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Legitimizing organisational decisions: A study of media framing of the Australian Government's legitimacy strategy and public opinion on the war in Iraq

Abstract

This study investigates how organisations seek to legitimate their decisions by tracking the relationship between press releases issued by the Australian government to support their involvement in the Iraq war, media framing of news stories about this issue, and public opinion. Using a qualitative content analysis of government press releases and media coverage, and the results of Newspoll opinion polls, the study showed that despite shifts in the framing of the stories, public opinion remained almost constant. Given these results, the authors suggest that using media coverage as a reflection of either the organisation's legitimating attempts, or of public opinion may provide an inaccurate account of the legitimacy of an organisation's decisions.

Keywords: legitimacy, media framing, public opinion, Iraq war, government

Introduction

Maintaining positive stakeholder perceptions of the organisation's legitimacy in the face of unpopular decisions and public crises is a concern for both government departments and the private sector. The development of appropriate strategy is usually required by such organisations in order to avoid or contain the problems arising in the event of a contentious issue. The media is one tool commonly used to address public level issues because of its ability to reach a wide group of stakeholders.

On one hand, communication managers use media to broadcast information about their organisation's activities. Media coverage is also used as a measure of stakeholder opinions about the organisation and as a gauge of legitimacy. Despite these attempts by organisations to manage the messages about their practices and the subsequent perceptions of the legitimacy of those actions, the results in terms of public opinion are not necessarily related. This was the case when the Australian government decided to send troops to Iraq as part of the USA-led Coalition of the willing.

The case

Throughout 2003 and 2004, one of Australia's most topical and divisive issues was the Government's decision to send troops to Iraq. During the initial stages, the Government stood firm on its key reason for supporting the United States led alliance to invade Iraq - that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. As the campaign progressed, these weapons were not found, forcing the Government to address the apparent discontent within the media and the public with that decision.

Throughout this period, public opinion was divided. When the key premise given for the decision to join the U.S. led invasion rapidly became more unlikely, Australian

Prime Minister John Howard found himself needing to defend his actions to the public. Howard's response to the growing discontent within the Australian public was to defend the Government's support of the war in Iraq by attempting to manage perceptions of the legitimacy of its actions.

A major focus of the Government's legitimacy strategy was the dissemination of press releases to the media, with the aim of legitimizing government actions. However the media also play a role in influencing public opinion through framing stories relating to these releases in a particular way. This study investigates the relationship between the Government's legitimating strategies, media framing, and public opinion regarding Australia's involvement in the Iraq war.

Legitimacy

The subject of legitimacy has been studied in relation to both organisations and to governments. Suchman defines the concept of legitimacy as a perception that the actions of an entity are "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995, 572). Furthermore, Elsbach and Sutton claim that an organisation can be described as legitimate "when it is endorsed and supported by a segment of society large enough to ensure its effectiveness" (1992, 700).

In relation to governments, Mitchell's definition of legitimacy of authority states that it is "a matter of belief concerning the rightfulness of the institutional system through which authority is exercised, concerning the rightfulness of the exercisers' incumbency in the authoritative role within the institutional system, concerning the rightfulness of the command itself" (Mitchell 1979, 14). Similarly, Beetham (1991, 150) argues that governments cannot feel completely safe in their election to the position of government

without the support of those who elected them to the position originally. The ultimate test of the legitimacy of governments in democratic political systems is through the electoral system (Beetham, 1991, 164). Whilst the public elect a political party to power, their time in government is determined by public opinion of the legitimacy of their actions taken during their period of power. For the purpose of studying the legitimacy strategy of the Australian Federal Government during the war in Iraq, legitimacy is defined as occurring when the government makes policy decisions in the best interests of the public and thus holds the support of the public majority, who has consented to their governance through the electoral process (Mitchell, 1979, 14 and Beetham, 1991, 164).

Media Framing

Media framing revolves around the key idea that the media provides a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, 143) to the stories that are published. Tuchman (1978, in Ferguson, 2000, 232) suggests that through the process of media framing the news media present a particular frame or perspective through which the population is able to learn about themselves, institutions and other societies. However, the process of framing can also be responsible for concealing news and occurrences, thus preventing certain information from becoming public knowledge (Tuchman, 1978, in Ferguson, 2000, 232.).

In framing a particular news story, the media often use cultural symbols, such as the categories of hero and villain, good or bad (Bird and Dardenne, 1987, 80, in Ward 1995, 113). Hallahan (2000, 208) states that “framing operates by providing contextual cues that guide decision making and inferences drawn by message audiences”. Such cues

can occur either directly or indirectly, and include verbal, written and symbolic devices (Nelson and Kinder, 1996, 1057).

An important aspect of the media's function achieved through framing is the provision of information to initiate public discussion of important issues (Hurst and White, 1995). They argue that the media has a responsibility to "make their fellow citizens aware, not only of facts but of various interpretations of those facts" (1995, 17). As such media framing of an issue not only brings information to readers but also presents interpretation of that information in a way that allows for public discussion and the formation of public opinion.

Public Opinion

One established discussion of public opinion has focused on the role of the mass public in the process of government policymaking. This draws on the Aristotelian view that the contingent views of the 'public', and the role of practical wisdom are important in determining problems of the day (Peters 1995 in Glasser & Salmon). The media play a major part in both the formation and communication of public opinion by facilitating two-way communication between the public and government (Ferguson, 2000, 7). Public opinion is a way through which the mass public are able to "participate in and influence government" (Lipari, 1995). To gauge public opinion, 'snapshots' of public opinion are taken to capture a consensus at a given time (Cutlip et al. 2000, 265). The collection, tabling and presentation of public opinion through opinion polls allows for analysis and comparisons to be undertaken.

Pan and Kosicki (1997, in Shah et al, 2002, 343) suggest that "research on public opinion needs to pay closer attention to issue regimes that dominate news coverage of

politics ... for news reports on these common classes of coverage provide the basic standards citizens use to form and adjust their evaluations of politicians". This argument suggests that public opinion can be influenced through media coverage and media framing. This supports Shah et al's (2002, 344) argument that the use of particular frames and cues which become shared by political elites and journalists, have become common place in news coverage and are likely to be responsible for public opinion formation about politicians.

While interpersonal discussion is an influential source of information and opinion formation, the media is the major source of information delivery to the public in modern societies (Mutz, 1998). Simon and Xenos state that the public relies on the mass media for its political information and that the political information they provide is the basis on which public discussion follows (2000, 363). Similarly, Nelson and Kinder (1996, 1055) argue the mass media's importance in framing issues which then "shapes understanding of the roots of contemporary problems". In qualifying the need for a media coverage and opinion poll cross correlation, Jaspersen, Shah, Watts, Faber and Fan argue that "many models of public opinion suggest that presentation of issues in the media play an important role in shaping the attitudes of the public" (1998, 205). Furthermore, they argue that the media framing process can influence and form public opinion during times of war and international policy disputes (1998, 207).

The war in Iraq represents one of the major issues faced by the Australian Government and the Australian public over the last few years. This study draws on the concepts of legitimacy, framing and public opinion to develop an in-depth analysis to determine the relationship of media framing of the Australian Government's legitimacy

strategies and influence on public opinion of the war in Iraq. This study will investigate the link between the Government's legitimacy strategy as evidenced in press releases, media framing in print articles, and finally public opinion assessed through Newspolls.

Method

The study takes a qualitative approach and uses content analysis (Weber, 1992) to identify key themes and compares them to the themes that emerged in public opinion polls. Sources of data include government press releases, media coverage of those releases and the results of public opinion polls from 2003 and 2004. To study the legitimating strategies employed by the Australian Government, press releases were collected from the Australian Liberal Party website (www.liberal.org.au), The Minister for Foreign Affairs' website (www.foreignminister.gov.au) and the Australian Prime Minister's website (www.pm.gov.au). In all, 42 press releases with topics relating to "Iraq", "weapons of mass destruction" and "Saddam Hussein" were collected for the period of 01 January, 2003 and 01 July, 2004. Ten press releases from each date range were randomly selected to avoid bias and provide equal numbers for comparison (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998). A preliminary scan of the content was then performed to confirm suitability for this study.

Print media articles detailing Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq were accessed through the Australian New Zealand Reference Centre electronic database via EPNET. To negate potential bias that may occur in any individual newspaper, five Australian newspapers were used, including The Australian (national), The Courier-Mail (Brisbane), The Sydney Morning Herald (Sydney), The Daily Telegraph (Sydney), and The Herald Sun (Melbourne). These particular newspapers were selected for their high

circulation in major regions of Australia (Deegan, 2001). A total of 20 newspaper articles from each date range were selected for the study.

The third source of data was from opinion polls drawn from the Newspoll website (www.newspoll.com.au). The opinion polls were searched for words relating to “Iraq”, “weapons of mass destruction” and “Saddam Hussein”. Three specific opinion polls were then selected based on their relevance to topics from the periods outlined by the specific chosen media frames, published on 24 March, 2003, 22 July, 2003 and 11 February, 2004. The time periods and justifications for their use in this analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Time Period	Justification for Time Period
Time Period 1: 01/01/03 – 24/03/03	The lead up to war and the initial engaging of war. Major discussions were held in relation to the deployment and role of Australian troops to Iraq.
Time Period 2: 25/03/03 – 22/07/03	Immediately after the start of the war. Questions began to be asked regarding the Governments reasoning for going to war.
Time Period 3: 23/07/03 – 11/02/04	Discussions of the war. The absence of weapons of mass destruction became apparent.

Table 1. Justification of time periods used in the study

All three time periods were used to analyse the legitimacy messages put forward by the Government in its press releases and the frames presented through newspaper coverage. However only two time periods (25 March, 2003 – 22 July, 2003 and 23 July 2003 – 11 February, 2004) were used to analyse public opinion as only these two opinion polls used the same question. The use of opinion polls which ask the same question allows for a direct comparison of results and the possibility of any change in results due

to questioning is negated. As no such question was asked during the time period 01 January, 2003 – 24 March, 2003, this period has been excluded from the analysis of public opinion.

This study drew on three frames. The first two – talk and crisis – were identified in Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber and Fan’s (1998) study of shifts in public opinion on the issue of the U.S federal budget in relation to shifts in media content. A third frame - justification - was used drawn from studies using justification as a legitimating strategy (Zajac and Westphal, 1995; Wade, Porac and Pollock, 1997). These were used to represent the range of intensity levels surrounding the specific issue (Jasperson, et al 1998). Key words and phrases that defined each frame were then used in coding the press releases and media articles as depicted in Table 2. These three frames were developed in order to analyse the press releases and newspaper articles in relation to the three phases the Australian Government experienced regarding its commitment to the war in Iraq.

Frame	Key Words
Talk	Warns, will, possess, progress, anticipated, encouraging, achieve, achievement, national interest, determined, support, confirmed, performed.
Justification	Claims, suspected, speculation, justify, justifying, truth, judgment, credible, intelligence, doubt.
Crisis	Unable, unaware, inability, unaccounted, false, hyped, sexed-up, blow, undermined, admitted, conceded, inquiry, probe, exaggeration, furore, embarrassed, apologized, responsibility.

Table 2. Frames and associated key words developed for the study

The talk frame featured non-threatening discussion of the situation in Iraq. The frame comprised of press releases and newspaper articles that simply reported the

Government's reasoning for going to war and other important developments without any overt form of media bias. These articles simply stated the facts as put forward by the Federal Government and included both governmental quotes and newspaper comment.

The justification frame relates to press releases and newspaper articles in which the Government was responding to criticisms or where the media was criticizing the Government. This frame is described as 'justification' as much of the discussion details the Federal Government's responses to initial criticisms and questions. In this frame, initial questions and doubts were being raised by the media.

The crisis frame represents news articles that openly criticize or negatively frame the Government as it became increasingly unlikely weapons of mass destruction would be found in Iraq. The crisis frame also represents the Federal Government's response to accusations of deception and the launch of an inquiry into whether they had lied to the Australian people about the reason to go to war.

After identifying the three key frames, coding of each press release and news article was performed. Coding consisted of a manual search for the identifying key words of each frame. After conducting the coding of each frame, a confirmation of the context in which these key words were used in each individual article was performed in order to ensure the accuracy of the above mentioned categorisation. This confirmation was achieved through a manual search of each article to determine the context in which the key words were used.

The percentage of press releases and newspaper articles falling within each of the frames was then calculated. This system of percentage calculation allows for comparison of the smaller number of issued press releases with the larger range of news reports

gathered from newspapers. This was done to balance the number of press releases and news articles collected. These percentages were then analysed within each of the media to determine whether there was an increase or a decrease in each of the frames as time progressed. This process involved calculating and plotting the individual framing percentages for both press releases and news articles on Microsoft Excel. These were then studied to determine whether any patterns emerged within either the press releases or the news articles for the period of 01 January, 2003 to 11 February, 2004.

The next step performed was an analysis of the percentages between each of the media. The aim of this analysis was to determine whether there was a correlation between the frame of the press releases and the frame of the newspaper articles for the studied period. The final step of the analysis was a comparison of the newspaper article frames to the opinion polls during the time period to determine whether public opinion had been affected as a result of an increase or decrease of newspaper articles of a particular frame. In order to perform this analysis two opinion polls, which were taken during two significant stages of the period, were chosen. The question asked in the opinion polls was:

“Thinking now about Iraq. In the lead up to the war in Iraq, do you think the Howard Government knowingly misled the Australian public about whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, unknowingly misled the Australian public, or did not mislead the Australian public?” (Newspoll, August 05, 2004, www.newspoll.com.au)

Findings

Each source of data was assessed in terms of the three identified frames. It was expected that a relationship would exist between media framing and public opinion, however the findings reveal that this is not the case.

Press Releases

Talk - Overall this was the prominent frame in the press releases throughout the entire period examined. Initially the talk frame represented 90% of the press releases steadily decreasing throughout the remainder of the period to ultimately reach 40% in the final time period.

Justification - Initially there were only a small number of press releases issued by the Government in the justification frame. This small number of 10% then increased to a steady 30% throughout the two later time periods.

Crisis - There were no press releases within the crisis frame at the beginning of this exercise. However this progressively increased to 30% in the final time period.

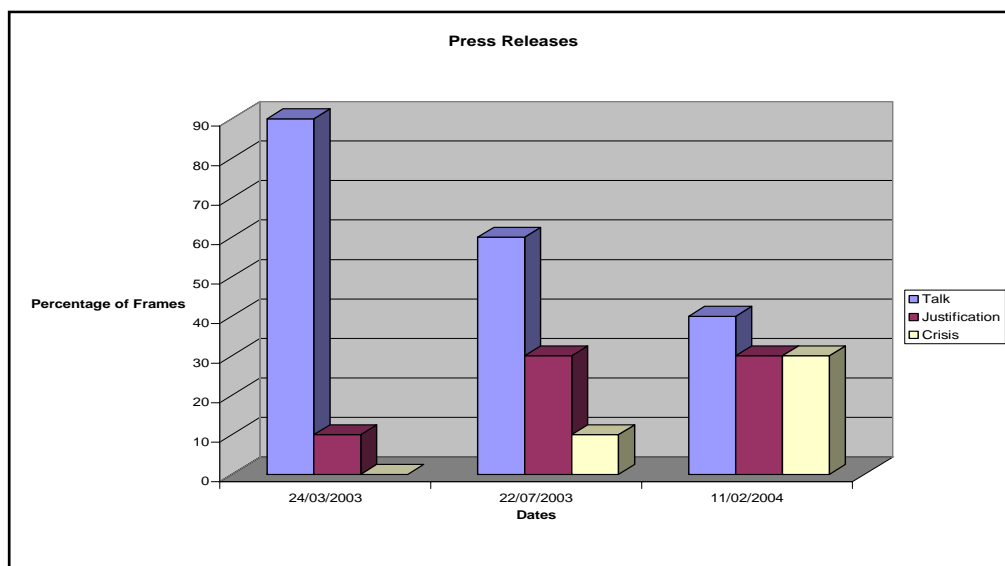


Figure 2. Analysis of frames used in press releases

Newspaper Articles

Talk - The percentage of newspaper articles appearing within the talk frame for the first period was again high. There then appears to be little pattern as the percentage of articles decreased from 55% in the first to 15% in the second period before increasing again to 25% in the final period.

Justification - There again does not appear to be a trend in the percentage of articles appearing in the justification frame. In the first time period there were 40% of articles appearing in this frame. This increased to 45% in the second period before decreasing to 25% in the final period.

Crisis - The percentage of articles found in the crisis frame, as expected increased during the identified periods. The increase was from 5% during the initial period, through 40% to 50% in the final period.

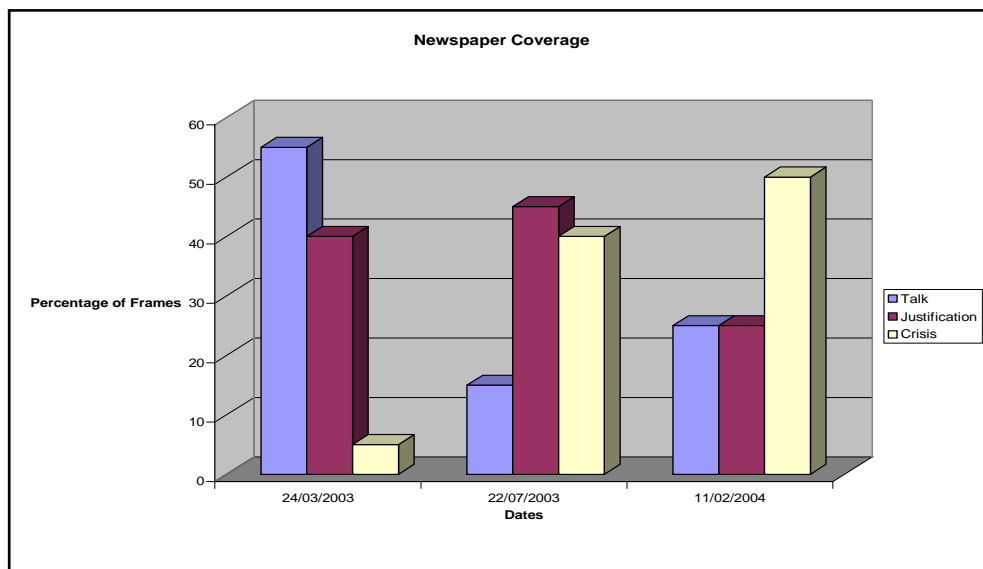


Figure 3. Analysis of frames used in newspaper coverage

Opinion Polls

For the purpose of this study two specific opinion polls were chosen on the basis that they were the only two polls which asked precisely the same question, over a significant period of time. These results indicate that in the initial poll taken on 22 July, 2003, 67% of those polled believed they were misled, either knowingly or unknowingly. There was little change in this figure which decreased slightly to 62% by 11 February, 2004. Results are summarized in Table 5.

Public Opinion/Date	24/03/03	22/07/03	11/02/04
Knowingly Mislead	Nil	36	26
Unknowingly Mislead	Nil	31	36
Total Mislead	Nil	67	62
Did not Mislead	Nil	25	26
Uncommitted	Nil	8	12

(Newspoll, August 05, 2004, www.newspoll.com.au)

Table 5. Opinion Polls

Discussion

The results of this analysis indicate a number of findings in both the message strategy employed by the Federal Government and the degree of influence that media framing of the issue had on public opinion. Overall, despite changes in the framing of the story, there was little change in public opinion.

The government's press releases were predominantly written in the talk media frame with the focus on positive and descriptive news of Iraq. The key to this strategy was the proposition that continual reinforcement of positive information will influence the public and form a belief that the Government was acting with legitimate actions. The Government used 'impression management' tactics, through which specific portrayals of events and actions were sought to have an influence on public opinion and raise overall

public support (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992, 700). The Federal Government attempted to do this by repeatedly issuing talk framed press releases based on the rebuilding of Iraq, positive human interest stories of Iraq people and continual reiteration that the war was proceeding quickly and effectively with minimal Australian casualties.

Despite the dominance of the talk frame in the press release analysis, the majority of the newspaper articles were found to be focussed within the crisis frame. As the war progressed and as it became more apparent that the Government's primary reason for deploying troops - to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq - was invalid, the percentage of articles within the crisis frame dramatically increased. As the war continued, the Government began to face regular criticism and questioning from the media and the Federal Opposition. Although it would appear that the Federal Government chose to concentrate their media strategy on positive and descriptive news of Iraq, the news articles did not reflect this. This result is demonstrated in Figures 4, 5 and 6.

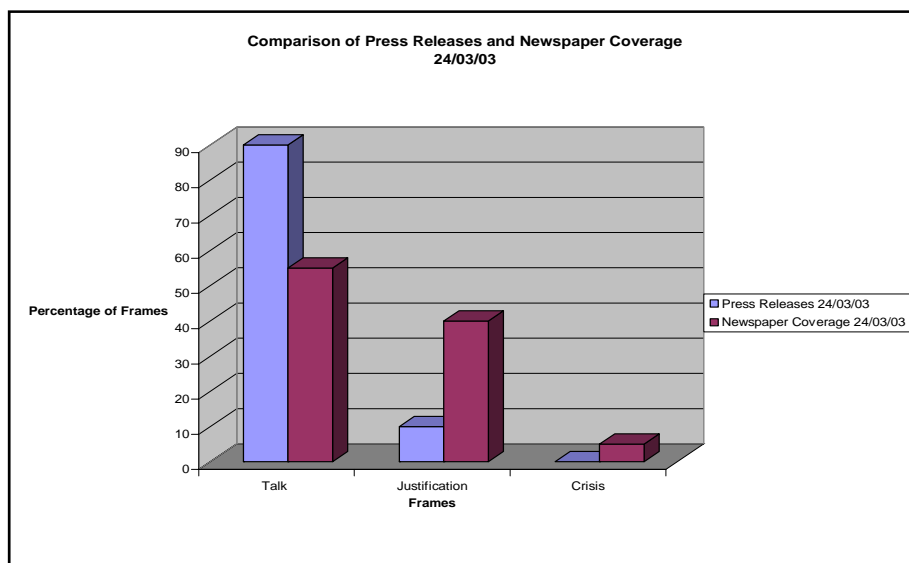


Figure 4. 24/03/03 comparison of frames used in press releases and newspaper coverage

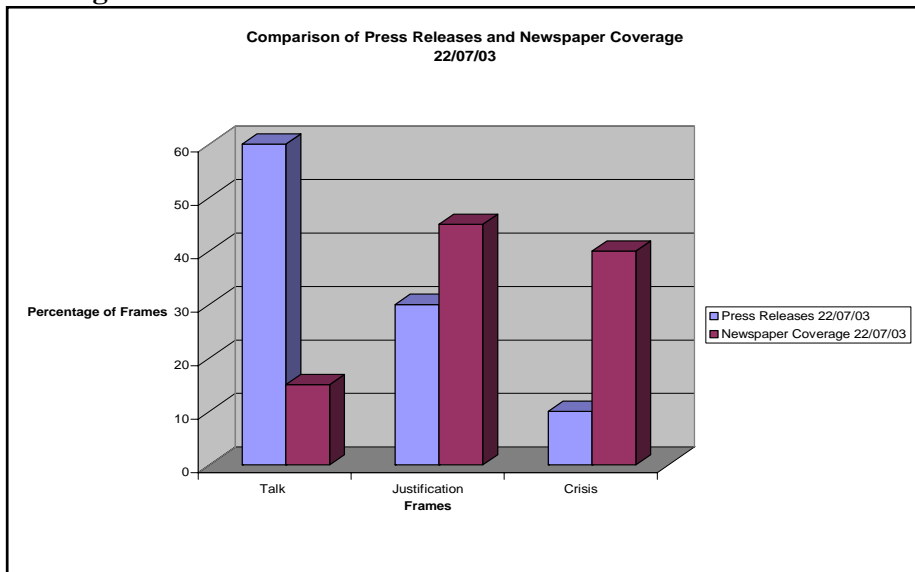


Figure 5. 22/07/03 comparison of frames used in press releases and newspaper coverage

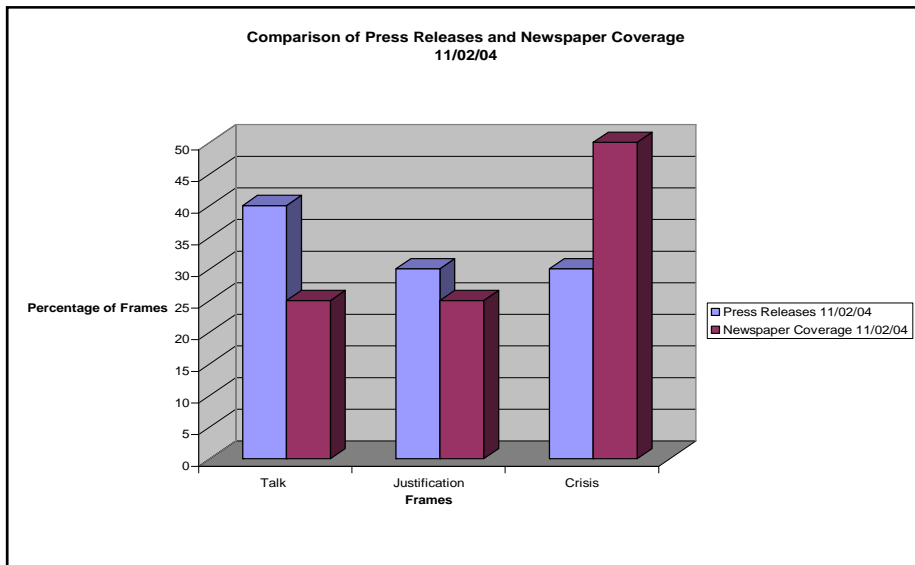


Figure 6. 11/02/04 comparison of frames used in press releases and newspaper coverage

These findings suggest there is no direct relationship between the frame of the press releases and the frame of the newspaper articles. While the Federal Government issued predominantly positive talk press releases, the media chose to publish a higher percentage of negative crisis articles. There can be two reasons for this.

In explaining such phenomena, Hallahan (2000, 208) suggests that negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information and is more attention-getting than positive information. Jasperson notes that “conflict among elites helps to raise reader interest and, as a result also raises the perceived importance of the content of the conflict” (1998, p219). Therefore the media is more inclined to publish negative stories that arouse the interest of the public. This explains why the media focused heavily on crisis frames over the final two periods despite the fact that the Government issued talk press releases.

An alternative argument is that journalists write to reinforce what their audience already believes. Hallahan (2000, 228) states that “market models of journalism suggest that journalists will purposefully strive to frame stories in ways that resonate with what journalists perceive to be the largest segment of their audience”. It could be argued that journalists perceived the public to be against the war and for this reason chose to release a growing percentage of articles which fell within the crisis frame.

According to media framing theory, such a large percentage of newspaper articles appearing in the crisis frame in February 2004 should have caused some corresponding impact in the opinion polls. This does not appear to be the case, as indicated in Figure 7.

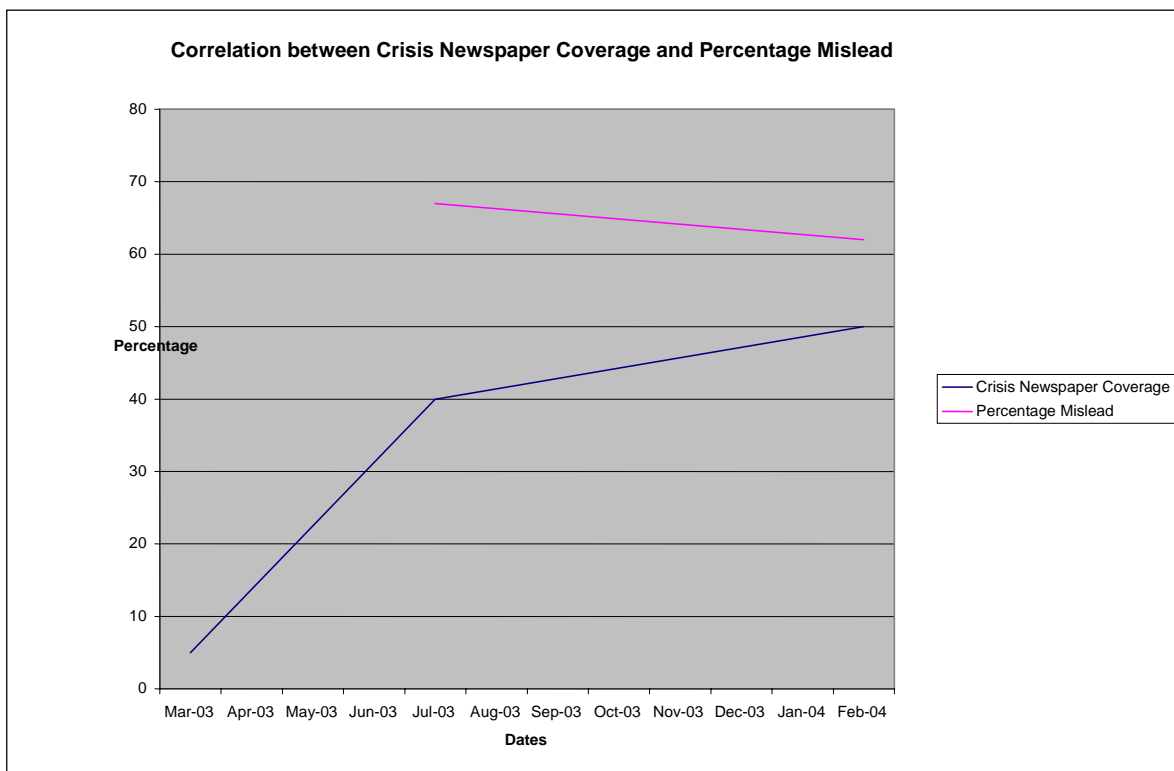


Figure 7. Correlation between Crisis Newspaper Coverage and Percentage Misled

As can be seen in the analysis of crisis newspaper coverage and percentage of the public who believed they were misled, as shown in Figure 7, there appears to be a negative relationship between the two variables. As of 22 July, 2003, 40% of news articles were crisis framed. At this point 67% of the public believed that Howard had misled the Australian people about whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. However, as of 2 February, 2004, as crisis framed news reports rose to 50% of total news articles published on the issue, the percentage of those who believed they were misled slightly declined to 62%.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this analysis is that for the total period studied, July 2003 – February 2004, public opinion remained at a relatively constant

percentage. Despite the high percentage of newspaper articles in the crisis frame, public opinion was not greatly affected. Whilst the percentage of people who maintained they had been misled, either on purpose or not, remained consistently high, (67% and 62% respectively) it would appear that the increase in crisis news frames had little impact in raising this percentage further. Rather, as the crisis media frame increased from 40% on the 22 July, 2003, to 50% of all articles, on 11 February, 2004, the opinion polls show a slight decrease in percentage.

Implications

The first implication relates to the relationship between framing in press releases compared to framing in media content. As the government and the media have different agendas, their framing is considerably different over time. If organisations seek to legitimate their actions through impression management in press releases a closer understanding of the subsequent treatment of those releases by the media and of public sentiment can provide guidance to the framing. In this study, releases issued by the Government continued to focus on the ‘talk’ frame discussing positive human interest stories of Iraq people which were not the focus of the media coverage. The study by Elsbach (1992) suggested that media printed stories that were favourable to the aims of the organisation attempting to manage perceptions of their legitimacy. This was not the case in this study. As such this provides an opportunity for further research into legitimacy strategies by governments and organisations when media does not frame coverage in the same way as the impression management attempts. For practice, it suggests that a clear understanding of the nature of the issue being framed and media’s

reaction to it before assuming that media will frame stories in a similar way to press releases.

The findings of this study also present a number of implications for the role of media coverage in influencing public opinion. As the findings indicate, the resulting increase in crisis framed media coverage had a negative relationship with public opinion. The fact that crisis framed media coverage has little impact in shifting public opinion is a significant finding in this study is consistent with similar findings by Jasperson et al. (1998, 219). In their study, Jasperson et al. found that the crisis frame was too conflictual in content (1998, 219). When frames contain such highly conflictual content, defensive behaviors of the recipient are activated and thus the persuasive role of the frame is reduced (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, 436, in Jasperson et al., 1998, 219). Jasperson suggests that when the intensity of the debate is too arousing, as categorized in the crisis frame, “the effect on the salience of an issue is diminished” (Jasperson et al., 1998, 219).

The resulting implications that can be drawn from these findings are that public opinion can be formed and maintained despite media framing and legitimising attempts by the organisation. This study has also indicated that although framing is used by the Government in issued press releases, the media often re-frames the message in corresponding newspaper coverage to target the largest segment of their audience, thus often disregarding the key message of the initial press release. As such organisations and governments attempting to manage their legitimacy need a close understanding of public opinion about the issue rather than solely relying on media coverage as a source of information about sentiments among key stakeholders.

(4500 words)

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