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News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing

This article documents three types of media effects that operated on public opinion during the Persian Gulf crisis and war. First, the level of network news coverage matched the proportion of Gallup poll respondents naming the Gulf crisis as the nation's most important problem (agenda-setting). Second, use of data from the 1988, 1990, and 1991 National Election Studies (NES) shows that the weight respondents accorded foreign policy performance when evaluating George Bush significantly increased (priming) in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis. Third, content data (showing that network news coverage was preoccupied with military affairs and highly event oriented) and survey data are coupled to show that respondents reporting higher rates of exposure to television news expressed greater support for a military as opposed to a diplomatic response to the crisis (framing). In conclusion, it is suggested that these effects, in combination with the nature of the media's information sources, were conducive to legitimizing the administration's perspective on the crisis.

When Saddam Hussein decided to invade Kuwait, he set in motion an uninterrupted torrent of news coverage. For the next 6 months, television viewers were fixated on the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the American military buildup, the launching of Operation Desert Storm, and the eventual liberation of Kuwait. The situation in the Gulf represented the single "big story" in the daily flow of public affairs information. More than one third, by elapsed time, of all prime-time network newscasts broadcast between August 1990 and March 1991 were devoted to the conflict (see below for the description of the content analysis).

Not only was the Gulf the subject of extensive news coverage, there is ample evidence that Americans were, in fact, recipients of this coverage. In January 1991, for example, 70% of the public reported that they followed news about the Gulf "very closely." Television news viewing in general surged during this period, and nearly 80% of the public reported "staying up late" to watch news of the conflict (Gallup Organization, 1991a). Another symptom of this surge in viewer interest was the transformation of CNN into a major source of information, with ratings points in the double digits.

The events leading up to the Gulf War provide a powerful "natural experiment" for examining the effects of news on the crystallization and development of public opinion. This article examines, in the context of the Gulf War, three classes of media effects. The first (*agenda setting*) is generally defined as the ability of the news media to define the significant issues of the day. We document this effect by tracking the proportion of the public nominating the Gulf crisis as the nation's most important problem. The second effect (*priming*) concerns the relationship between patterns of news coverage and the criteria with which the public evaluates politicians. We demonstrate that the public weighted their opinions concerning foreign policy more heavily when evaluating President Bush in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Finally, we address *framing*—the connection between qualitative features of news about the Gulf (in particular, the media's pre-occupation with military affairs and the invariably episodic or event-oriented character of news reports) and public opinion. Here the results suggest that the pattern of episodic framing induced individuals to express greater support for a military as opposed to a diplomatic resolution of the crisis.

Agenda-setting, priming, and framing are only three of the ways in which news coverage shaped the public's response to the Gulf crisis. The threat of an imminent full-scale war between the United States and Iraq represented an occasion for rallying behind the administration (Brody, 1991). Additionally, the one-sided "official" message inherent in most news reports was bound to persuade most Americans of the wisdom of President Bush's actions (Zaller, 1991). However, these effects on public opinion (particularly the rally and persuasive effects) have been documented by other researchers and will not be discussed here.

Agenda-Setting

Issues enter and leave the center stage of American politics with considerable speed. In October 1989, the problem of illegal drug usage was foremost in Americans' minds. Seventy percent of the public referred to drugs as a major

national problem. This extraordinary level of public concern prompted the administration to announce a major initiative to deal with the problem. In February 1991, however, drug usage was cited as a national problem by a mere 5% of the public. The most plausible explanation of such dramatic shifts in political priorities is that the amount of news coverage accorded various political issues will dictate the degree of importance that the public attaches to these issues. This argument is referred to as media agenda-setting.

Early agenda-setting studies (conducted in the 1960s) were plagued by a number of conceptual and methodological difficulties, including, most notably, confusion between cause and effect. Did the convergence of newspaper readers' political concerns and newspaper content, for example, mean that the news had set the audience agenda, or did it mean that editors and journalists had tailored their coverage to appeal to the political concerns of their readers? In response to such ambiguities, communications researchers began to track the rise and fall of public concern for particular issues and events in relation to changes in the pattern of news coverage. With few exceptions, these time-series studies uncovered evidence of significant media agenda-setting effects (see Rogers & Dearing, 1988, for a review of these studies).

The time-series analyses further refined the agenda-setting paradigm by incorporating measures of the actual severity of issues (i.e., real world cues) in addition to the level of media coverage as potential determinants of the public agenda. As the level of unemployment increased, for instance, more people mentioned unemployment as a major national problem independently of how much news coverage the media provided (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; MacKuen, 1991). In addition to the state of economic conditions, the level of presidential rhetoric was also found to influence the public's issue agenda. When the president addressed the nation on a particular problem and the address was televised nationwide, he was able to boost public concern independently of the amount of other news coverage accorded that problem (Behr & Iyengar, 1985). Finally, in a further elaboration of the interrelationships between events, network news, and public opinion, Behr and Iyengar (1985) demonstrated that agenda-setting was generally unidirectional—news coverage affected the levels of public concern, but public concern did not, in turn, affect the focus of television news.

The most recent evidence on agenda-setting provides the strongest support to date for the proposition that agenda-setting is not reciprocal. Using laboratory experiments to manipulate the content of television newscasts, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that relatively small exposures to news coverage of particular issues were sufficient to induce significant shifts in viewers' beliefs about the relative importance of various issues.

Agenda-setting effects have been captured for all forms of mass media coverage, in both experimental and survey-based studies, and with open-ended indicators in which respondents identify the "most important problems facing the country" as well as with closed-ended items in which they rate the importance of particular issues. These effects have been observed for both local and national problems. In all these areas, research has shown that individuals habitually refer to issues or events "in the news" when diagnosing current social and political ills. In this study, we examine the effect of Gulf-related media coverage on the salience of national problems. We expect that increases in media coverage will be accompanied by increases in the percentage of the respondents who nominate the situation in the Persian Gulf as the nation's most important problem.

Priming

Whereas the term *agenda-setting* reflects the impact of news coverage on the importance accorded issues, the term *priming effect* refers to the ability of news programs to affect the criteria by which political leaders are judged (for a detailed discussion of priming, see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Priming is really an extension of agenda-setting and addresses the impact of news coverage on the weight assigned to specific issues in making political judgments. In general, the more prominent an issue in the national information stream, the greater its weight in political judgments (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Priming by television news has been established in several experiments, for evaluations of both presidents and members of Congress and across a wide range of political judgments, including evaluations of political performance and assessments of political leaders' personal traits. In general, news coverage of political issues induces stronger priming effects in the area of performance assessments and weaker priming effects in the area of personality assessments.

The evidence demonstrating the existence of priming is not drawn exclusively from laboratory experiments. A recent study based on national survey data found that the public's support for U.S. intervention in Central America became twice as influential as a determinant of President Reagan's popularity in the period immediately following the disclosure that funds from the sale of arms to Iran had been used to finance the Contras (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). In this context, we expect increases in media coverage of the Gulf War to increase the weight that respondents accord the foreign policy domain relative to the economic policy domain when they evaluate the president.

Framing

Research on framing has studied the effects of alternative news frames on the public's attributions of responsibility for issues and events. The concept of framing has both psychological and sociological pedigrees. Psychologists typically define framing as changes in judgment engendered by alterations to the definition of judgment or choice problems. The psychological evidence derives mainly from the work of Kahneman (1982; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). The sociological perspective on framing derives from work by Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974), and tends to focus on the use of story lines, symbols, and stereotypes in media presentations. This literature typically defines news frames in terms of ideological or value perspectives (for illustrations, see Gamson 1989; Gamson & Modighiani, 1986; Gitlin, 1980). Attributions of responsibility for political issues are of interest for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the concept of responsibility embodies an especially powerful psychological cue. Social psychologists have demonstrated that attitudes and actions within a wide variety of areas are altered by the manner in which individuals attribute responsibility (see Iyengar, 1991, for a review of this research).

Attributions of responsibility are generally divided into causal and treatment dimensions. Causal responsibility focuses on the origin of the issue or problem, whereas treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the power either to alleviate or to forestall alleviation of the issue (for illustrative discussions of responsibility, see Brickman, Karuza, Coates, Cohn, & Kidder, 1982; Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). To illustrate with the issue of poverty, causal responsibility concerns the processes by which people become poor, whereas treatment responsibility would seek to establish what could be done to alleviate (or perpetuate) poverty.

Typically, the networks frame issues in either *episodic* or *thematic* terms. The episodic frame depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events—a homeless person, an unemployed worker, a victim of racial discrimination, the bombing of an airliner, an attempted murder, and so on. Visually, episodic reports make for "good pictures." The thematic news frame, in contrast, places public issues in some general or abstract context. Reports on reductions in government welfare expenditures, changes in the nature of employment opportunities, the social or political grievances of groups undertaking terrorist activity, changes in federal affirmative action policy, or the backlog in the criminal justice process are examples of thematic coverage. The thematic news frame typically takes the form of a "takeout" or "back-

grounder" report directed at general outcomes or conditions and frequently features "talking heads."

Given the nature of television news—a 21-minute "headline service" operating under powerful commercial dictates—it is to be expected that the networks rely extensively on episodic framing to report on public issues. Episodic framing is visually appealing and consists of on-the-scene, live coverage. Thematic coverage, which requires interpretive analyses, would simply crowd out other news items. In fact, television news coverage of political issues is heavily episodic. Two thirds of all stories on poverty broadcast between 1980 and 1986 concerned a particular poor person (see Iyengar, 1991, for details). Similarly, of the nearly 2,000 stories on terrorism, 74% consisted of "five" reports of some specific terrorist act, group, victim or event, whereas 26% consisted of reports that discussed terrorism as a general political problem.

Our examination of framing effects is divided into two parts. First, we assess the degree to which network news coverage of the Gulf crisis was episodic. Second, we examine the effects of exposure to television news during the crisis on respondents' policy preferences. Respondents were provided with a choice between a military or a diplomatic response to the crisis. For reasons outlined later, we expect that increased exposure to television news will be associated with increases in support for the military response.

Method

Data

Our analysis draws on three sources of data. First, we use polls taken by the Gallup Organization between April 1990 and March 1991 (see Gallup Organization, 1991b, for details). All these polls used a probability sampling procedure and were based on more than 1,500 respondents.

Our second source of data is a content analysis of network news coverage of the Persian Gulf. One network (ABC) was selected at random. A graduate student coder then randomly sampled two broadcasts per week (one for the first 3 days of coverage) from each Monday through Friday between August 2, 1990, and May 4, 1991. Using the Vanderbilt *Television News Index and Abstracts*, the coder performed a text-based analysis of 79 broadcast news reports. This sample represents 40% of the total number of news programs broadcast during this period.

Finally, we used the National Election Study surveys from 1988, 1990, and 1991. Each survey used probability sampling and personal interviews

with respondents. In addition to the indicators that we use, respondents were asked about political parties, institutions, public officials, and topical issues. The 1988 survey was administered between November 12, 1988, and January 10, 1989 ($N = 2,040$). The 1990 survey was administered between November 10, 1989, and January 26, 1991 ($N = 2,000$). Virtually all respondents in this survey (97%) were interviewed before the outbreak of the air war on January 16, 1991. The 1991 survey reinterviewed a subset of respondents from the 1990 survey ($N = 1,385$) in June and July of 1991 to form the NES "Panel Study on the Consequences of War."

Measures and Procedures

The only measure taken from the Gallup surveys was the most important problem question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country?" The aggregate proportion of respondents mentioning the economy, the budget deficit, the drug and crime problem, and the Persian Gulf was recorded for each poll. These percentages were then compiled to create a time-series for these four problems.

Several different measures were extracted from the text-based coding of the *Abstracts of ABC's "World News Tonight"* stories relating to the Gulf and recorded, beginning with the amount of time taken up by each. The average amount of Gulf-related coverage per month was then calculated by summing the total number of minutes from that month's sampled broadcasts and dividing by the number of reports sampled. The proportion of news coverage allocated to the Gulf was determined by dividing the coverage of the Gulf by all coverage.

The central theme and source of each Gulf-related story also were recorded. We classified the themes into four subject matter categories corresponding to news coverage of diplomacy, military activity, and the ramifications of the conflict for Iraqi and American society. The number of minutes of news coverage allocated to official sources (basically, members of the Bush administration or the Department of Defense) was divided by the total amount of news to produce a measure of "official journalism." Finally, the *Abstracts* were examined to determine whether news reports were *primarily episodic* or *primarily thematic*. Episodic coverage focuses on specific events; thematic coverage is broader in scope and refers to the policy debate, historical background, or possible political consequences connected with Gulf-related actions. The amount of episodic coverage was then compared to the amount of thematic coverage.

A subset of 49 of the 79 sampled broadcasts was independently coded by a second graduate student. The level of intercoder agreement was greater than 90%. Similar levels of intercoder reliability (using the identical episodic vs. thematic classification scheme) have been reported in previous research on television coverage of political issues (Iyengar, 1991).

In testing the priming and framing hypotheses, we relied on a number of survey items taken from the NES surveys. In the case of priming, we used a series of questions on presidential performance. These were worded as follows (NES variable numbers for 1988, 1990, and 1991 are included in parentheses): "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush [or Ronald Reagan] is handling our relations with foreign countries?" (v256, v206, v2119) and "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush [or Ronald Reagan for 1988] is handling the economy?" (v227, v204, v2123). These questions were coded *approve strongly* (1), *approve not strongly* (2), *disapprove not strongly* (3), and *disapprove strongly* (4). The dependent variable in the priming analysis was the "feeling thermometer" question, which asked respondents to rate George Bush on a 0- to 100-degree scale, with higher ratings indicating more positive feelings (v154, v237, v2205).

The variable of interest in the framing analysis is a measure of policy preference taken from the 1990 study. It consisted of the following two questions. First (v738), "Which of the following do you think we should do now in the Persian Gulf: pull out U.S. forces entirely; try harder to find a diplomatic solution; tighten the economic embargo, or take tougher military action?" Respondents who mentioned the tougher military response were scored as 1 and respondents who did not mention this response were scored as 0. Second (v737), "Do you think we did the right thing in sending U.S. military forces to the Persian Gulf, or should we have stayed out?" The responses to this question include *right thing* (3), *stayed out* (1), and *other* (2). The two questions were significantly correlated ($r = .30$) and were summed to form an index of policy preference that ranged from 0 (*preference for a diplomatic response*) to 4 (*preference for a military response*).

We incorporated two measures of television exposure from the 1990 survey into the framing analysis. The first tapped respondents' self-reported frequency of news watching: "How many days in the past week did you watch the news on television?" (v127), for which the number of days was coded (0 to 7). The second was an index of general political information. Following Converse (1962) and Price and Zaller (1991), we assumed that old information begets new information and that individuals most likely to receive and retain news coverage of the Gulf are those already relatively informed about public affairs. Respondents answered a battery of seven political identifica-

tion questions, including Dan Quayle, George Mitchell, William Rehnquist, Mikhail Gorbachev, Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela, and Tom Foley (v835 to v841). One point was awarded for each correct answer to produce a 0 to 7 scale of general political information.

Respondent's partisanship, race, gender, and education were included in both the priming and framing analyses as control variables. Partisanship (v274, v643) ranged from *strong Democrat* (0) to *strong Republican* (6). Race (v412, v1428) was coded as White (0) and all else (1). Gender (v413, v1427) was scored 0 for female and 1 for male. Education (v422, v1208) was coded on seven levels from *less than eight grades* (1) to *college* (7). Finally, one additional control variable was included in the framing analysis. This was the respondent's attitude toward defense spending (v924), which ranged from *greatly decrease defense spending* (1) to *greatly increase defense spending* (7).

Analysis

Before discussing the specific statistical tests used in the analysis, we summarize the previous discussion and formally state the three media effects hypotheses under consideration.

Hypothesis 1 (agenda-setting): Increases in the level of media coverage accorded to events in the Persian Gulf will be associated with increases in the proportion of respondents naming the Gulf crisis as the nation's most important problem.

Hypothesis 2 (priming): The weight that respondents accord foreign policy performance when evaluating the president will significantly increase during and after the Gulf crisis.

Hypothesis 3 (framing): Respondents reporting higher rates of exposure to television news will express greater support for a military as opposed to a diplomatic response to the crisis.

As a test of agenda-setting, we plotted the average amount of Gulf-related coverage per month against the percentage of Gallup respondents who nominated the Gulf, the economy, the budget deficit, and drugs or crime as the nation's most important problem. Because of the limited number of data points, we relied on a simple correlation to test the statistical significance of the relationship between Gulf coverage and the proportion of respondents who named the Gulf as the nation's most important problem. We used multiple regression techniques to test the priming and framing hypotheses. The regression specifications were as follows. For priming, the feeling thermometer rating was regressed against foreign policy performance, economic performance, party identification, education, and race. For framing, the

index of policy preference was regressed against the information index, self-reported television news exposure, party identification, education, gender, and race. The specification also included a pair of interactive terms between gender, race, and the index of information. These interactive terms capture the differential effects (if any) of information on policy preference among men and women and Whites and minorities.

Results

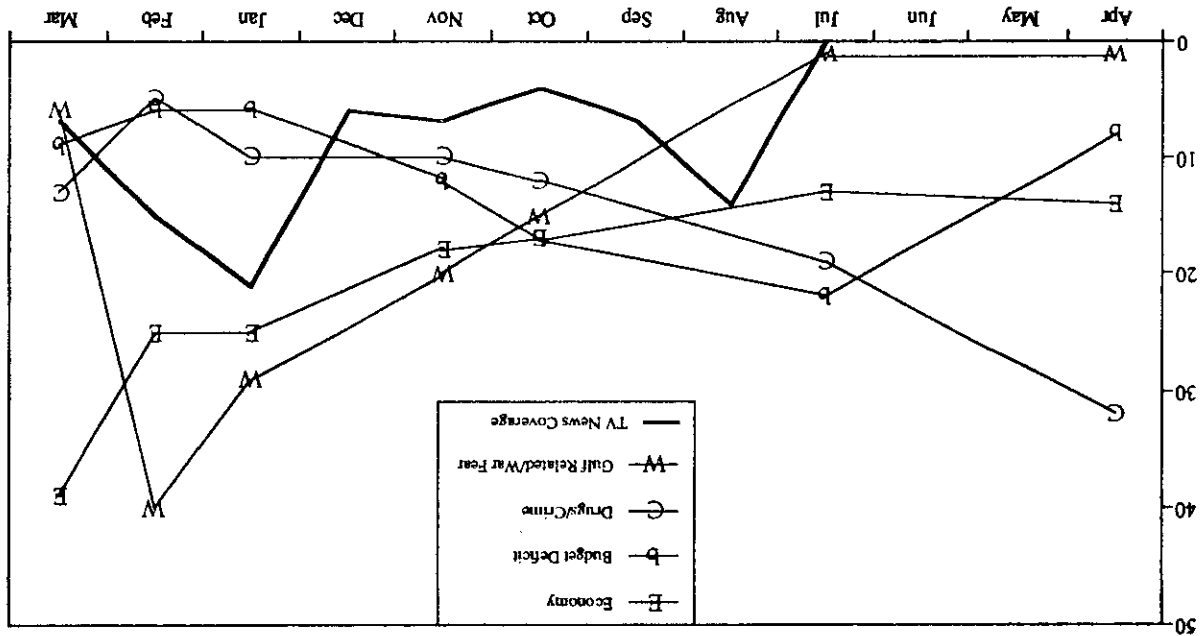
Agenda-Setting

How did the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait affect the political agendas of Americans? In July, immediately prior to the invasion, Americans were preoccupied with domestic problems. Drug usage and crime, the state of the economy, and the federal budget deficit were the issues most likely to be nominated as the most important problems facing the nation. This trio of issues was mentioned by more than 50% of survey respondents. In Figure 1, we trace the trends in responses to the Gallup poll's most-important-problem question between July 1990 and March 1991 in relation to the amount of television news coverage of the Gulf.

Beginning in August, the Gulf absorbed virtually all network news time. The sheer amount of news peaked (at over 2 hours of news coverage in August) immediately following the Iraqi invasion. Between September and December, news from the Gulf averaged approximately 60 minutes per month. The onset of the air war in January and Operation Desert Storm in February raised the level of coverage to about 90 minutes per month. Thus there was an initial period of saturation coverage followed by a steady state of heavy news that culminated in 2 months of virtual saturation coverage.

Turning to the issue salience data, the conflict in the Gulf achieved parity with the economy and deficit as an agenda item as early as October. By November, references to the Gulf had surpassed mentions of the economy to become the preeminent national problem in the eyes of Americans. At its peak (in February), the Gulf came in for a greater share of public attention than the economy, deficit, and drugs combined. Just as rapidly, the Gulf disappeared from the public agenda. Following the cessation of hostilities, responses to the most-important-problem question reverted to their preconflict state, with one notable change: although the economy shared center stage with drugs and the deficit prior to the conflict, at the end of the war, the economy had come to overshadow all other domestic issues. Overall, the amount of media coverage accorded to the Gulf's situation and the proportion

Figure 1: Trends in Issue Salience and Gulf-Related News Coverage (Y axis = percentage nominating or average minutes per month; X axis = month).



of respondents nominating it as the nation's most important problem were highly correlated ($r = .85$).

Most discussions of agenda-setting are unidirectional in nature—increases in news coverage are thought to bring about increases in the salience of particular issues or events. The evidence in Figure 1, however, not only highlights the dramatic surge in the salience of the Gulf conflict but also indicates the bidirectional nature of the agenda-setting process. That is, the emergence of the Gulf as the most important national problem was accompanied by a sudden (and pronounced) decline in the prominence of drugs and the budget deficit. In effect, intensive news coverage generated by a crisis issue not only elevates the prominence of the target issue but also removes other issues from public attention. It is important to note, however, that this "hydraulic" pattern did not apply to the economy. Although references to economic problems remained relatively stable during the early phases of the conflict (October and November), the economy actually gained in salience between November and February. By March, the economy was clearly the preeminent agenda problem—references to economic problems exceeded references to all other domestic issues. It is possible that the continual coverage of the Gulf crisis prompted viewers to consider simultaneously the economic and military risks posed by the conflict, thus elevating their concern for economic problems. Alternatively, the public may have been responding on the basis of prevailing economic conditions—that is, as the economy worsened, more people identified it as a significant problem.

Priming

In the context of the Gulf crisis, the priming hypothesis predicts that, over time, Americans will assign a greater weight to their beliefs and opinions concerning foreign policy in general when forming impressions of George Bush in 1990. Our data stem from the 1988, 1990, and 1991 NES postelection surveys. In each year, we analyzed the effects of the public's ratings of presidential performance on the economy and foreign policy on their overall feelings toward George Bush. These results are given in Table 1.

The evidence is consistent with the priming hypothesis. Foreign policy performance assessments tended to override economic assessments in their impact on thermometer ratings of George Bush during the Gulf crisis, whereas the reverse was true in 1988. A similar analysis (not reported here), using ratings of overall presidential performance as the dependent variable, produced identical results. These results are also suggestive of the hydraulic pattern found in the agenda-setting section above. Increases in the impact

Table 1
Determinants of Feelings Toward George Bush

	Year					
	1991		1990		1988	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Foreign policy performance (disapprove)	-9.24	0.53	-6.00	0.29	-4.40	0.56
Economic performance (disapprove)	-7.08	0.53	-4.96	0.31	-7.95	0.57
Gender (male)	0.41	1.64	-1.01	0.83	-1.43	0.98
Party ID (Republican)	1.29	0.27	2.09	0.22	4.12	0.28
Education	-0.76	0.32	-0.49	0.25	-0.33	0.31
Race (non-White)	-5.88	1.63	-1.03	1.20	1.52	1.45
Adjusted R ²	.47		.47		.47	
n	1,228		1,925		1,713	

Note. Entries are multiple regression coefficients and standard errors estimated with controls for education, gender, partisan identification, and race. In 1988, both performance questions referred to Ronald Reagan.

of foreign policy performance assessments on global evaluations of the president were accompanied by small decreases in the importance of economic evaluations. Overall, the evidence suggests that the Gulf conflict altered the principal basis of President Bush's popularity from the state of the national economy to foreign policy matters. Because the public rated Bush more favorably on foreign policy, their overall impression of the president was made more positive; his mean feeling thermometer rating rose from 60 in 1988 to 64 in 1990 and 71 in 1991.

Framing

We examined the prime-time newscasts broadcast by ABC News between August 1990 and April 1991 (see Figures 2 and 3). Not surprisingly, television news coverage of the Gulf was heavily episodic or event oriented. The typical news story transmitted information about specific developments or live occurrences. Each day, viewers were provided the next episode in the developing confrontation between the United States (and its allies) and Iraq. Rarely were viewers provided background in the form of analyses of the antecedents of the conflict, historical precedents of similar territorial disputes, information about the socioeconomic and cultural makeup of Iraqi and Kuwaiti society, or other such contextual presentations.

The *diplomatic* and *military* categories in Figures 2 and 3 are self-explanatory. Stories included in the *Iraq* and *U.S.* categories (which were collapsed into

Reports on ongoing diplomatic efforts accounted for most coverage throughout the period, except during the months of January and February, which were characterized by a flurry of reports on the ground war. Within each subject matter category (but particularly news reports on diplomacy), episodic reports overwhelmed thematic reports by a huge margin.

How might this pattern of predominantly episodic news coverage affect public opinion toward the Gulf conflict? Previous research has investigated the effects of the episodic and thematic news frames on viewers' attributions of responsibility for various political and social issues (including poverty, unemployment, crime, terrorism, racial inequality, and the Iran-Contra affair). Under thematic framing, viewers tended to assign responsibility for national problems to general societal factors, including cultural norms, economic conditions, and the actions or inactions of public officials. When television news coverage presents a general or analytic frame of reference for national problems, the public's reasoning about causal and treatment responsibility is societal in focus. Under episodic framing, however, viewers attributed responsibility for national problems not to societal or structural forces, but to the actions of particular individuals or groups. For example, when poverty, crime, and terrorism were depicted in episodic terms, viewers attributed causal and treatment responsibility primarily to poor people, criminals, and terrorists. Confronted with a parade of news stories describing particular instances or illustrations of national issues, viewers focus on individual and group characteristics rather than historical, social, political, or other such general forces. In this respect, episodic framing encourages reasoning by resemblance—people settle upon causes and treatments that "fit" the observed problem.

In the context of the Gulf crisis, the important policy question concerned the appropriate strategy for ending the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, that is, a question of treatment responsibility. Given the pervasive use of episodic framing, it was anticipated that exposure to television news coverage of the Gulf crisis would strengthen a preference for punitive (i.e., military) as opposed to diplomatic or economic remedies. This hypothesis is based on the evidence cited above that episodic framing of "public order" issues such as terrorism and crime instills attributions of punitive treatment responsibility. Because the conflict in the Gulf may be considered analogous to issues of law and order (Iraq as the transgressor, Kuwait as the victim, and United States as the law enforcer), it was anticipated that exposure to television news would enhance viewers' preference for military as opposed to diplomatic responses to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.

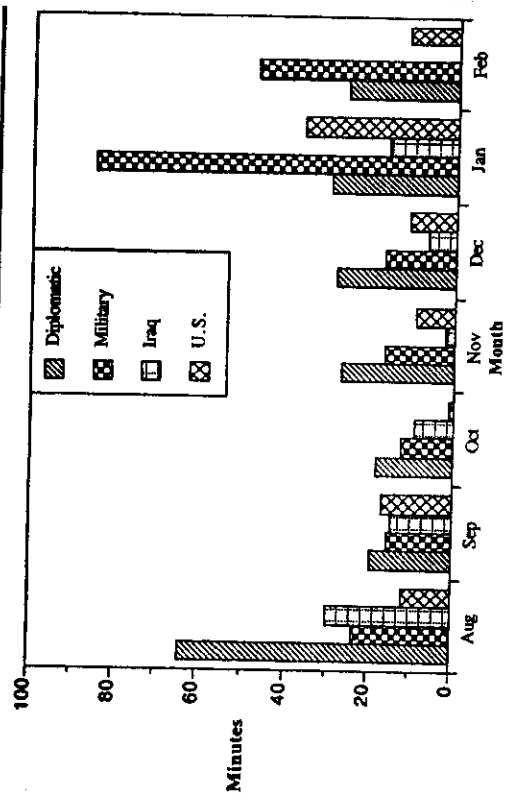


Figure 2: Trends in Gulf-related news coverage by subject matter.

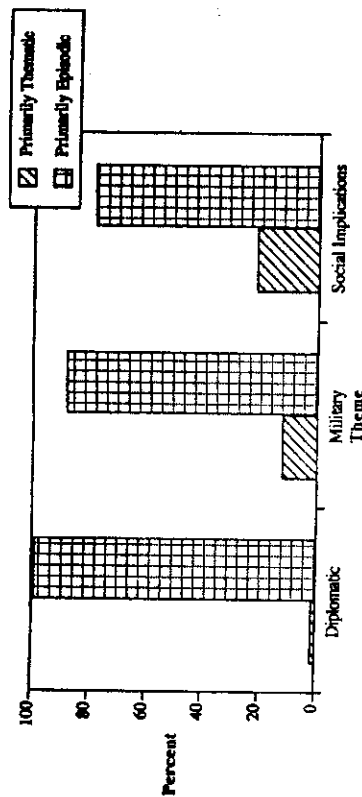


Figure 3: Mix of episodic and thematic framing in Gulf-related coverage.

a single category in Figure 3) included reports on the economic consequences of the military buildup, reports of ethnic strife (in the case of Iraq), public opinion and elite debate, the impact of the crisis on civilian life, and so on.

Table 2
Support for Military Rather Than Diplomatic Response

	b	SE	p level
TV news exposure	0.02	0.01	.03
Information	0.07	0.03	.03
Gender x Information	-0.09	0.04	.02
Race x Information	0.10	0.06	.08
Gender (male)	0.57	0.11	<.001
Race (non-White)	-0.76	0.13	<.001
Party ID (Republican)	0.07	0.01	<.001
Defense spending (favor)	0.20	0.02	<.001
Education	0.07	0.02	<.001
Adjusted R ²		.19	
n		1,763	

Note. Entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients, standard errors, and their corresponding significance levels.

We attempted to examine this particular connection between television news coverage and public opinion by using our two measures of exposure to television news (self-reported frequency of exposure and the general political information index) and the index tapping support for military over diplomatic solutions to the conflict. We relied on two different indicators of exposure to television news. Following Zaller (1991), we assumed that the effects of information on support for a military response would be stronger among groups with relatively low levels of political information. Therefore, we computed two interactive terms between information and respondents' race and gender. These interactions were then included in the regression equation. Finally, we also controlled for respondents' preferences concerning military spending, on the grounds that those who favor increased military spending would be more hawkish on the Gulf crisis. The results of this analysis are provided in Table 2.

Partisanship, race, gender, and education—all affected respondents' policy preferences concerning resolution of the conflict. Republicans, males, those with more education, and Whites tended to support the military option. Support for increased defense spending was strongly associated with a more militaristic outlook toward the conflict. Both indicators of exposure to television news exerted significant effects—more informed respondents and respondents who watched the news more frequently were most apt to favor a military resolution. The effects of information were markedly stronger among women and minorities, suggesting that groups relatively inattentive

to public affairs were especially affected by exposure to news of the crisis. (Women, for example, received a mean score of 1.8 on the information index in 1990, whereas men received a mean score of 2.5.)

Overall, then, there were statistically significant traces of the expected relationship. Exposure to episodic news programming strengthened, albeit modestly, support for a military resolution of the crisis.

Discussion

The evidence presented here indicates that television news coverage of the conflict in the Persian Gulf significantly affected Americans' political concerns and the criteria with which they evaluated George Bush. Prior to the crisis, Americans were preoccupied with economic problems and crime, and their feelings toward George Bush were colored primarily by economic considerations. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf crisis became the public's paramount concern, and evaluations of George Bush became more dependent upon foreign policy considerations. Finally, we find support for the hypothesis that exposure to episodic framing of the crisis increased viewers' support for a military resolution of the conflict.

As Walter Lippmann (1922/1965) noted nearly 70 years ago, we tend to know little about "what is happening, why it happened and what ought to happen" (p. 39). But, in modern times, we do have pictures in our heads, courtesy of ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC.

It is now well established that television news has a significant impact on public opinion. The Gulf War was a mediated issue par excellence, and the results shown here, that American public opinion would follow the course of television news coverage, were predictable. The influence of the media inevitably gives rise to a host of questions concerning the determinants of news coverage and the practice of public affairs journalism.

In a simpler era, Lippmann (1922/1965) drew a distinction between "news" and "truth," and first posed the question—fundamental to democratic functioning—of how closely the news could be said to reflect the truth. The discrepancy between the two has surely been increased by the present governmental domination of the flow of information. As the recent examples of Grenada, the Gulf crisis, and Somalia make clear, print and broadcast news coverage of world events involving the use of U.S. military force have propagated the worldview and policy preferences of the incumbent administration. The media portrayed Grenada as a hotbed of communist insurgents hatching terrorist plots and jeopardizing American lives. Saddam Hussein

was portrayed as a modern Hitler, bent on annexing Kuwait and controlling the world's supply of petroleum. In Somalia, the deployment of U.S. troops was seen in exclusively humanitarian terms.

Journalists have attributed their tendency simply to repeat the governmental "party line" to the unavailability of other sources of information. As correspondent John McWethy has described the journalist's predicament: "When you are in a situation where your primary source of information is the U.S. Government, . . . you have to make an assumption that the U.S. Government is telling the truth" (quoted in Hertzgaard, 1989, pp. 233-234). In our analysis of network news reports on the Gulf Crisis, more than 50% of all reports examined emanated directly from official spokespersons. Even allowing for the most benevolent and accessible of administrations, this de facto stranglehold over the news guaranteed that there would be a certain disjuncture between actual events and the media's depiction or interpretation of events. The successes of American technology, such as the interception of Iraqi Scud missiles and the destruction of military installations by "smart" bombs, and the "malevolence" of the Iraqis, as demonstrated by the deliberate igniting of oil wells, were the staples of news coverage. Contrary themes, such as the devastation of a Third World nation, the scale of civilian casualties, or the deliberate burial alive of Iraqi conscripts in their trenches, were ignored. The practice of "official" journalism thus ensured that the public's and the president's understanding of this international crisis would be congruent.

Authors' Note: We are indebted to Sharmaine Vidanage for her invaluable research assistance and to two anonymous reviewers for comments on a draft of this article. Preparation of this article was supported in part by a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship to Adam Simon. All correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Shanto Iyengar, Department of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

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