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# Patriotism meets plurality: reporting the 2003 Iraq War in the British press

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors draw upon the results from a substantial content and framing analysis of the British media's treatment of the 2003 Iraq War to show how Britain's national press managed their coverage of the initial combat phase of the war against the background of substantial public and elite opposition. They show that reporting was dominated by coverage of the ongoing battle, that newspapers offered a similar subject agenda to one another and that coalition actors were prominent and likely to be reported neutrally. But the article uncovers a substantial diversity of opinion and tone across the British press and identifies five different editorial approaches to the conflict which are sustained across the news and editorial pages of different newspapers. Through a closer examination, the authors attempt to account for the existence of these approaches in relation to the effects of public opposition to the war, patriotism and newspapers' longstanding political allegiances. Finally, they suggest that, in the British press at least, this plurality of opinions and forms of coverage offers a challenge to longstanding assumptions about the extent to which the media have tended to offer support to official positions in relation to war.

**KEY WORDS** • Britain • Iraq War • media • newspapers • patriotism • war

The behaviour of the news media in wartime has long been a focus of controversy and a fertile subject for academic enquiry. In part, this is because journalism has traditionally involved an attachment to objective reporting, even where this may involve criticism, and to scrutiny rather than celebration. But governments justify military actions as serving the national interest, and fear that media criticism could undermine support for them. And, of course, in putting themselves in harm's way, soldiers and their families need

to believe that their actions are patriotic and necessary. Even in wars of national interest, these differing aspirations and needs can lead to conflict, often involving government criticism of the media's role. But the national interest argument for the 2003 Iraq War was debatable at best and the war attracted much popular and elite opposition. For the British media then, and particularly for the press – without its television cousins' statutory imperative to 'due impartiality' – reporting this war presented a difficult challenge and an interesting test: newspapers choosing unconditionally to support the war against Iraq risked alienating segments of their readership, while those mounting strong opposition to it risked appearing unpatriotic. In this article, we draw upon the results from a substantial content and framing analysis of the British media's treatment of the Iraq War to show how different sections of Britain's national press managed their coverage of the war. We identify a press whose coverage is very similar in content but strikingly divergent in tone, and we examine the extent of editorial opposition to the war among different newspapers and how this is reflected in their coverage of it. Finally, we seek to explain how the effects of public opposition to the war, patriotism and individual newspapers' longstanding political allegiances might account for this apparent plurality.

## Media and war

Analysing media coverage at an aggregate level, existing studies have suggested that media have generally 'served the military rather well' (Carruthers, 2000: 271–2) in times of war and often function as a tool of government propaganda (see Taylor, 1992). Various reasons are put forward to explain media deference to government war objectives. These include excessive dependence on official sources when constructing the news, ideological factors such as anti-communism during the Cold War, patriotism and fear of flak (if reporting is seen as undermining the war effort). For example, in assessing the belief that the US media took a stance that opposed official US policy towards the Vietnam War, Hallin (1984, 1986) found that critical reporting surfaced only after the US administration had become split between 'hawks', who believed victory had to be attained whatever the costs, and 'doves', who believed that the price of victory in south-east Asia was not worth paying. Furthermore, Hallin found that the media rarely reported outside the bounds of this elite debate to argue that the war was fundamentally wrong or immoral. Even after the conclusion of the Cold War, Bennett and Paletz's edited collection *Taken by Storm* (1994) highlighted the failure of journalists adequately to criticize official policy in the 1991 Gulf War.

Although fewer in number and narrower in scope than their US equivalents, UK-based studies have produced similar findings. The Glasgow University Media Group's (1985) analysis of media and the 1981 Falklands Conflict provided evidence of an acquiescent media that often slipped into patriotism and jingoism. Morrison's study of British media and the 1991 Gulf War indicated that TV news coverage focused mostly upon the progress of the war, speculation on the ground-war strategy and concern over air and missile attacks, while criticism of the war was rare and few images of death reached the evening broadcasts (Morrison, 1992: 68). Two studies of UK media in the 2003 Iraq War have been published: Tumber and Palmer (2004) and Lewis et al. (2006). Both identified a heavy reliance on coalition sources in reporting the war, although the former also drew attention to a substantial amount of negative commentary regarding the military campaign. But, in analysing media coverage, each study was relatively narrow in scope. Lewis et al. focused predominantly on coverage relating to three specific themes associated with the government's case for war and only analysed the performance of television. Tumber and Palmer did examine four national newspapers but this survey represented only part of their project and tended to provide a more interpretive analysis of coverage. Generally it is the case that substantial British studies have tended to focus either on television news or on the media generally; distinctive conclusions about the approach of the press to war are rare. Nonetheless, as a significant element in the British public sphere and an important source for both opinion and policy formation, we consider that the role of the press deserves separate examination.

Overall, American and British studies suggest, at least at an aggregate level, that the wartime role of media can be characterized as representing what Wolfsfeld (1997) describes as a 'faithful servant' approach, whereby they are 'constantly publicizing official frames of [a] conflict and either ignoring or discrediting challengers' (p. 69). There are a number of reasons, however, to suggest that British coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq might depart from this 'faithful servant' role. In the absence of a clear-cut *casus belli*, Tony Blair's government had made various attempts to 'sell' the idea of war, including the release of two intelligence 'dossiers' purporting to explain the threat that Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed to Western security.<sup>1</sup> Although the earlier dossier, which contained the claim that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction would be 'ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them', was initially seized on by much of the press as evidence that an Iraqi threat to British territory was genuine,<sup>2</sup> the later one was quickly discredited as the 'dodgy dossier', demonstrating that media reporting could be critical, as well as supportive, of plans for war. Allied to this was the existence of widespread public disquiet at the prospect of war, accompanied by some prominent elite dissent.<sup>3</sup>

Unusually, then, no clear national consensus about the necessity and value of war existed in Britain as the invasion of Iraq was launched. While both the Labour and Conservative parties officially supported it in the parliamentary debate prior to the invasion, significant elements within each of these parties dissented from the party line. Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats, opposed the invasion altogether. So, despite heavyweight cross-party support for the war, the national dailies were armed with an unusually large number of official sources opposed to it and the knowledge that readers might also have misgivings about it.

### **The British press**

The nature of the British press itself may also serve to make the notion of a 'faithful servant' role in relation to the Iraq War more problematic than in some other nations. Britain has a national press that is London-based but distributed throughout the country. It enjoys a proportionately larger readership than most comparable western countries and one which embraces all social classes (Tunstall, 1996: 8–11). In this, it differs markedly from the US model where the press is predominantly regional and, with a few exceptions, contains regional monopolies which are not subject to the same competitive pressures. Although analysis of press coverage is a regular component of American-based studies of media and war, a considerable similarity of approach between American newspapers is commonly found and expected (see Entman, 1991: 9, for a typical example), and hypotheses can be constructed that suggest a relatively uniform relationship between the perspectives of powerful elites and those adopted by the press (Bennett's [1990] notion of 'indexing', for example). With its greater diversity of approach and competitiveness, we might expect the coverage of the Iraq War found in the British press to be less monolithic and, instead, to offer a wider range of perspectives to its readers.

The British press is often described as consisting of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers but a division between downmarket, midmarket and upmarket more accurately reflects its reporting styles and corresponds roughly to the social class divisions of its readership (Tunstall, 1996: 8–11). Most daily titles have Sunday equivalents which are separately edited and more extensive but tend to share the editorial concerns of their daily cousins. Despite an attachment to norms of journalistic objectivity, newspapers tend to be opinionated and politically partisan. Sometimes this is manifested in the manner in which news stories are reported but, in upmarket papers at least, the editorial 'voice' of the paper is more likely to be confined to leader and op-ed columns and to the selection of what is considered newsworthy. Although party loyalty within the British press has weakened substantially

over the last 40 years, newspapers still tend to endorse political parties or their policy ideas at election times and to remain broadly supportive of, or critical towards, the party in power. It is common also for newspapers to attempt to influence the policy agenda themselves through the pressure that they place on politicians.

The prospect of the Iraq War created some interesting dilemmas for British newspapers in deciding how it should be reported. Editorial support for an invasion of Iraq could, in effect, be interpreted as support for the foreign policy of Blair's New Labour government. So, in defining a position on the war, some newspapers had to weigh their inclination to support military action against their sense of the party political advantage that might accrue for the government. Editorial scepticism was widespread. As war became a reality in the third week of March 2003, with the support of much of the Conservative opposition as well, sceptical newspapers faced different pressures. Scholars have commonly noted a 'rally round the flag' effect at the outbreak of war,<sup>4</sup> wherein newspapers (and indeed politicians) rein in their earlier opposition and show support for the actions of troops and for victory. But the extent of popular opposition to the Iraq War, shown by demonstrations of unprecedented scale,<sup>5</sup> made this change of editorial priorities and of forms of coverage more problematic. Some British newspapers, notably the *Daily Mirror*, continued to oppose the idea of war throughout the conflict period, despite attempting to show support for the British troops prosecuting it.

To examine how the British press covered the Iraq War and the degree of support that they showed towards it, we analysed all news articles and editorials about the Iraq conflict in all but three national daily newspapers and their Sunday equivalents.<sup>6</sup> The findings reported here cover the period from 21 March 2003, the day on which newspapers told of the invasion of Iraq, to 15 April 2003, the day after the fall of Tikrit, which was considered to mark the end of the 'major combat' phase of the war. Table 1 shows the newspapers surveyed and their circulations prior to the conflict. Although we include circulation figures here, we are, of course, making no direct claims about the influence that newspapers might have either on their readers or on the political/military process surrounding the Iraq War. In analysing newspapers' coverage of the war, we have treated each story as a unit of analysis regardless of the newspaper from which it originated.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on the results of a wider study into coverage in the British media of the main conflict period of the 2003 Iraq War. In developing our

**Table 1** British newspapers covered in our analysis of Iraq War reporting

Title	Circulation	Orientation
<b>Downmarket</b>		
<i>Sun/News of the World</i>	3611/3979	Broadly right-wing/populist
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	2101/1726	Broadly left-wing/populist
<b>Midmarket</b>		
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	2366/2297	Broadly right-wing/populist
<b>Upmarket</b>		
<i>Guardian/Observer</i>	384/438	Broadly liberal
<i>Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	184/181	Broadly liberal
<i>Times/Sunday Times</i>	634/1367	Broadly conservative
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	930/744	Broadly conservative

Note: Average circulation figures (in thousands) for August 2002–January 2003 inclusive.

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations.

codebook and methodology, we drew upon two established frameworks – Hallin’s (1986) study of coverage of the Vietnam War and the methodology widely used internationally since the early 1990s for analysing media coverage of elections (see Semetko et al., 1991). Hallin offers a systematic and codified approach to the analysis of media coverage of conflict that has been widely applauded, documenting subject matter (e.g. battle successes and battle failures, civilian casualties, anti-war protest) and sources used by US news media, and assessing the tone of each news story. The election studies methodology also offers a detailed framework for analysis with some points of similarity to Hallin’s but with a particular sensitivity to the measurement of journalists’ autonomy in resisting (or not) the explanatory frames that political parties attempt to place on events. It includes, for example, measures of evaluative and disdainful reporting which enable us to assess the extent of critical contributions emanating from journalists. In developing our own codebook, we refined these frameworks through piloting to reflect the particular circumstances of the 2003 conflict, creating a schema that allowed us to code media coverage with maximum attention to nuance and local detail. Murray et al. (2008) and Robinson et al. (2005, forthcoming) offer further accounts of our methodology and its rationale, and a copy of our full codebook is available from the authors.

We were able to code and analyse a wide range of features within media coverage of the Iraq War, but we refer here only to those elements which we have drawn upon in producing the findings for this article. Initially, we look at the range of *story subjects* relating to the war that were covered in newspapers. Our codebook contained a large number of story subjects, each

of which fell within one of 20 broader categories: battle/strategy, rationale for war, media, prisoners of war, casualties of war (capable of subdivision into military and civilian casualties), anti-war protest, diplomacy, public opinion, religion, reconstruction of Iraq, law and order, domestic focus, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, historical perspectives, family life within forces' families, Saddam Hussein, humanitarian issues, the Iraqi people, other. Where stories had multiple subjects, we identified the one (or occasionally two) which constituted the principal focus, other subjects that could be considered to have a main focus, and subsidiary subjects that occurred in passing. In giving our findings in the following section, these subsidiary subjects have been ignored. Through the story subject measure, we were able to identify and distinguish the full range of subjects within newspaper coverage and also to compare the subject agenda and particular preoccupations of different newspapers.

We produced a similar array of codes for the range of *story actors* mentioned within news coverage of the war. Here again, a large number of individual codes were reducible to the following broad and mutually exclusive categories: all coalition government and military, all Iraqi government and military, Iraqi opposition, domestic anti-war, international leaders who were anti-war, Arab political leaders, United Nations, 'experts', humanitarian groups, religious spokespersons, Iraqi civilians, terrorist groups, citizens and public opinion, media, other actors. Our story actors measure shows another aspect of the newspaper agenda in covering the war by identifying who is deemed to be significant within the story; in this, it is also a reflection of the types of actor who were most successful at gaining press coverage.

We were interested to identify not only the content of news coverage but also the extent to which journalistic accounts were evaluative and/or supportive of aspects of the war narrative or of actors within it. Consequently, for each mention of a story actor that we coded, we also coded its tone, recording whether it was 'straight' (non-evaluative), reinforcing, deflating or 'mixed' (containing both reinforcing and deflating elements). These tone measures, deriving from the election studies methodology (Semetko et al., 1991), capture how often reporters are making judgements and to whom they are directed. Whereas factual or dispassionate reporting might be expected to produce *tone towards actors* codes that were 'straight', the more involved or partisan that journalists were towards the war or Britain's involvement in it, the more likely it was that we would find codes here other than 'straight'.

Similarly, when coding the appearance of story subjects, we also measured the tone shown towards them. The *subject tone* measure that we report here differs from that used for tone towards actors in that it is based on the orientation of the coverage rather than the overt judgement expressed by journalists.



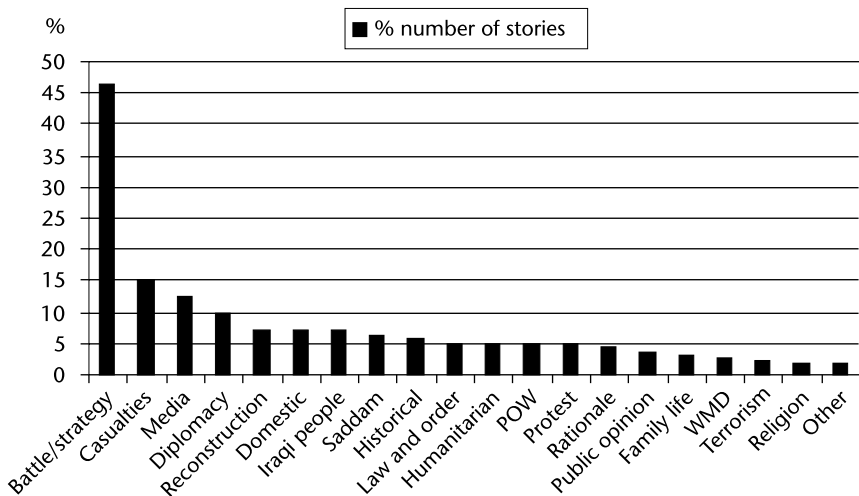
So we asked how well the reporting of a subject reflected the interests of the group most obviously affected by its reporting; whether a subject in a story would have been viewed by the coalition, for example, as favourable or unfavourable to its interests and perspectives. This approach enabled us to assess the extent to which journalists reproduced or rejected existing assumptions and perspectives (beneficial to the coalition, for example) in reporting the war even in coverage that contained no manifest evaluation.

Coding was piloted and two coders were carefully trained over a period of five months to ensure maximum reliability. They spent approximately six months coding, testing and analysing the results. Throughout this period, the project directors monitored coding closely and performed regular reliability tests. A reliability coefficient of at least .90 (Holsti, 1969) was achieved across both manifest content variables (such as story subjects) and latent content variables (such as tone).

## Findings

### Subjects and actors

In covering the 2003 Iraq War, the subject agenda of British newspapers was heavily dominated by the day-to-day events of the battle itself. Figure 1 shows that 'battle/strategy' occurred as a principal or main subject in more than 46 percent of the stories coded.<sup>7</sup> Only three other subjects – casualties (15.0%), media (12.5%) and diplomacy (11.8%) – were present in more than 10 percent



**Figure 1** Proportion of stories with a principal or main subject in each category.

of stories. Domestic protest (4.7%) and the rationale for war (4.4%), issues that opponents of the war would wish to see covered, are almost invisible by comparison. Notably, the subject agenda of newspapers compared closely with that of television news in Britain (see Robinson and Goddard, 2006) and with Aday et al.'s (2005) comparable analysis of US television coverage. Like ours, Aday et al.'s findings reflected the dominance of 'episodic battle coverage' (p. 18), and we would agree with them in noting that other important aspects of the war were crowded out as a consequence.

In reporting the Iraq War, there was a remarkable congruence between newspapers in their subject agenda. At 42.7 percent, *The Independent* contained the lowest number of 'battle/strategy' stories but five newspapers occupied a range between 44.2 percent and 48.4 percent. Only the *Daily Mail* (53.7%) exceeded this. There was a difference between newspapers of no more than 5 percent for almost every subject area that we coded, and the occasional discrepancy between them can largely be explained by their differences in style and audience address. *The Sun* and *Daily Mirror*, as downmarket papers, showed a greater interest in 'family life' stories (involving the opinions or concerns of coalition soldiers' families), averaging 5.3 percent, while the upmarket papers averaged 2.0 percent, with the midmarket *Daily Mail* in between at 3.8 percent.<sup>8</sup> Upmarket papers showed a stronger focus on 'diplomacy' (an 11.8% average compared with 6.5% for the two downmarket papers) and on 'reconstruction' in Iraq (9.3% as against a downmarket average of 3.4%). Only with regard to 'casualties' was there a substantial discrepancy, which seemed to suggest strongly divergent editorial priorities. The *Daily Mirror* devoted 27.1 percent of its coverage to this subject, more than double the 12.6 percent average among the midmarket and upmarket papers. Closer examination of these figures reveals a further discrepancy. Most papers' casualty coverage was divided fairly evenly between civilian and coalition military casualties (Iraqi military casualty coverage was negligible throughout, perhaps in part due to lack of firm information) and this was also the case with the *Daily Mirror* (10.3% and 12.8%, respectively) despite its stronger focus on the subject. Civilian casualties were virtually unreported in *The Sun*, however, at 2.0 percent, although it gave almost as much coverage as the *Daily Mirror* to coalition casualties (11.8%). These figures suggest strongly partisan editorial approaches to this aspect of the war story. As civilian casualties rarely played well for the coalition or for arguments in favour of war, they seem largely to have been ignored by the staunchly pro-war *Sun* but emphasized by the anti-war *Daily Mirror*, operating in the same segment of the market.

Likewise, the range of actors mentioned in newspapers was also broadly similar throughout the press. Not surprisingly, political and/or military actors

from the coalition were present in the vast majority of stories (87.3%) with no individual newspaper deviating by more than 4.1 percent from this mean (see Figure 2). But actors associated with the Iraqi government or military were also prominent, appearing in 56.3 percent of stories, with the *Daily Mail* (61.6%) representing the greatest deviation from this figure. In contrast, however, actors associated with anti-war protest were mentioned in only 7.6 percent of stories.<sup>9</sup> Anti-war actors were more common in the upmarket press (8.3%), which might be expected to offer a greater quantity of background coverage, than the downmarket and midmarket press (6.5%), but not markedly so.

Of course, the prominence of actors offers no clue to the way in which the press represented them, as our findings for 'Tone towards actors' indicate. As expected, we found that the majority of references to actors were 'straight' (i.e. without evaluation). But nearly a quarter (23.0%) of newspaper references to the Iraqi regime were coded as 'deflating' while only a single story was 'reinforcing'. Coalition actors attracted much less evaluative treatment from reporters (86.7% of stories were 'straight') and a more even spread of coverage that was approving or critical (3.0% deflating, 5.4% mixed, 4.8%, reinforcing). However, we were surprised at newspapers' tone towards anti-war actors. Based on a much smaller number of stories, we found that 15.1 percent of references were deflating and only 1.0 percent reinforcing. Examining the press as a whole, then, it was clear that reporters were less likely to be evaluative towards coalition actors and that they were prone not only to evaluate but also to deflate the actions of the Iraqi regime and western anti-war actors.

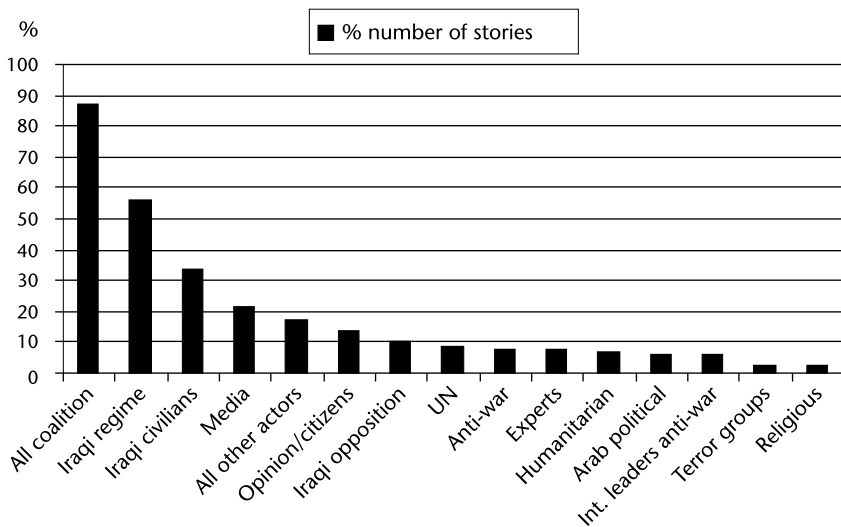


Figure 2 All newspapers: references to actors as a proportion of stories coded.

### Variations among newspapers

However, examining the British press in aggregate is misleading. In Britain's highly competitive press arena, newspapers commonly differentiate themselves from their competitors through their political opinions, editorial enthusiasms and reader address. Although the subject agenda and the range of actors mentioned were surprisingly similar across all papers, this does not indicate that coverage was monolithic. On the contrary, our examination of the tone of reporting reveals that widely divergent approaches were adopted by different newspapers towards the war. When coding the subjects of each story (see Figure 1), we also coded for their tone, as shown in Table 2.

As Table 2 demonstrates, *The Sun* was very much more likely to report subjects in a manner favourable to the coalition than any other newspaper and reported scarcely any subjects unfavourably. Although the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* were not as extremely one-sided, they too reported a remarkably high proportion of subjects in a manner that favoured the coalition's perspective, with *The Times* also substantially more likely to be supportive than critical. But *The Sun's* principal rival, the *Daily Mirror*, reported

**Table 2** Tone towards all principal or main subjects coded (%)

Newspaper	Pro-coalition	Mixed/straight	Anti-coalition	Other	TOTAL (subjects)
<i>Sun/News of the World</i>	589 (63.6)	123 (13.3)	41 (4.4)	173 (18.7)	926 (100.0)
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	290 (31.3)	229 (24.7)	307 (33.1)	101 (10.9)	927 (100.0)
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	365 (47.0)	199 (25.7)	130 (16.8)	82 (10.6)	776 (100.1)
<i>Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	213 (20.4)	389 (37.2)	280 (26.8)	164 (15.7)	1046 (100.1)
<i>Guardian/Observer</i>	280 (23.8)	424 (36.0)	269 (22.9)	202 (17.2)	1175 (99.9)
<i>Times/Sunday Times</i>	435 (34.4)	420 (33.2)	187 (14.8)	223 (17.6)	1265 (100.0)
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	503 (43.2)	330 (28.3)	133 (11.4)	199 (17.1)	1165 (100.0)
All newspapers	2675 (36.7)	2114 (29.0)	1347 (18.5)	1144 (15.7)	7280 (99.9)

Note: 'Pro-coalition' also includes 'Anti-Iraq government' codes and vice-versa. 'Other' codes indicate subjects whose main orientation was neither towards the coalition nor the Iraq government and mainly concerns subjects coded for their tone in relation to 'media', 'protest' and 'diplomacy'. Coding in relation to the interests of different groups produced very few 'straight' codes and here these are aggregated with 'mixed' codes. Not all totals add up to 100.0% due to rounding.

more subjects unfavourably than favourably, as did *The Independent*, with *The Guardian* showing a close balance between the two. Furthermore, *The Sun* was almost half as likely to report subjects in a mixed or straight fashion than any other newspaper. Collectively, the upmarket newspapers contained a higher proportion of subjects coded 'mixed' or 'straight' than their more populist competitors, although this may be attributable in part to a reporting style involving longer and more complex stories. As our pro- and anti- findings show, the likelihood that upmarket papers would be more likely to 'negotiate' the meanings of the subjects that they covered did not indicate that their coverage of the war was dispassionate.

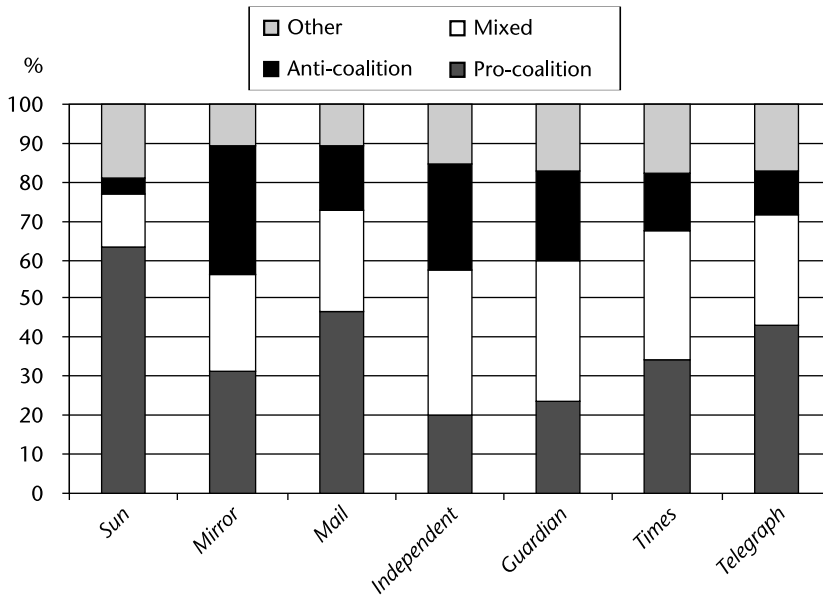
A similar pattern emerges when looking at newspapers' 'tone towards actors', as Table 3 shows. Here again, our results for *The Sun* depart radically from those for other newspapers. Though its 'straight' reporting of coalition actors is only slightly less than other populist newspapers, *The Sun* is reinforcing towards the coalition more than four times as often as the average for all newspapers and two-and-a-half times more than the *Daily Mail*, the next most reinforcing paper. Scarcely any *Sun* stories were coded as mixed or deflating towards coalition actors. The *Daily Mirror* is the newspaper most likely to deflate coalition actors, again with a figure more than two-and-a-half times higher than the next most deflating paper, *The Independent*, although it scores

**Table 3** Tone towards all coalition actors coded (%)

Newspaper	Straight	Reinforcing	Mixed	Deflating	TOTAL (actors)
<i>Sun/News of the World</i>	724 (78.7)	182 (19.8)	9 (1.0)	5 (0.5)	920 (100.0)
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	838 (80.5)	43 (4.1)	44 (4.2)	116 (11.1)	1041 (99.9)
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	742 (82.5)	71 (7.9)	64 (7.1)	22 (2.5)	899 (100.0)
<i>Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	1196 (85.3)	8 (0.6)	139 (9.9)	60 (4.3)	1403 (100.1)
<i>Guardian/Observer</i>	1261 (89.8)	11 (0.8)	99 (7.1)	34 (2.4)	1405 (100.1)
<i>Times/Sunday Times</i>	1256 (91.9)	42 (3.1)	64 (4.7)	5 (0.4)	1367 (100.1)
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	1182 (93.4)	45 (3.6)	32 (2.5)	7 (0.6)	1266 (100.1)
All newspapers	7199 (86.7)	402 (4.8)	451 (5.4)	249 (3.0)	8301 (99.9)

Note: Not all totals add up to 100.0% due to rounding.

third highest for reinforcing the coalition as well. There is an interesting symmetry between results for *The Independent* and *The Guardian* and for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*. The former offer scarcely any reinforcement but a significant amount of deflating coverage towards coalition actors, whereas the pattern is reversed for the latter. And, as in Table 2, the upmarket newspapers emerge as much more likely to report in a manner that is 'mixed' or 'straight'.



**Figure 3** Principal and main subject tone.

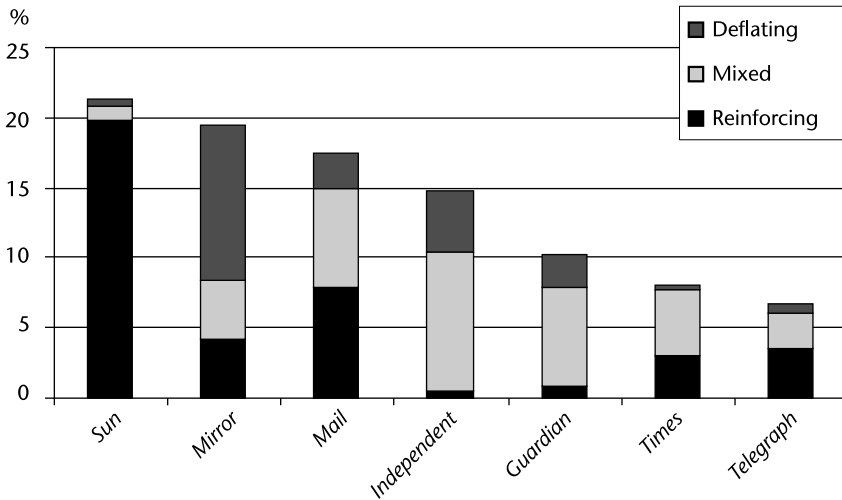
The divergent patterns of reporting among British newspapers become even more apparent if we display our findings graphically. Figure 3 is based on the same data for subject tone as Table 2 but, when viewed like this, our newspapers seem readily to divide into distinct groups based on the orientation of their reporting of the war. We propose that five groups are to be found here:

1. *The Sun*: a clear majority of *The Sun* newspapers' reporting supports the coalition's interests and criticism of it is minimal. Less coverage is mixed than in other papers as well, suggesting relatively little negotiation of the meaning of events or topics. *The Sun* is avowedly pro-coalition and reports issues in simple terms with little concern for opposing viewpoints.
2. *The Daily Mirror*: despite appealing to the same segment of the market as *The Sun*, the *Mirror* newspapers are the most critical of the war.

Anti-coalition subjects occur as frequently as pro-coalition ones (in fact, slightly more). The *Daily Mirror* was robust editorially in its opposition to the war, as we discuss later, and the contrast with *The Sun* is stark.

3. The *Daily Mail*: in common with their midmarket position, the *Mail* newspapers seem to stand midway between *The Sun* and *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. The *Daily Mail* is distinctly pro-war and, were it not for a lesser proportion of coverage orientated towards 'other' perspectives, its proportions of pro- and anti-coalition coverage would resemble closely those of *The Daily Telegraph*. As we show later, however, other indicators show significant differences between the orientation of the *Daily Mail* and that of *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* which suggest a more complicated approach to the politics of the war.
4. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* – the 'liberal' anti-war newspapers: the distributions produced by *The Guardian* and *The Independent* are very similar to one another, containing the fewest pro-coalition subjects, roughly as many anti-coalition subjects (rather more in the case of *The Independent*) and with the highest total reserved for subjects coded as 'mixed'. As might be expected from upmarket papers, the approach to news coverage here offers much more depth and sophistication than in *The Sun* and embraces a range of viewpoints. But these newspapers were unafraid to criticize the invasion and thought of themselves as anti-war.
5. *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* – the 'conservative' pro-war newspapers: although not quite as closely aligned as the previous grouping, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* were substantially more likely to report the war in a manner favourable to the coalition. Nearly twice as many subjects in *The Times* favoured the coalition than were anti-coalition; in *The Daily Telegraph*, the figure was higher still. Nonetheless, there is some mixed coverage and a fairly sophisticated approach overall, as befits the upmarket press.

With 'straight' codes excluded, Figure 4 displays the data from Table 3 as a bar chart. Displayed in this way, the resemblance of our data for 'tone towards coalition actors' to that for 'subject tone' is easy to see. Again, there is a close resemblance between the 'liberal' anti-war newspapers and between the 'conservative' pro-war newspapers, and *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* show themselves to be distinct from the other groupings and diametrically opposed to one another even more clearly than in Figure 3. Here, however, the *Daily Mail's* position is more clearly distinguished from other pro-war papers; it is much less likely to offer 'straight' reporting than *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. In fact, it is interesting overall how clearly market position relates to the quantity of straight reporting, with upmarket papers offering



**Figure 4** Tone towards coalition actors excluding 'straight' codes.

the most straight reporting, downmarket papers the least and the midmarket *Daily Mail* in the middle.

Of course, editorial columns are likely to provide the clearest indication of newspapers' attitudes to the war. More than their news coverage, editorials can be taken to represent the 'voice' of a newspaper because the choice of what to discuss and in what way is the newspaper's alone. An analysis of the tone of editorials, shown in Figure 5, seems to provide the strongest support for the suggestion of five distinct orientations towards the war.

Once again, the upmarket papers divide neatly into 'liberal' anti-war and 'conservative' pro-war groupings. More than 50 percent of subjects in *The Times*' and *The Daily Telegraph*'s editorials were coded pro-war. The *Daily Mirror* is easily the most anti-war newspaper – the only example with more than half of its editorial subjects coded anti-war – but it also admits more pro-war subjects (23.0%) than *The Independent* (5.6%) or *The Guardian* (16.3%). *The Sun*, however, despite scarcely any mixed or anti-war codes, has a surprisingly large category for 'other' subjects, reducing the pro-war component of its editorials to below 50 percent. In fact, this is the result of a series of editorials attacking the war's opponents. *The Sun*'s 'other' category reflects editorials repeatedly containing personal attacks on Jacques Chirac as well the BBC, the UN and prominent British anti-war politicians such as Robin Cook. For each newspaper, the subject tone of its editorials seems to represent a magnification of its stance towards the war when reporting all news stories (i.e. pro-war papers appear as more pro-war; anti-war papers as more anti-war). But the *Daily Mail*'s editorials buck this trend: only 33.9 percent of



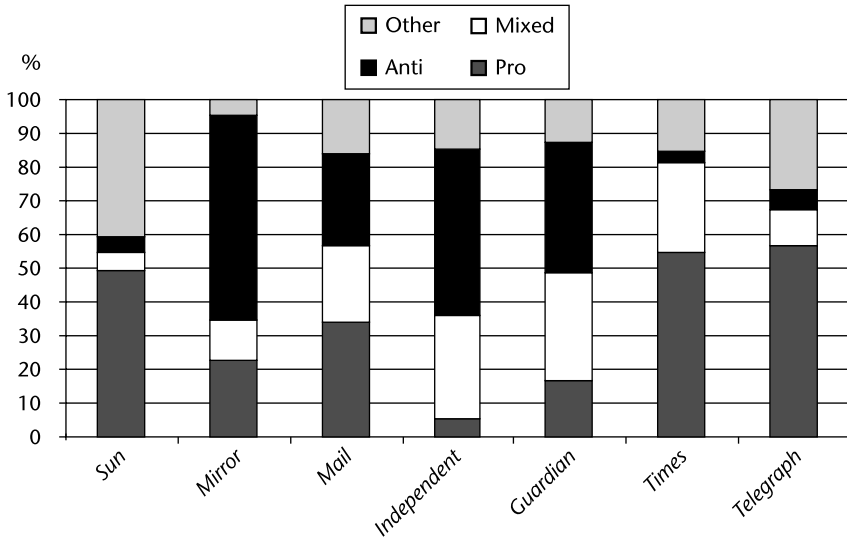


Figure 5 Subject tone towards coalition in editorials.

its editorial subjects support the war, compared with 47 percent in Table 2, and 27.4 percent are critical of it, compared with 16.8 percent in Table 2. On the face of it, this is a puzzling finding, but we believe that it can be explained in relation to longer-term allegiances in British politics. After all, the war took place against the background of the ongoing story of a government already nearly six years old. In so doing, it posed problems for the natural allegiances of British newspapers to party or ideology. The *Daily Mail* found itself in a position of potential confusion – supportive of the war but opposed to the party prosecuting it. We discuss this point further in the next section.

## Discussion

To a considerable extent, our findings for the tone of coverage of the Iraq War in the British press reflect newspapers' publicly stated positions as the conflict commenced. Only *The Sun* was unambiguously supportive:

*The Sun's* message to all Our Boys and Girls on land, at sea, and in the air is from the heart: Fight the good fight with all your might – and come home soon, safe, sound and successful. (20 March 2003: 8)

Each of the other papers surveyed acknowledged doubts about the war, even if – as with the conservative 'pro-war' newspapers – they chose to dismiss them: 'The rights and wrongs of the campaign to oust Saddam will now be

for historians to argue about' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 2003: 25); 'There has not been, despite what some critics charge, an unseemly rush to war on the part of the United States and the United Kingdom' (*The Times*, 20 March 2003: 21). Each drew attention to Saddam's tyranny before urging support for British troops. The 'liberal' anti-war newspapers also promised support for British troops. In contrast with our findings about the extent of the anti-war tone of its coverage, *The Independent's* criticisms were strangely muted as hostilities commenced, calling for 'a swift conclusion with as few casualties on both sides as is possible in war', adding: 'But that does not mean we should not debate how the fighting is about to be conducted' (20 March 2003: 18). *The Guardian* was more forthright:

This war is wrong. It did not need to happen; it is unnecessary and was avoidable ... This recourse to war is a substitute for thought and understanding, divisive in conception and enormously damaging to the international order. (20 March 2003: 27)

In simpler language, the *Daily Mirror* was equally forthright: 'The *Daily Mirror's* view of this conflict could not be clearer – we believe it is wrong, wrong, wrong' (20 March 2003: 6). But, conscious of the need not to alienate its popular audience, the *Daily Mirror* took pains to differentiate its opposition to the war from its support for the troops: adjacent pages, on which a picture of Blair was set against one of a soldier, carried the heading: 'HE's let us down ... HE never will' (*Daily Mirror*, 18 March 2003: 2–3). Three days later, the *Daily Mirror* expressed the same sentiment even more plainly: 'Troops are heroes, the war's insane' (21 March 2003: 8). The *Daily Mail's* position was strangely ambivalent. Although we found that its reinforcing coverage of the coalition greatly outweighed its deflating coverage (see Tables 2 and 3) and that its editorials were more supportive than critical (see Figure 5), it painted itself in terms that echoed the scepticism of the anti-war press – for the troops but against the conflict:

When the troops go into battle, they will – rightly – have overwhelming public support. That doesn't mean the doubts and concerns – so frequently expressed by this paper – have gone away. These are matters that will have to be addressed, once the fighting is done. (*Daily Mail*, 17 March 2003: 10)

It would be rational to expect the positions taken by newspapers to be based upon commercial logic. Certainly there were circulation gains for parts of the press, most notably for *The Sun*, whose March sales showed a year-on-year gain of 4.2 percent. In contrast, the *Daily Mirror* suffered a 4.4 percent loss which was widely blamed on its overtly anti-war stance, a suggestion acknowledged by Piers Morgan, its editor (Cozens, 2003). But such changes cannot, of course, be attributed with any certainty to war coverage and other

newspapers showed no clear pattern in circulation changes. *The Guardian's* circulation grew by 3.9 percent, for example, but *The Independent*, similarly anti-war, lost 1.1 percent.

Essentially, newspapers' attitudes to war seem to be best explained in terms of their ability to triangulate attitudes to three factors: the righteousness of the war itself, the involvement of British troops, the status of the war as a policy identified with Tony Blair and his Labour government. As might be expected in any nation that sends its forces into battle, support for British troops was universal among British newspapers, even those that showed themselves to be uneasy about the rationale for war or its likely effects on the geo-political situation in the Middle East. Understandably, there was a consensus that the responsibility for the invasion of Iraq lay with politicians and not with those carrying out military orders, who were portrayed as highly skilled, efficient and, at times, heroic. Any other stance would be likely to appear deeply unpatriotic. But for anti-war newspapers, principally the *Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* titles, this created a difficult balancing act: how to express opposition to the policy of war without appearing to undermine support for those charged with prosecuting it. The examples from the *Daily Mirror*, quoted earlier, demonstrate the particular pains taken to differentiate opposition to war from lack of support for British forces. Of course, the need for such a differentiation takes on a particular significance in view of the wartime fall in the *Daily Mirror's* circulation.

A further problem lay in the identification of the invasion of Iraq with the Labour government and, in particular, with Tony Blair himself. In some cases, those parts of the press which were editorially inclined to support the invasion and the projection of western power that it represented were also those which had generally opposed the Blair government. At the 2001 general election, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* had both endorsed the Conservative party while other papers, notably *The Times*, supported Labour only grudgingly (see Hall, 2001). But a successful invasion could only reinforce the standing of the Blair government. Here, perhaps, lies the most likely explanation for the confusing stance of the *Daily Mail*, a longstanding critic of the Blair government, in relation to the conflict. Temperamentally inclined to back the invasion of Iraq, it was nonetheless unimpressed by government behaviour in creating a *casus belli* and wary of the boost that a successful invasion could give to Blair's standing and the electoral chances of his party. Tellingly, the *Mail* newspapers reported the huge anti-war demonstration held in London on 14 February almost entirely in terms of its political damage to Tony Blair.<sup>10</sup> For obvious reasons, the *Daily Mail* does not clarify its stance publicly in these terms, so we can only advance this explanation speculatively. Nonetheless, we believe that it provides the best rationale for our findings concerning the *Daily Mail's* coverage of the conflict – it was more markedly

pro-coalition than any other paper besides *The Sun* in its news coverage of the war but much less so in its editorial columns; it was keen to point out to its readers the extent of its 'doubts and concerns' about the invasion in its leader column of 17 March 2003. On the day of the invasion though, when editorial columns of other newspapers were given over to discussion of the war and where their papers stood on it, the *Daily Mail's* editorials focused only on domestic issues.

## **Conclusions**

To some extent, our findings reflect previous aggregate studies of media coverage of conflict. Like Aday et al. (2005: 18) and Lewis et al. (2006: 114), we found the news agenda to be dominated by the reporting of day-to-day events such as 'battle' stories, at the expense of coverage of substantive issues such as the rationale for war. Furthermore, a patriotic emphasis, involving support for British troops and their families, and for their part in the conflict, was present in all newspapers, whether or not they favoured the policy of war. The extent of negative reporting about the Iraqi regime suggested that 'the enemy' were open to being delegitimized – perhaps even demonized – in some parts of the British press. Taken together with the relatively low level of coverage of domestic dissent, this suggests reporting that tended to play well for the coalition.

It has become commonplace to assume that, at times of war, the media tends to act as a 'faithful servant' (Wolfsfeld, 1997) by reproducing elite perspectives with little negotiation. Certainly it is the case that British newspapers were not completely even-handed or 'objective' in their coverage of the war: there was a patriotic inflection, as we have noted, and even the most anti-war newspapers included a quantity of coverage that could be coded as 'reinforcing' or 'pro-war'. However, any commonality of approach within British newspaper coverage of the Iraq War was greatly outweighed by the diversity of voices and viewpoints expressed in, and often endorsed by, elements of the press. There is little sense of the British national newspaper market operating uniformly. Whereas some newspapers – *The Sun*, in particular – may have taken a 'faithful servant' approach, the space given to dissenting voices and viewpoints, particularly in the *Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, suggests a position that at least negotiated the meaning of the war and at times took an oppositional stance. This is an important finding, too, for scholars making international comparisons. A common research model involves taking one, or perhaps two, newspapers from a nation or territory and comparing their coverage and orientation with newspapers from other nations. Although there are limits to the plurality of British press

coverage, our findings suggest that it would be highly misleading to take one or two of these papers to be representative of coverage as a whole.

Finally, and more tentatively, we propose that it is unduly simplistic to represent our findings merely as showing newspapers reflecting, or dissenting from, elite perspectives on war. It is clear that newspapers established divergent editorial perspectives on the war at its outset and, generally, that these perpetuated the much more longstanding editorial orientation of each newspaper. In other words, we suggest that the character of news coverage that we have found is likely to have some degree of historical basis as well as reflecting a complex series of transactions concerning the triangulation of (at the least) support for current policy, patriotism and party allegiance.

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### Notes

- 1 *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government*, 24 September 2002, URL (consulted 17 Sept. 2006): <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page271.asp>; and *Iraq – Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation*, 3 February 2003, URL (consulted 11 Feb. 2007): <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page1470.asp>
- 2 See, for example, *The Sun*, 'Brits 45 Minutes from Doom', 25 September 2002: 1.
- 3 A *Guardian*/ICM poll on the eve of war reported a dramatic decrease in public dis-approval for a military attack, but even then only 38 percent supported military intervention while 44 percent disapproved (Travis, 2003). Robin Cook was the most prominent political 'dissenter', resigning from the government on 17 March 2003. His resignation speech was highly critical of the war but was reported favourably by much of the British press (see Murray et al., 2008).
- 4 This phrase is credited to John E. Mueller (1973).
- 5 The anti-war demonstration on 15 February 2003 is acknowledged as the largest ever demonstration in Britain; that on 22 March as the largest ever in wartime.
- 6 We omitted the *Financial Times* (upmarket) as primarily business-oriented, the *Daily Express* (midmarket) for its similarity to the much larger circulation *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Star* (downmarket) as containing relatively little hard news. Due to the large number of news articles, coders selected the three major news articles from each page of the 'Iraq War' sections of the newspapers. In practice, this ensured that all significant articles were analysed and only brief articles were excluded from the analysis. Articles written by experts, 'news in brief' and political sketches were omitted. The occurrence and subject description of the excluded stories during the period covered by the findings that we present here

- ( $N = 334$ ) were noted in the database. The handbook for coders, containing full instructions to coders on which articles to exclude, is available from the authors.
- 7 Note that some stories were coded as having more than one principal or main subject. In the conflict period, 5750 subjects were coded altogether, occurring in 3696 stories.
  - 8 These figures exclude stories about coalition casualties which were coded separately.
  - 9 This figure includes anti-war actors from the UK, the USA and elsewhere in the world, but excludes international leaders identified with an anti-war stance (see separate column in Figure 2). The latter were mentioned in 5.8 percent of stories.
  - 10 For example, 'A crushing humiliation for Tony Blair' (*Mail on Sunday*, 16 February 2003: 1), and see Murray et al. (2008).

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