it from spreading to countries closer to the United States. William M. LeoGrande explains that Reagan inherited the war from President Jimmy Carter in 1981 and continued the former president's public relations battle with the media. LeoGrande writes, "In mid-1980, the Carter Administration evolved a conscious policy of attempting to manage U.S. public opinion on El Salvador by encouraging media coverage favorable to the government [...] The Reagan administration has continued in this vein."³ LeoGrande confirms that the president pursued this public opinion strategy fervently throughout 1980 and 1981, the onset of the civil war. During this time, there was no anti-war movement or strong opposition to intervention. However, later reports of casualties and other negative news stories about the president's handling of the situation prevented the American people from placing its trust in the government and approving its policies. As Baum and Potter point out, casualties cause the public to demand more information. In the case of El Salvador, since this information was negative, public opinion took a turn. LeoGrande states, "The Reagan Administration appears to recognize that it cannot sustain U.S. military involvement in El Salvador without the support of the U.S. public. What the Administration appears not to recognize is that public support cannot be manufactured by good public relations; it is inextricably tied to the nature of the conflict itself."⁴ Negative coverage of the El Salvador civil war was related to low public approval of Reagan's intervention. Although there were attempts to keep news about the conflict positive at the beginning of the war by

making it seem like a fight against communism, this influence decreased as the media filled the information gap between the government and the public.

The Reagan administration attempted to depict the El Salvador government in a positive light and labeled the guerilla rebels as leftists who could threaten American national security in the future. This was an attempt to gain public support for America's involvement in the civil war. However, conflicting information from other sources than those of the U.S. government were revealed, filling the information gap between the public and political leaders and turning the public against Reagan's foreign policy. On January 27, 1982, Raymond Bonner of the *New York Times* reported about the El Mozote massacre at the hands of the El Salvador government in "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in El Salvador Village." The U.S. government supported the right-wing El Salvador government and aided it militarily. The foreign correspondent writes, "From interviews with people who live in this small mountain village and surrounding hamlets, it is clear that a massacre of major proportions occurred here last month."⁵ Bonner incorporated information not from the Reagan administration but from other sources such as local villagers, who actually contradicted reports from the U.S. government that the massacre was not so severe. This news article allowed Americans to more fully understand the situation in El Salvador and that the government might not have been telling the entire story.

American coverage of the El Salvador civil war starting in 1981 was distinctive because of its overall negativity especially compared to coverage from other countries. It was negative in the sense that it depicted certain political groups in a way that would incite disapproval from the public. Walter C. Soderland and Carmen Schmitt compiled and analyzed news stories from 1981 written by Argentinean, Chilean, Canadian, and American reporters. For their American study, the authors focused on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. They critically interpreted

news stories based on, “[...] whether a given item reflected positively or negatively on five major domestic and international political actors—the FDR/FMLN, the Salvadorean Junta, the United States, Cuba and Nicaragua. Items were coded mixed if both positive and negative material was included, or neutral.”⁶ All of the countries in the study reported more heavily on the United States’ involvement in the war than on any other political actor’s involvement. Soderland and Schmitt concluded, “[...] in the United States, while most items were neutral (74%), the percentage of negative items (22%) far surpassed the positive items (3%). Thus it is clear that press criticism of American policy on El Salvador in North American papers was found in American, not Canadian newspapers.”⁷ Not only was the U.S. press noticeably more negative than South American papers, but also it was even more negative than its North American counterpart, Canada. It is reasonable that the majority of stories were labeled neutral because they most likely followed the conventions of objectivity. Clearly, though, overall coverage did lean towards a negative depiction of U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador. The U.S. media was even more critical of its own government than foreign newspapers.

Maintaining a focus on newspapers, particularly the *New York Times* because of its broad audience, another example of a news story that drove public opinion and exemplified negativity towards U.S. foreign policy was “Lawmakers Say U.S. is Misusing Aid to Salvador” by Joel Brinkley, printed on February 12, 1985. This article revealed that Congress was questioning the authority of the president. Brinkley writes, “A Congressional caucus accused the Administration today of having supplied ‘insufficient, misleading and in some cases false information’ on aid for El Salvador” and “The report says the United States is becoming more and more deeply involved in the war in a manner that is ‘reminiscent of Vietnam.’ It also says the Reagan Administration has routinely misled Congress and the public to disguise that fact.”⁸ This was an example of the

media filling the information gap with elite discord and evidence that a leader had spun information. Such news coverage could have a clear effect on public opinion because it mentions a wartime when the president was strongly mistrusted. Ratings during the time of this article's publication were significantly low towards Reagan and his handling of the El Salvador civil war.

Negative coverage also affected public opinion because the media gave Americans the opportunity to question the president's abilities. The media was so influential because it fulfilled its basic function as an agenda setter. Maxwell E. McCombs argues that the media's role in agenda setting impacts what Americans view as important to them and their country. He compares trends in news coverage with concerns of the American public from 1983 to 1986. The highest correlation between media agenda and public agenda (+0.87) is for government performance.⁹ Therefore, the media covered government performance a great deal and many Americans considered this issue important at the same time. The issue of authority in the U.S. during the 80s was so prominent because the news media put it at the forefront of its agenda. The media's ability to control what issues are labeled "important" in society and the way in which these issues were covered as newspapers filled the information gap combined to affect public opinion. In this way, the media affected public opinion in relation to El Salvador not just through its negativity but also because it placed the issue of government performance at the head of public concern.

The public was susceptible to this media influence because although trust in the media was not particularly high, trust in the government was even lower. A 1997 Gallup Poll states, "Trust in the Fourth Estate and other elements of the mass media has also suffered over the last two decades, falling fifteen points from 68% in 1972 to 53% today."¹⁰ However, Richard Sobel reports that the American public more strongly disapproved of how the Reagan administration

was handling the El Salvador conflict than of how the media was performing its job. The public even held some fear that the war would become a second Vietnam. Sobel confirms, “Americans have also expressed concerns that the Central American conflicts could become another Vietnam. Gallup polls from 1981 to 1983 showed that roughly two-thirds (62% to 74%) of those aware of the situation in El Salvador thought it was likely that ‘it could turn into a situation like Vietnam.’”¹¹ A mentality of preventing abuses by the president as seen during Vietnam was therefore very noticeable during Reagan’s terms. Overall, in 1986, only 18% to 35% of Americans approved of Reagan’s Central American foreign policy.¹² The news coverage of El Salvador was the driving force behind this disapproval and mistrust. News stories about the president being questioned by Congress for withholding and falsifying information and overall negative coverage of a very flawed foreign government supported by the U.S. influenced an audience susceptible to the idea that the government cannot always be trusted.

Sobel, however, points out a possible weakness in this assessment: “A review of the polls indicates that most people in the U.S. are aware but not very knowledgeable or intensely concerned about these situations in Central America.”¹³ This statement could point out that media coverage did not have a very strong effect on the public because El Salvador was not a very important issue to it. However, this set-up actually aids unfavorable public opinion. Because people were not very knowledgeable about the El Salvador conflict, they were more likely to be influenced by negative news stories published in mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* because they were less likely to question the reporter if they had no previous information. Even if the public was not “intensely concerned,” the timing of the El Salvador civil war is significant because any news story questioning political leaders contributed to a larger-scale media emphasis on government performance. El Salvador may not have been a very pressing issue, but

government performance certainly was.

One could argue that some examples of news coverage that were positive towards the government and the El Salvador civil war should have affected public opinion as well. Michael Massing asserts that after Raymond Bonner left the *New York Times* when the Reagan administration attacked his piece about the El Mozote massacre, the press became much more optimistic and less critical of the Reagan administration. Massing writes that the purpose of the work of Bonner's replacement, Charles Mohr, was "to relay official optimism."¹⁴ However, by inspecting his article, Mohr's work does not have a necessarily optimistic tone. Rather, it is realistic, gives a factual overview of a situation in El Salvador, and also supplies negative facts.

Mohr's article titled, "Salvador Combat: U.S. is Now More Hopeful," printed in the *New York Times* on August 12, 1983 may have a positive headline. Although headlines give the reader the first impression of a story, Mohr's lead is even more effective. Mohr writes, "In purely military terms, the fortunes of the Salvadoran Government in its war with leftist guerrillas seem to have improved in recent weeks, according to a variety of foreign experts."¹⁵ Mohr not only points out that the military, which the U.S. government supported, was only improving in a limited way but also only vague foreign experts claim this improvement and it is not necessarily an indisputable fact. Also, for all the "optimistic" reporting about El Salvador's government, Mohr balances these claims with pessimistic data. Mohr reports, "There are also command and control problems. The chain of command from army headquarters to troop commanders works only fitfully, leaving commanders largely on their own."¹⁶ This section shows that even articles that some considered "optimistic" were still subject to negativity. Therefore, despite Reagan's attempt to control the news, an article such as this could not have aided Reagan or his approval. Some positive information may have been involved in filling the information gap, but negative

stories still dominated.

Making the Connection

In the case of El Salvador, favorable public opinion for Reagan's intervention policies trended lower and lower as time continued and the media supplied Americans with more information. The information gap was filled with negative-toned but true stories about tragic death and the president overstepping his bounds as a leader. The media was negative towards intervention and was critical of the Reagan-led government performance especially when it revealed that the administration had falsified information. All of this occurred despite the executive branch's attempt to create a positive image for itself. Baum and Potter claim, "After all, the longer a conflict lasts, the greater the opportunity for the public to accumulate sufficient information to overcome – or at least to reduce – its informational disadvantage."¹⁷ This pattern points out a critical problem in war coverage, though. At the beginning of conflicts, the public is almost completely uninformed and it takes years for it to gain enough knowledge to make an opinion based on factual information. Baum and Potter also state, "[...] a consensus has emerged that the public is able to develop and hold coherent views on foreign policy, that citizens can and do apply their attitudes to their electoral decisions, and that this leads politicians to consider the electoral implications of their overseas activities"¹⁸ In other words, what the public thinks matters because it will affect how the government continues its foreign policy plans. However, the problem remains that even though the public is able to form a view, the timing of this formation is also crucial.

Coverage of El Salvador shows that the media is able to affect public opinion even when it is not strongly trusted by the people. If the people do not develop an informed opinion about a conflict until it has already been occurring for many years, then what about the earlier years

when the government made decisions without clear public opinion? If the media relied less on facts solely from the government and therefore filled the information gap with the truth, and if the media was able to perform this task faster during the onset of wars, casualties and damage could be prevented. This is also the lesson from the Iraq war, for if the media filled the information gap quicker without falling into the “rally round the flag” phenomenon, the public would have been better informed and the war itself and all of its damaging effects may not have even happened. The effects of a delayed filling of the information gap are even more dramatic in the Iraq situation because the war was very important to the public, unlike the El Salvador civil war itself, and the conflict arguably defined Bush’s presidency.

The war in Iraq

Voices within the news media challenging President Bush’s foreign policy virtually did not exist during the onset of the Iraq war. After the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, Bush was able to rally the American public around his foreign policy plans. Douglas M. McLeod argues that the American news media failed to both discover the truth and to inform the public so that it could make rational decisions at the onset of the Iraq war. McLeod writes, “The American media’s wholesale acceptance of the Bush Administration’s claims about al-Qaeda connections to the Iraqi government, as well as about Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) program, constitutes a dereliction of duty. The mainstream media’s failure to thoroughly investigate these claims contributed to public misconceptions about Iraq, and paved the way for what, in retrospect, has been largely acknowledged as both a human tragedy and a foreign policy disaster for the United States.”¹⁹ The media could have satisfied the ethical duty that McLeod describes if it had tried to fill the information gap between the government and the public earlier and faster. Because the media was swept up by the rally round the flag effect, it

did not question the information fed to it by official sources of the U.S. government. However, over time, conflicting information emerged and the information gap was slowly filled with more accurate information. McLeod states, “These observations, and the fact that support for the Iraq war declined markedly over time as Americans became aware that the al-Qaeda connections and WMDs did not exist, point to the fact that U.S. engagement in the conflict was predicated on false beliefs. The mainstream media’s failure to play an adjudicating role in separating fact from fiction inherently makes them complicit in the conflict and its disastrous consequences.”²⁰ In other words, news coverage became more negative towards the Bush administration over time as the government’s messages were revealed to be false. Favorable public opinion towards the war and trust in the president, therefore, also declined. However, it was too late to repair some of the damage. Misconceptions persisted even after the truth was revealed. A president from an opposing party was elected in 2008 and the war in Iraq eventually wound down, but years of death and money spent from war could not be regained.

Over many years, favorable U.S. public opinion about the war in Iraq declined. A Gallup Poll spanning March 22nd and 23rd of 2003 to January 15th to 18th of 2007 asked whether participants favored or opposed the U.S. war with Iraq. In 2003, 72% were in favor and 25% were opposed. However, in 2007, 36% were in favor and 61% were opposed.²¹ Not only did favor towards the war decline, but approval for Bush’s abilities as an enactor of foreign policy also dropped. A 2007 poll asked, “When it comes to making policy for handling the situation in Iraq, how much confidence do you have in George W. Bush to recommend the right thing to do in Iraq – a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or almost none?” 15% answered a great deal, 22% a fair amount, 17% only a little, and 46% almost none.²² Approval for the war and the Bush administration fell as media coverage became more critical of the administration’s claims. For

example, Mark Mazzetti wrote a scathing piece about the war in the *New York Times* article, “Prewar Intelligence Ignored, Former C.I.A. Official Says.” Mazzetti writes, “A former top official of the Central Intelligence Agency has accused the Bush administration of ignoring intelligence assessments about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction programs in the months leading up to the Iraq War.”²³ Such a news article would never have been written before the war or months after it began. As the media presented more information such as this, which conflicted Bush’s messages from the onset of the war, the public demanded more information and anti-war voices gained momentum.

Misconceptions formed about the Iraq war because the media was slow to fill the information gap. After the rally round the flag effect died down, the public was able to hear more sides discuss foreign policy, most of which were negative towards the war and Bush. Baum and Potter state, “The rally effect results from a market equilibrium characterized by highly informed leaders and a public at a significant informational disadvantage.”²⁴ The American public overcame this disadvantage as time passed and the media became more critical. This shift in coverage encouraged the anti-war movement, which gained more attention as the conflict dragged on. Coverage of anti-war demonstrations further encouraged a decline in approval because stories about the movement presented the protesters’ complaints and essentially spread their message to the public. Adam G. Klein, Carolyn M. Bylery, and Tony M. McEachern studied the effect of conflicting information about the Iraq war on the 2006-midterm elections. Klein, Bylery, and McEachern write, “We utilize the notion of *counterframing* to describe the overall shift in the news media’s presentation of the war’s popular response, and coverage thereof, as affected in 2006 by ‘new voices.’ The voices belonged to those in the American populace whose views on the war had previously been underrepresented in place of elite opinion-

makers on the subject (i.e., experts in the White House).”²⁵ Because the media gave the opportunity for anti-war ideas to enter news coverage, a new focus and new frames developed in war stories. Like in the case of El Salvador, the media’s agenda played a vital role in what the American public found important. In the Iraq case, the media emphasized the anti-war movement and its declarations about the Bush administration, allowing trust in the government to become an important issue to the American people. Klein, Bylery, and McEachern conclude, “Counterframes collectively characterized the war story as ‘illegal,’ ‘immoral,’ and ‘based on lies.’”²⁶ This increase in voices of dissent aided the decline in favorable public opinion towards the Iraq war. The widening of voices in the news over time reinforced the filling of the information gap with new, provocative information. Such knowledge turned the public against Bush and his party as trust in the administration plummeted. Articles questioning the existence of WMDs and connections between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda allowed the anti-war movement to rise up. Coverage of its demonstrations further encouraged the public to question the reasons why the U.S. entered the war.

The elections of 2006 confirmed that trust in Bush and his party declined because the news revealed their failures in the Iraq war. Luke Keele claims that elections are prime opportunities for the public to demonstrate its trust in the government. Keele writes, “Under one formulation, trust is a precursor to demands for political change, perhaps even radical change. Under the other, trust is an important barometer of public satisfaction with the government, and has important electoral consequences.”²⁷ The shift in news coverage of the Iraq war was related to the significant change in public opinion towards the Bush administration, which was expressed through the 2006-midterm elections as democrats took control of both the House and the Senate. In their study of anti-war movement articles from 2006 to 2007, Klein, Bylery, and

McEachern state:

Perhaps even more notable, however, was the mere 5% of total actors appearing in these articles who supported the Iraq war. This finding is important because it demonstrates the tremendous shift in American support for a war that, in 2002, Pew surveys consistently established as having 62% of national support [...]. Over the course of this study, it became apparent that the news coverage had begun to mimic that shift in public opinion from the initial 62% of those in favor of a war to the 75% who disapproved of it during the November elections [...].²⁸

As the media filled the information gap, two shifts occurred: more voices from the anti-war movement entered news stories and favorable public opinion fell. The demand for more information from the public encouraged the media to take on an even more critical tone by focusing on anti-war actors. The public's decline in trust was revealed in 2006 as Democrats dominated the midterm elections.

Again relying on the *New York Times*, one can see the remarkable shift in coverage that lined up with changing public opinion between 2003 and 2007. For example, an article written by Judith Miller titled "Aftereffects: Illicit Arms; U.S. Aids Say Iraqi Truck Could be a Germ War Lab" was printed on May 8, 2003 while the rally effect was still prominent and the majority of Americans believed WMDs existed. Miller reports, "When Secretary of State Colin L. Powell addressed the United Nations in February to describe intelligence on Iraq's biological and chemical weapons program, he cited a defector's report on mobile laboratories that could develop unconventional weapons and be moved around Iraq to avoid detection and attack."²⁹ Nowhere in the news article does a conflicting voice question the claims of a member of the Bush administration. The story is, in fact, hopeful that the U.S. military has finally found evidence of

the driving force behind the U.S.'s entering into the war. Miller writes, "If the trailer proves to be a mobile weapons lab, it would be the first uncovered in Iraq, and the discovery would support the Bush administration's claims that Iraq continued to pursue weapons of mass destruction in violation of United Nations sanctions and its 1991 pledges to end such programs."³⁰ During this point in time, WMDs were assumed to really exist because the government claimed they did and all the U.S. needed to do was find them. After no such weapons were found and the anti-war movement took root, the *New York Times* developed a very different tone in respect to the Bush administration.

Michael Janofsky reported in "Protest Groups, Too, Prepare for the President's Big Day" on January 13, 2005 that although the president had been elected to another term and his Inauguration Day was shortly coming up, the anti-war movement used the day as an opportunity to spread their message. Janofsky quotes a protester claiming, "'Our goal is to make sure Inauguration Day reflects the great divisions that exist in the United States right now,' said Brian Becker, national coordinator for the coalition, known as Answer, which stands for Act Now to Stop War and End Racism. 'Bush is trying to assert he has a mandate. We will show that a big part of the American people do not believe he has one.'"³¹ The report then describes some of the events the movement planned to perform on Inauguration Day and explains that the protestors were critical of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq. Janofsky sources Becker again declaring, "'I'm not thinking that our presence will have a deep impact on George Bush's thinking,' Mr. Becker said, describing an area that could hold as many as 10,000. 'But we have a goal of building a movement as people did during the Vietnam War, making it impossible for politicians of any stripe to ignore. Wherever Bush or supporters of the war in Iraq go, we want them to be met by visible antiwar demonstrations.'"³² In other words, the goal of the anti-war

movement was not to necessarily gain Bush's attention but to encourage as many people as possible to think about the movement's message and to question their president. Clearly, articles such as this were effective in relation to public opinion as demonstrated by the 2006-midterm elections, which took place just a year after this story was printed.

Like the civil war in El Salvador, favorable public opinion towards the Iraq war declined as the public received more information that cast the war and the president in a negative light. However, during the Iraq war, the president's administration was more successful in influencing what was in the news. The media was much slower in filling the information gap between the government and the people during this war. Even though many people found the war in Iraq important, public knowledge about the war was irreparably damaged. McLeod writes, "Data from the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland show that the belief in the al-Qaeda connection to the pre-war Iraqi government was at 52% in 2004 and 49% in 2006. Similarly, in October 2004, 49% of the American public believed that the pre-war Iraqi government possessed WMDs, despite the fact that no such weapons were discovered, much less used during the war. In March 2006, this belief was still at 41%."³³ Like the El Salvador civil war, favorable public opinion decreased as the battle dragged on, more casualties were reported, and, most importantly, the government was depicted as untrustworthy by voices outside the president's administration. This filling of the gap happened too slowly, though, and misconceptions persisted. The media has never been truly held responsible for this failure to inform the public and act as a watchdog early in the conflict. Nor has the president's administration been held accountable for presenting false information about WMDs and links between the Saddam regime and al-Qaeda and using this incorrect intelligence to justify its reasons for invading Iraq.

What Next?

Coverage of El Salvador and Iraq reveal lessons for the future of the news media. Public opinion and approval are closely connected to trust in government. Davide Morselli and Stefano Passini argue that trust and confidence in authority figures are crucial for the successful implementation of policy and the exercise of political influence. Morselli and Passini write, “Indeed, the process of accepting influence from authority is defined as a process of legitimate influence, where influence is accepted as a consequence of the perceived legitimacy of authority [...].”³⁴ Therefore, only if the public trusts the government as an authoritative figure will it accept an administration’s political goals. The trust relationship between the people and government is absolutely critical to the strength of democracy. Without trust in politicians’ decision-making abilities, a democracy cannot function. However, Morselli and Passini add, “[...] the level of democracy within a country benefits of the increment in critical and active attitudes towards institutional authorities, instead of being threatened by it.”³⁵ Here, the authors are stating that questioning authority is actually healthy for a democracy. The media can play a very important role in this practice because negative coverage of leaders’ policies could influence the public and its trust in politicians. Questioning authority and ensuring that leaders do not abuse their power is vital for a democracy. The media, therefore, has the ethical responsibility to sustain democracy by inviting the public to be skeptical of political leaders and to hold them accountable for their actions.

If the media is not skeptical of authority, even for short periods of time, misconceptions can easily form and will not quickly go away. The media should make a more concerted effort to rely less on the White House for foreign policy information and should look to other outlets even if they are not so official. The president’s administration may have an automatic stamp of

legitimacy and importance, but its information may not always be accurate and this is a fact the media must accept. The president inherently wants the public to support his or her foreign policy plans and he or she will therefore, and some would say unethically, present “spun” or partial information, using the media to bolster his or her own image. This creates an ethical dilemma for the media because at times, the president may seem like the only source for information and journalists want to avoid angering their sources by writing critically. Unlike the government, which the Constitution requires to be held responsible for its choices, the media has no explicit law in relation to its duty towards American citizens. There is no defined way to “punish” the media for failing to report the truth. The news is the primary connection between the government and the public especially during times of war. The public’s opinion does indeed influence foreign policy and this opinion should be informed in order to make decisions about what direction America should take overseas.

Analyzing news coverage of El Salvador and Iraq also creates implications for future research and considerations for the importance of public knowledge and the media. Why exactly was the media so much slower in filling the information gap during the Iraq war? Was it the nature of the war? Did propaganda from the Bush administration cause it? Would this mean that the media’s ability to fill the gap has regressed since the 1980s? Baum and Potter claim that through media fragmentation, citizens are more likely to expose themselves only to information that supports their pre-existing knowledge. Baum and Potter write, “[...] such selective exposure may slow the narrowing of the information gap between leaders and the public, and hence also slow the tightening of the elasticity of reality.”³⁶ This would mean that the increase in partisan or ideologically leaning news outlets has made the public easier to manipulate and has made misconceptions more difficult to clarify. Even though new technology has allowed journalists

more and quicker access to sources and the public more access to the news, the information the public receives actually seems to lead to less critical thinking and more passive acceptance.

These speculations hold many ethical considerations such as what these changes mean for democracy and the government if the public seems easier to influence and the government better at manipulating. The media must consider restructuring its priorities and practices to focus less on partisanship and the speed of new technology, even though it might cost them readership, in favor of more investigation and criticism of its sources.

Notes

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3. William M. LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," *International Security* 6 (1981): 46.
4. Ibid., 47.
5. Raymond Bonner, "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village," *New York Times*, Jan 27, 1982, sec. A1.
6. Walter C. Soderland, and Carmen Schmitt, "El Salvador's Civil War as Seen in North and South American Press," *Journalism Quarterly* 63 no. 2: 268.
7. Ibid., 272.
8. Joel Brinkley, "Lawmakers Say U.S. is Misusing Aid to El Salvador," *The New York Times*, Feb 12, 1985, sec A1.
9. Maxwell E. McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 13.
10. Lydia Saad, Gallup, "Americans' Faith in Government Shaken but Not Shattered by Watergate," Accessed November 4, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/4378/Americans-Faith-Government-Shaken-Shattered-Watergate.aspx>.
11. Richard Sobel, "Public Opinion About United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 53 (1989): 118.
12. Ibid., 120.

13. Ibid., 116.
14. Michael Massing, "About-face on El Salvador: The recall of a New York Times reporter seemed to send a signal. The once-tough press went soft," *Columbia Journalism Review* 22 (November/December 1983): 48.
15. Charles Mohr, "Salvador Combat: U.S. is not More Hopeful," *The New York Times*, Aug 12, 1983, sec A1.
16. Ibid.
17. Baum and Potter, 44-45.
18. Ibid., 44.
19. Douglas M. McLeod, "Derelict of Duty: The American News Media, Terrorism, and the War in Iraq," *Marquette Law Review* 13 (2010): 113.
20. Ibid., 136.
21. Gallup, "Iraq," accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx?version=print> .
22. Ibid.
23. Mark Mazzetti, "Prewar Intelligence Ignored, Former C.I.A. Official Says," *New York Times*, April 21, 2006, sec. A1.
24. Baum and Potter, 46.
25. Adam G. Klein, Carolyn M. Byerly, and Tony M. McEachern, "Counterframing Public Dissent: An Analysis of Antiwar Coverage in the U.S. Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26 (2009): 332.
26. Ibid., 331.
27. Luke Keele, "The Authorities Really Do Matter: Party Control and Trust in

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28. Klein, Byerly, and McEachern, 339-440.
29. Judith Miller, “Aftereffects: Illicit Arms; U.S. Aids Say Iraqi Truck Could Be a Germ-War Lab,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2003, sec. A5.
30. Ibid.
31. Michael Janofsky, “Protest Groups, Too, Prepare for the President’s Big Day,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2005, sec. A1.
32. Ibid.
33. McLeod, 136.
34. Davide Morselli and Stefano Passini, “New Perspectives on the Study of the Authority Relationship: Integrating Individual and Societal Research,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 41 (2011): 296.
35. Ibid., 298.
36. Baum, 58.

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