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None Dare Call It Torture: Indexing and the Limits of Press Independence in the Abu Ghraib Scandal

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This paper considers the extent to which leading news organizations use independent documentation to build interpretations of events that challenge official framing. The data presented in this study show that despite available evidence and sources to support a counterframing of the Abu Ghraib prison story in terms of a policy of torture, the leading national news organizations did not produce a frame that strongly challenged the Bush administration's claim that Abu Ghraib was an isolated case of appalling abuse perpetrated by low-level soldiers. The press struggled briefly, and in limited fashion with the question of whether events at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere reflected an administration policy of torture, but "abuse" was by far the predominant news frame. The case of Abu Ghraib offers a critical test of agreement and differences among theories of event-driven news, cascading activation, and indexing. Although all the 3 models were implicated in this case, the data, drawn from a content analysis of the Washington Post, CBS Evening News, and a sample of national newspapers, fit most closely with the predictions of the indexing model.

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When U.S. Army Specialist Joseph Darby arrived at his post at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in November 2003, he heard about a shooting in Tier 1A. He asked the military police officer in charge of the area, Specialist Charles Graner, if there were any photos of the site. Graner gave him two CDs of photos, but they were not what Darby expected to see. As a *Washington Post* story later put it, those images would soon "become iconic, among them, the naked human pyramid, the hooded man standing on a box hooked up to wires" (Higham & Stephens, 2004). It is a measure of the photographs' impact that they could be described as "iconic" only 3 weeks after CBS's *60 Minutes II* made the photos public on April 28, 2004.

The photos may have become icons for the world, but inside the United States, their meaning became the object of a political framing contest that raised questions

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about how much independent evidence the mainstream press needs about an event before it can challenge official government definitions. President Bush, administration officials, and other Republican party leaders immediately and emphatically labeled the events at Abu Ghraib isolated cases of “mistreatment” and “abuse” at the hands of low-level soldiers, rejecting the claims of some commentators that the photos signified a new departure in U.S. foreign policy—the deliberate torture of terror suspects. The data reported here allow us to assess the relative power of dramatic events, independent documentation, and elite debate in shaping news framing of U.S. foreign policy. These news dynamics are important to understand because they determine levels of U.S. journalistic independence that enable the “watchdog” role that is so important to democratic theory (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Cook, 2005).

In particular, this study critically examines the degree to which press independence is enhanced by event-driven news dynamics (Bennett & Livingston, 2003; Lawrence, 2000; Livingston, Bennett, & Robinson, 2005; Livingston & Van Belle, 2005). Abu Ghraib initially became big news because digital cameras in the hands of military personnel enabled the press to build a story that was largely buried behind Pentagon walls before the photos emerged. The question is how that high-profile story subsequently unfolded in ways that might have affected opinion formation and government responses (Lawrence & Bennett, 2000).

Models of news events and framing

Previous research has shown that dramatic and troubling events can provide legitimizing pegs to support relatively independent and critical news narratives, even allowing the news media to set the agenda more proactively than usual (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Lawrence, 2000; Molotch & Lester, 1974). For example, two major U.S. news events that seemingly demanded interpretation—the 1991 beating of Black motorist Rodney King by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department and the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado—became opportunities for the news to deliberate about problems those events seemed to signify (Lawrence, 2000). The Columbine shooting was framed in terms of a variety of social problems, such as the corrosive effects of widely available guns and a violent popular culture (Lawrence, 2001; Lawrence & Birkland, 2005). Examples of the event-driven news model in foreign policy include the so-called CNN effect, in which the media purportedly use gripping events to draw U.S. policy makers into the foreign policy fray (Livingston, 2000; Potter, 2002).

The “indexing” hypothesis (Bennett, 1991) would predict that most of this event-driven news soon becomes constrained by the standard journalistic practice of tying, or indexing, story frames to the range of sources and viewpoints within official decision circles, reflecting levels of official conflict and consensus (Bennett; Bennett & Klockner, 1996; Entman & Page, 1994; Hallin, 1986; Mermin, 1999; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). Most independent story frames introduced by journalists are soon reigned in

by officials who strive to “get on top” of an event-driven story, particularly in foreign policy news, where journalists may be especially reluctant to probe far beyond the cues offered by highly placed U.S. sources. Livingston and Bennett (2003) examined 8 years of international stories on CNN and found that even though new news-gathering technologies have allowed ever greater numbers of event-driven stories to appear, officials “seem to be as much a part of the news as ever” (Livingston & Bennett, 2003, p. 376).

There are, of course, some chinks in this routine relationship between the government and the press. In foreign policy, some observers point to the weakening of the Cold War bipartisan consensus as a possible opening for more independent reporting (Entman, 2004a). Althaus (2003) similarly proposes that journalists may exercise greater “discretion in locating and airing oppositional voices”; yet, his empirical examinations conclude that today’s mainstream press does not “produce many bold statements of fundamental criticism” of U.S. foreign policy (Althaus, 2003, p. 404).

Overall, this research indicates that the press act more as “guard dogs” of the foreign policy establishment than its watchdogs (Donahue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995). At some point, the Internet may make it possible for more Americans to gain a different perspective through foreign news outlets, but the arc of news framing and public opinion during the Iraq war suggests that indexing still cues opinion.

What becomes important for theory building is to understand more precisely the limits of indexing and the room provided by events for more independent press framing. The above research suggests that event-driven and indexing dynamics are not diametrically opposed models of the news. Rather, these dynamics coexist and are often intertwined. Some (though not all) of the predominant frames in the Columbine story, for example, were suggested to reporters by leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties who were eager to capitalize politically on the event (Lawrence & Birkland, 2005). The curious result of the interplay of events and official framing is a “semi-independent press” characterized by moments of relative independence within a more general pattern of compliance with government news management (Bennett & Livingston, 2003).

Entman’s (2004a) model of “cascading activation” (borrowing a metaphor from literature on “knowledge networks” and “spreading activation”) incorporates aspects of the event-driven and indexing models but adds finer gradations of political power. According to this model, “the ability to promote the spread of frames is stratified” across several levels of U.S. political players, from the White House and the Departments of Defense and State at the top, to members of Congress, ex-officials, and well-placed experts one step below, to news organizations further down (p. 11). News frames are most likely to be activated at the top and spread down the ladder, but counterframes may also work their way up. As in the indexing model, Entman (2004a) posits that journalists are more likely to create counterframes, when officials at the top levels are not united, but his model adds additional counterframing circumstances: when midlevel sources pushing alternative frames are readily available and when the events being covered are culturally ambiguous.

Seen through these models, news frames are predictable responses of the media to particular sets of event characteristics, cultural values, and political power relations in government. The event-driven model suggests that the greatest press discretion in framing choices may be in the immediate aftermath of an event, when news organizations offer dramatic imagery that challenges the news management skills of government. The indexing model suggests that subsequent news framing will narrow or widen depending on how officials respond to the story: If officials present a unified front, critical counterframes may be curtailed; on the other hand, if serious official debate breaks out, particularly with policy-making implications, counterframes may expand. According to the cascading activation model, the degree of counterframing also depends largely on divisions among elites, but troubling cultural resonances and the efforts of peripheral sources can also result in more assertive journalistic counterframes. The Abu Ghraib story offers an opportunity to critically assess these three perspectives on news frames, with implications for a general model of press–government relations.

Applying the models to Abu Ghraib

The case of Abu Ghraib offers a critical test of agreement and differences among these theories, based on several elements. The event-driven model is in play because photographic and documentary evidence emerged that was not fully controlled by government elites. Leading news organizations independently publicized the photos and advanced the story by publishing images of hooded and leashed prisoners, pyramids of naked bodies, and other indelible scenes (although CBS, at the Bush administration's request, initially held its Abu Ghraib story for 2 weeks). Moreover, the events depicted in the photos demanded interpretation as they were highly challenging to Americans' social identity as a morally upright nation (Jones & Rowling, 2006). Indeed, interpretations varied across the political spectrum, from cultural critic Susan Sontag's assessment that the "torture" pictured in the photographs showed U.S. policies and attitudes at their starkest (Sontag, 2004) to radio pundit Rush Limbaugh's assertion that the photos showed nothing more than the "need to blow some steam off" among beleaguered soldiers (quoted in Meyer, 2004). These characteristics support an event-driven news prediction of critical counterframes to compete with official explanations. Our data show an early, modest emergence of such frames, followed by their startling disappearance.

A cascading activation model is engaged by the relative difficulty for the administration of framing Abu Ghraib in a favorable light, and by the presence of credible midlevel sources that framed events at Abu Ghraib in terms of larger problems of neglect, abuse, and even officially authorized torture at U.S.-run facilities in several countries. The *Washington Post* reported for the record at least 12 distinct sources of evidence of systemic problems pointing to a possible pattern of torturing detainees at detention sites in Iraq and elsewhere (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2005). For example, journalists quickly gained access to a summary report of 14 investigations

of U.S. detention facilities in Iraq conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2003, which charged that military police repeatedly engaged in “excessive and disproportionate use of force ... resulting in death or injury” of detainees, and described the routine stripping, humiliation, and physical mistreatment of prisoners as “tantamount to torture” (ICRC, 2004). Credible accounts by independent journalists also supporting a torture policy frame were also available to mainstream news organizations throughout the story (Danner, 2004a, 2004b; Hanley, 2003a, 2003b; Hersh, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). In addition, a series of government investigative reports made public throughout the spring and summer of 2004 contained evidence that the photographs captured only the tip of the iceberg in terms of conditions in U.S. detention centers (Danner, 2004a; see, e.g., Schlesinger, 2004). A general who authored one of the reports conceded that some of the events at Abu Ghraib qualified as torture (White, 2004). Moreover, leaked governmental memos showed a list of legally questionable interrogation techniques—some of which appear in the photos from Abu Ghraib—that were authorized by the Defense Department for use at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (Priest & Stephens, 2004; UN Commission on Human Rights, 2006). Additional memos revealed that White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales (who soon would be nominated for U.S. Attorney General) had loosened the official definition of torture to allow more coercive interrogation techniques against detainees in the war on terrorism (Zernike, 2004). According to the event-driven and the cascading activation models, these sources might lead the mainstream press to counterframe this event-driven story. Our data indicate that such framing was at best limited.

The indexing hypothesis is also in play in this case. As various levels of the Executive Branch and Congress became publicly engaged with the story, public statements were made, documents released, and hearings held. Yet, a consistent and organized political opposition within government or from presidential candidate John Kerry failed to arise. The absence of such official opposition supports an indexing prediction that Bush administration framing would trump the available evidence and lesser sources that challenged it. In short, this case enables us to assess the relative workings of indexing, event-driven, and cascading activation models in accounting for the framing of the story.

Why the frame matters

It is important to make clear that we do not claim that torture was the only correct label for the events at Abu Ghraib. Nor do we argue that competing available frames for Abu Ghraib “should” have had absolutely equal footing in the news. However, given the array of sources described briefly above, “torture policy” was a counterframe worthy of public discussion, and it was a frame supported by evidence and sources available to mainstream journalists.¹ The empirical question becomes, to what extent and under what circumstances did news organizations highlight the torture frame versus the administration’s preferred “isolated abuse” frame? We seek

the best empirical explanation of press behavior to better understand what the press responds to when it frames news stories.

As an empirical assessment tool, we employ Entman's useful standard of "counterframing." Significant counterframing occurs when the media "provide enough information independent of the executive branch that citizens can construct their own counterframes of issues and events," which requires an alternative frame to attain "sufficient magnitude to gain wide understanding as a sensible alternative to the White House's interpretation" (2004a, p. 17). In other words, a meaningful frame contest involves at least two coherent frames presented often and prominently. Our data allow us to assess whether leading national news organizations (*The Washington Post*, *CBS Evening News*, and a sample of 10 national papers) offered a counterframe as measured by this standard, and why they did or did not.

Beyond our concerns about theory, the quality of mainstream national discussion about Abu Ghraib was important for illuminating in a timely fashion various political questions in a timely fashion: damage to America's global reputation, possible high-level legal and policy transgressions, and the cultural self-understanding of Americans. For example, if policies were created that separated the Bush administration from both domestic and international laws on torture, then the United States had become a rogue nation with its troops subject to torture by other nations and its leaders subject to war crimes charges—matters that might warrant public scrutiny (Sikkink, 2005). If, on the other hand, the events at Abu Ghraib were isolated cases of prisoner mistreatment, then existing procedures for prosecuting individual soldiers were adequate to contain the problem.

A sustained press debate including a torture counterframe could also have had domestic political consequences. A survey by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) released in July, 2004 (PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, 2004), showed 66% of respondents agreeing that "governments should never use physical torture" and 60% agreeing that the United States should extend war treaty rights to unconventional combatants (see also Pew Research Center, 2004). Large majorities regarded the United States as a "moral leader" that "should not lower itself by engaging in torture or cruel or degrading treatment." Yet, only 35%–55% of respondents knew that the secretary of defense had authorized some practices similar to those depicted in the photos: hooding, using dogs to frighten detainees, and forcing detainees to go naked. Among those who knew that these were official policies, 59% said they were less likely to vote to reelect President Bush. For these reasons, in addition to building news framing theory, we find this study interesting and important.

Methods

A crucial element of frames is their ability to arouse or suppress moral and political judgments by categorizing events in particular ways (Edelman, 1988; Entman, 2004a, pp. 36–42). We track four labels that were most prevalent in news coverage of Abu Ghraib: mistreatment, "scandal," abuse, and torture. Mistreatment and abuse

include neglectful behavior, consistent with administration framing, whereas torture is strongly intentional and has a stronger connection in both common usage and legal terminology to interrogation policies and practices.² Moreover, the label torture might bring attention to policy initiatives up the chain of command to the secretary of defense and possibly even the president. The labels assigned to Abu Ghraib thus offered broad cues to policy makers and publics about the meaning of events and appropriate reactions.

We began our analysis with the *Washington Post*, which quickly became the lead U.S. news organization on the story, fueled by some 1,000 photos that it continued to review and release over time. We searched the Nexis database for all the *Post's* news and editorial items mentioning Abu Ghraib between January 1, 2004, and August 31, 2004. The specific search term used was "Abu Ghraib or (Iraq and prison!)." This time frame begins just before sketchy reports of a Pentagon investigation of Abu Ghraib appeared in the press on January 17 and ends with the final congressional hearing that put the story to rest before the 2004 election campaign entered its final stage. Our analysis concentrates on the *Post's* "big story" period between the end of April and the end of August, 2004. Prior to April 29, only two stories appeared in the *Post*, on March 21 and 22, noting that criminal charges were filed against soldiers for abusing prisoners. Scattered reports of an investigation at Abu Ghraib were largely ignored by the media until CBS broke the story of the photos on April 28, after which the *Post* steadily published from its cache of photos and assigned its large reporting force to the story.

The *Washington Post* sample of 609 items included many articles that made only passing reference to Abu Ghraib or Iraqi prisons in the context of stories about other topics on the war or the Bush administration. We selected only those articles that focused directly on events at Abu Ghraib and/or U.S. policies related to treatment of prisoners, prisons, interrogations, and related matters. In addition, letters to the editor were removed because our focus is on journalistic framing. This left a sample of 294 items (242 news articles and 52 masthead editorials, columns, and op-ed pieces).

These 294 items were then coded by a trained coder who was unfamiliar with the theoretical propositions of this study. The coded variables reported here are the "primary label" and, if present, the "secondary label" assigned to prisoner treatment in each article. The labels were chosen from a list previously identified by the authors through a close reading of stories, with labels winnowed by automated word searches to eliminate infrequent terms. The final list from which the coder was instructed to choose included abuse, mistreatment, scandal, torture, or "none of the above." The coder was also asked to determine whether a primary label appeared in the headline or lead paragraphs of the story ("primary label placement").

Coding reliability was assessed using a second coder and a subsample of 61 articles. Intercoder reliability scores were high, with intercoder percentage agreements of $p = .807$ for the primary label, $p = .912$ for the placement of the primary label in the headline or lead paragraph, and $p = .754$ for identification of the secondary label. Because percentage agreement is often too liberal a measure of

reliability, we calculated both Cohen's κ and Krippendorf's α , which also proved strong, with primary label identification reliabilities of $\alpha = .776$ and $\kappa = .775$. Because error in the first label code magnified error in the second label code, we also merged the "primary" and "secondary" labels into a single, "prominent label" variable that turned out to be the most generous measure of whether torture appeared as a counterframe (by counting it either in the first or second position), while producing strong intercoder reliability coefficients of $p = .917$, $\alpha = .801$, and $\kappa = .800$. The authors also conducted coder discussions of their disagreements, which revealed nuances such as a number of instances in which the torture label appeared as a denial rather than an affirmative description of events at Abu Ghraib.

A simplified version of this coding strategy was repeated on the full text of Abu Ghraib stories aired on the *CBS Evening News* between April and August 2004, chosen because that network's *60 Minutes II* first broke the Abu Ghraib photo story. The stories were gathered and culled using the same procedure as for the *Washington Post*, yielding a sample of 54 stories. Intercoder reliability on the primary and secondary label data for the entire sample of *CBS Evening News* was high due to the shorter and simpler TV story format ($p = .98$ and $p = .96$, respectively). Out of space considerations, the CBS data are not reported in tables but are discussed in the text.

Finally, we assessed our *Washington Post* and CBS findings against a national newspaper sample with an extended time period to include the Senate confirmation hearings for Alberto Gonzales, who participated in drafting the White House policy memos justifying relaxed conventions against torture in the war on terror. This study involved machine coding Nexis search results to ascertain the frequency of the same labels from the above content analyses. The national sample included news and editorials from 10 newspapers (the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, *St. Petersburg Times*, and *USA Today*) between April 2004 and mid-January 2005.³ The results of these analyses are reported in the next section.

Findings

In the pages of the *Washington Post*, even at the height of the Abu Ghraib story, the most prominent categorization by far was abuse, with torture barely appearing in the news coverage, and only slightly more often in editorials. Table 1 shows the primary label frequencies in the news stories and editorials. The frame imbalance in the news was overwhelming, with just 3% (9) of the stories offering torture as the primary frame, compared to 81% (188) offering abuse as the primary frame. Adding mistreatment and scandal accounted for the balance of the primary frames, meaning that our four terms comprised 99% of the primary framing categories. The editorials were a bit more likely to introduce torture, but only 17% led with torture, whereas 61% led with abuse.

Recall that we also constructed both a tougher and a more relaxed measure of frame strength. The tougher standard is whether the frame term appeared in the

Table 1 Primary Labels Used to Describe Abu Ghraib, by Type, *Washington Post*, April 1, 2004, to September 29, 2004^a

	Abuse	Torture	Mistreatment	Scandal
News (<i>n</i> = 242)	81% (188)	3% (9)	3% (7)	12% (29)
Editorials (<i>n</i> = 52)	61% (32)	17% (9)	3% (2)	13% (7)

^a These data are based on the *first* label used in each article. Numbers in parentheses are the counts for each cell; percentages are not rounded.

headline or lead paragraph. By this measure, only 2 of 242 news articles in the *Post* offered torture as a strong cue for reader interpretation. Even in these two articles, qualitative analysis reveals subtle distancing of torture from Abu Ghraib. The opening paragraph of the *Post's* May 11 article, headlined "The Psychology of Torture," reads, "The U.S. troops who *abused* Iraqis at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad were most likely not pathological sadists, but ordinary people who felt they were doing the dirty work needed to win the war, experts in the history and psychology of *torture* say" (emphases added). Even the rare news mentions of torture tended to evoke the term in the abstract, whereas abuse was used to describe events at Abu Ghraib.

Our most relaxed measure counted a first or a second frame term anywhere in the article as equal. By this standard, torture was still a remote challenger to the abuse frame. Table 2 shows that 91% of news articles and 82% of editorials in the *Washington Post* used abuse as the first or second label to describe events at Abu Ghraib, compared with 11% and 30%, respectively, that used the term torture. The *Post's* preference for the term abuse was most pronounced on the news pages, where it was used 10 times more often than torture. Editorials used abuse three times as often as torture. A similar pattern prevailed on *CBS*, where 50 out of 54 first or second label, compared with 10 (18%) that used torture as either first or second frame.

To assess whether event-driven news can sustain independent framing, however, weak it may be, we looked at the frequency distribution of the frames over time. The results show that torture was not only a weak frame but also not a consistent background element in the developing story. Torture appeared most prominently in the

Table 2 Percentage of Articles Using Each Label Prominently (either first or second label), by Type, *Washington Post*, April 1, 2004, to September 1, 2004 (*n* = 294)^a

	Abuse	Torture	Mistreatment	Scandal
News (<i>n</i> = 242)	91% (222)	11% (28)	16% (40)	33% (80)
Editorials (<i>n</i> = 52)	82% (43)	30% (16)	13% (7)	36% (19)

^a Data in this table reflect labels used as either the first or the second label in each article; for this reason, row totals do not equal the total *n* of stories. Numbers in parentheses are the counts for each cell; percentages are not rounded.

2 weeks after the story broke, and then faded quickly as event-driven reportage on the photos was displaced by managed governmental activities such as investigations, reports, and hearings. In the *Washington Post*, 15 out of 28 (54%) appearances of torture as either a first or second frame occurred during the first 2 weeks after the photos broke, then dropped to one the following week and never exceeded three in any week the rest of the summer. By the third and fourth weeks, abuse was prominent in 56 stories, scandal in 28, and torture in just three. Similarly, on *CBS Evening News*, 8 of the 10 uses of torture as either a first or second label appeared between April 29 and May 12. Thereafter, torture was used prominently only twice to describe events at Abu Ghraib.

Befitting its role as a leading national paper, the *Post* was followed by other mainstream national news organizations in framing the story. (“Following” is used in a special sense here because indexing permits the national press to behave as a relatively homogeneous institution without slavishly sacrificing competitive relations.) Our sample of 10 national newspapers from April 1, 2004, through January 18, 2005, produced a total of 895 news articles and editorials about Abu Ghraib. Fully 97% mentioned at least one of the three labels, mistreatment, abuse, and torture; 60%, however, did not mention the term torture at all, and 35% (primarily editorials) used it in conjunction with one of the other labels. Only nine (1%) items in the national press used the term torture alone.

The data reveal some variation across the newspapers, but there was far greater variation in volume of coverage than in framing. For example, the *New York Times* published 210 stories about Abu Ghraib during this time period, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published only 10. The *Times* also showed the highest proportion of counterframes, but even in the *Times*, torture stood alone in only five items (2%), whereas 62% of *Times* articles and editorials made no reference to torture at all, putting it close to national averages on both counts.

These findings are displayed graphically in Figure 1, which shows the results of four distinct searches of stories about Abu Ghraib in these 10 newspapers. The top line (“any label”) shows all stories that mentioned either abuse, mistreatment, or torture; for ease of analysis and presentation, and because we discovered that scandal so often appeared in conjunction with abuse, scandal was dropped from this stage of the analysis. The second line (“no torture”) shows all articles that mentioned either mistreatment or abuse but did not mention torture. The third line (“other + torture”) shows all stories that mentioned torture but also used the terms abuse or mistreatment. The bottom line (“torture only”) represents all stories in which only the label torture and none of our other main labels appeared.⁴

This torture-only line shows how rarely the torture label stood alone. Even at the height of coverage in early May, the number of items *solely* using the term torture was small, and almost all appeared on the editorial pages, not in the news itself. If editorials are excluded from Figure 1, the torture-only line literally disappears. The predominance of the torture + other trend line over the torture-only line shows that when torture did appear, it generally was paired with—and softened by—other

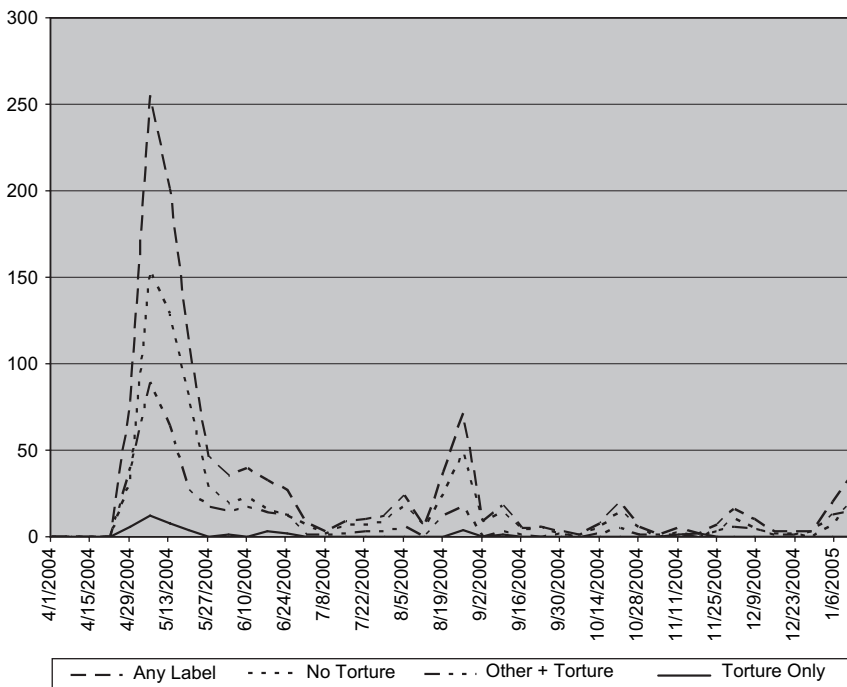


Figure 1 Mentions of “torture” and other labels in connection with Abu Ghraib, national newspaper sample, April 1, 2004, to January 19, 2005.

labels. Overall, the bulk of stories on Abu Ghraib did not include the term torture at all.

As with the *Washington Post*, most mentions of torture in both CBS and the national news sample appeared immediately after the photos broke. For example, CBS anchor Dan Rather led a May 3 story by saying that “evidence of mistreatment, even torture of Iraqi prisoners has inflamed many in the Muslim world.” Reporter Bill Plante also led with torture in a May 5 story: “Around the world newspapers and magazines have seized on the torture to pour scorn on American promises of democracy for Iraq.” During this early period, torture seemed to enter the news as an event-driven model might predict, as in CBS’s May 6 report that the *Post* had “published new images of humiliation and degradation, one of which seemed to verge on outright torture” (Martin, 2004). A glimmer of support for cascading activation was also provided by the initial use of peripheral sources such as the ICRC. Yet, the failure to achieve a full cascade leading to a robust counterframe is evidenced by journalists’ general reluctance to independently introduce the term torture after the first few days. By contrast, abuse was often used by journalists on their own. Our *Washington Post* coding reveals that from April through the end of September, 95% of the instances of abuse in the news pages ($n = 179$) were in reporters’ own words, contrasted with only 55% ($n = 5$) of the instances of torture.

Consistent with an integrated event-driven indexing dynamic, journalistic license occurred early in the story before official news management was fully established.

The torture frame briefly reemerged—again diminished by other labels—in August with the release of the official Fay and Schlesinger investigation reports. These reports occasioned two hard-hitting masthead editorials in the *Post*, one arguing that they “have dragged the Bush administration and Pentagon brass a couple of steps closer to facing the truth about how and why U.S. soldiers and interrogators committed scores of acts of torture and abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Closer To the Truth, 2004). Notably, the same editors had all but purged the term from the news articles that cue public opinion, yet introduced it in editorials that speak largely to other elites.

As Figure 1 shows, torture also reentered the national news in December and January in conjunction with the Gonzales confirmation hearings, almost always in reference to the infamous “torture memo,” as official sources at congressional hearings, followed by reporters, labeled it when it first emerged in May. Yet, stories and editorials seldom linked the memo or the practice of torture directly to Abu Ghraib. Indeed, the *Post* mentioned “Gonzales” and torture together in 37 items appearing between mid-December 2004 and January 2005—far more than it prominently used that term in nearly 300 articles between April and September of 2004. Yet, only nine of those items linked torture to Abu Ghraib, and only two of those were news stories (each mentioned Abu Ghraib only once, deep within each story). Thus, in much of the coverage, the possible connection between Gonzales’s memo and the scenes depicted in the photos remained unclear. The photos that might have enabled some greater degree of (event driven) press independence—supplemented by ample sources available to activate a counterframe of torture—ended up being framed, following the administration’s lead, as abuse by the end of the story.

Discussion

Why the mainstream press declined to counterframe Abu Ghraib in a way that challenged Bush administration framing is all the more interesting in light of the fact that editors at two leading organizations did not view the framing as particularly difficult or even conscious choices. The *New York Times*’ public editor Daniel Okrent asked the paper’s editors why they settled on abuse rather than torture—a choice that Okrent described as “comparatively delicate” given the evidence at hand. Okrent reported that the editors “were surprised when I raised the issue.” Both denied that the *Times* had a policy one way or another, but acknowledged that “readers may be right” that torture was a more appropriate label. One responded simply, “Now that you tell me people are reading things into our not using torture’ in headlines, I’ll pay closer attention” (Okrent, 2004). *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie held an online chat with readers, and his response to a similar question suggested that his choice was more deliberate: “Abuse is obvious from the information and images we have, and is serious in its own right. Torture is a more loaded term and its

use requires more information about whether the abuse constitutes torture” (Downie, 2004).

Because journalists generally try to present at least two sides of every story, Downie’s rationale is puzzling, as support for another side of the story was available. By the time Downie made this statement on May 21, considerable documentation had already emerged about high-level policy discussions on coercive interrogation procedures, along with the other evidence of torture noted earlier—evidence the *Post* had drawn upon in its own reporting (Bennett et al., 2005). For example, the *Post*’s own report on the Gonzales memo quoted the White House counsel as saying, “In my judgment, this new [war] paradigm renders obsolete Geneva’s strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions” (Kessler, 2004). A cascading activation analysis might predict that in conjunction with the photos, such evidence would prompt amplification of a torture policy frame. Instead, the *Post*’s initial thousand-word story on the Gonzales memo used the word torture only once, in an ironic observation that the memo had caused the administration to postpone a State Department report on the U.S. commitment to international human rights—a report that included fighting the practice of torture.

Entman (2004b) has cited Abu Ghraib as an example of comparatively aggressive reporting that challenged the government. We agree that the continued publication of photos pushed the government to respond. However, this seems only limited support for a cascading activation explanation because the requisite counterframe did not fully develop. And although Entman singles out Seymour Hersh’s reporting as particularly important in the critical framing of Abu Ghraib, our data challenge the notion that such midlevel relatively peripheral sources can either establish or sustain a counterframe absent higher level support. Although Hersh’s (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) reporting may have shaped the inside-Washington conversation about Abu Ghraib, his strongest claim—that the United States had embarked on a new policy of torture in the war on terrorism—was not picked up prominently or consistently by the rest of the national media.

Perhaps, the reason is that the idea of Americans engaging in torture represents a cultural incongruence that “short circuits” critical frames (Entman, 2004a; Jones & Rowling, 2005). Following this logic, the torture frame would not fit easily within the “defensive” reporting style documented in studies of war coverage. “When one’s own combatants are involved in killing civilians,” one study finds, “journalists usually adopt techniques that lower the emotional impact of such stories” (Wolfsfeld, Frosh, & Awabdy, 2005, p. 5; see also Fishman & Marvin, 2003). This pattern extends to coverage of domestic policing as well, where the term “police brutality” occurs only under particular circumstances (Lawrence, 2000).

The cultural explanation, while plausible, is not fully satisfactory because torture *did* appear, if only briefly, as a candidate for a counterframe at the outset of the story. Moreover, the term torture eventually became more prominent in the news as Senator John McCain and other leaders pressured the White House to support an amendment further limiting the cruel and inhuman treatment of prisoners overseas.

A search of the Nexis database shows that of 54 articles mentioning the McCain amendment in the *Washington Post* between October and December 2005, fully 42 articles, or 77%, included the term torture. These patterns suggest that, rather than meeting with a blanket cultural prohibition on discussing torture, the Abu Ghraib photos enabled an event-driven news pattern to briefly and tentatively challenge the news management capacities of officials, but the fragile event-driven news dynamic faded as the administration aggressively took over the framing virtually unchallenged by other top-level officials. Within days of the release of the photos, the story began to fall into a familiar pattern of indexing and the counterframe of torture was pushed out of the news by a deluge of official events that promoted the terms abuse and mistreatment. (Some of these events were no doubt planned during the timely reprieve from an earlier release of the pictures that the CBS granted the government.)

Among the official actions that arguably blocked a potential cascade of other sources and evidence supporting a challenging counterframe were the following (with the dates they appeared in the *Washington Post*). On April 30, 2 days after the CBS photo story aired, an initial anonymous government official said the government “had taken several steps to stop the mistreatment of prisoners,” whereas President Bush introduced the frame that he would consistently repeat, “The actions of a handful of soldiers ... should not taint the tens of thousands who serve honorably in Iraq.” On May 1, a televised statement by President Bush inserted in a Rose Garden photo op with the Canadian prime minister referred to the “treatment” of prisoners but promised that “abuses” would be punished. (The *Post* echoed the term in its account, but also reported international shock, and introduced the term torture, citing an article in *Tehran Times*). On May 2, an army investigative report by Major General Antonio Taguba was released, localizing the abuse problem to, as the *Post* reported it, “the willful actions of a small group of soldiers” and “a failure of leadership” at the prison level. On May 5, Bush addressed the Arab world in a televised speech that characterized events at Abu Ghraib as regrettable abuses. On May 7, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, testifying before a joint Senate-House Armed Services Committee hearing, called the incidents abuse and mistreatment; the same day, the House overwhelmingly passed a resolution that deplored the mistreatment of Iraqi detainees and repeated the president’s frame: “The alleged crimes of a handful of individuals should not detract from the commendable sacrifice” of U.S. soldiers in Iraq. On May 14, Rumsfeld made a surprise visit to Abu Ghraib and told reporters the soldiers involved in the scandal would “be brought to justice.” On May 15, the Defense Department issued this punctuating statement: “No responsible official of the Department of Defense approved any program that could conceivably have been intended to result in such abuses.” This series of official events ensured that the abuse label would be prominent in news linked to Abu Ghraib. By May 19, while the Senate Armed Services committee held hearings on the abuses, the term torture had all but disappeared from the news.

The weakness of the torture frame is not attributable merely to this administration news management campaign but to the absence of a strong democratic challenge

either from Congress or from the presidential campaign. Although some prominent Democrats used the congressional hearings to probe high-level culpability for the scandal, few framed events at Abu Ghraib as torture. In our *Washington Post* data, no prominent instances of the torture frame were pegged to members of Congress, although a broader search found Senator Edward Kennedy cited deep in one story as saying that “Shamefully, we now learn that Saddam’s torture chambers reopened under new management: U.S. management” (VandeHei, 2004).⁴ Though he would later call for Secretary Rumsfeld’s resignation, Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry also repeated the president’s framing virtually verbatim, saying “We cannot let the actions of a few overshadow the tremendous good work that thousands of soldiers are doing every day in Iraq and all over the world” (Shanker & Steinberg, 2004). When asked to react to Kennedy’s statement, Kerry said, “He’s my friend and I respect him, but I don’t agree with the framing of that” (VandeHei, 2004). With President Bush affirming his faith in Rumsfeld early in the frame contest, the avenues for sustaining a challenging story were closed, at least as played by the rules of the U.S. press system.

Conclusions

For all the photos and available evidence suggesting a possible policy of torture laid bare at Abu Ghraib, the story quickly became framed as regrettable abuse on the part of a few troops. The early limited appearance of the torture frame followed by its quick demise suggests that event-driven frames, particularly in matters of high consequence, are seriously constrained by mainstream news organizations’ deference to political power. Lacking any consistent counterframing by high-level officials, the national media declined to challenge the administration. Leonard Downie’s dictum about lacking enough information to raise sustained questions about torture in the *Post*’s coverage might be translated as the operating code of the elite press: *who* (in the political hierarchy of sources) offered *what* (officially sanctioned) evidence of torture is the essential question. These kinds of framing rules separate the mainstream press from the alternative press, which did in many cases apply the torture frame to the story (see, e.g., Danner, 2004a; Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, 2004; Gilson, 2004).

In conclusion, the framing of events at Abu Ghraib by the mainstream press followed the predictable pattern of indexing. Yet, we see how, with a bit more division in policy circles or on the campaign trail, a counterframe might have been activated and, perhaps, sustained in a cascading fashion by the event-driven dynamics of continued publication of photos. Indeed, the McCain torture bill, appearing well over a year later, indicates that the Abu Ghraib story lingered on to influence public debate in a more indirect and long-term fashion. However, at the height of attention to the Abu Ghraib story, when public opinion was in the formative stage, the mainstream media allowed the administration’s “isolated abuse” frame to dominate the news and declined to offer the public a coherent alternative frame.

In this way, we see important links among theories of event-driven news, cascading activation, and indexing. In particular, it appears they operate in hierarchical fashion in which openings created by indexing (either through divisions among policy makers or failures to mount news management activities) may enable events to continue to drive challenges from sources beyond the inner circles of power. More broadly, we see rather vividly the limits on press independence: Even when provided with considerable photographic and documentary evidence and the critical statements of governmental and nongovernmental actors, the nation's leading media proved unable or unwilling to construct a coherent challenge to the administration's claims about its policies on torturing detainees. As it turned out in this case, the photos may have driven the story, but the White House communication staff ultimately wrote the captions.

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Notes

- 1 Some readers may believe that the term torture was simply not appropriate to describe the activities at Abu Ghraib. However, some, though not all, of the activities pictured in the photographs (such as the use of unmuzzled dogs and the stripping of prisoners) clearly violate elements of the Geneva Conventions and other laws against torture to which the United States is a signatory (see Danner, 2004a; Sikkink, 2005). As noted above, one U.S. military investigator even conceded that some of the Abu Ghraib abuses rose to the level of torture (White, 2004). Moreover, most of the documented injuries and deaths in U.S. facilities in Iraq and beyond were not pictured in the photographs from Abu Ghraib (see Danner, 2004a, 2004b), meaning that the photos were not the full story. Finally, the scope of incidents at multiple U.S. facilities suggests something more than low-level lapses of judgment. As one legal expert has noted, "A widespread practice in multiple locations implies an institutional policy, not human error" (Sikkink, 2005, p. 22).
- 2 The Encyclopedia Britannica, for example, defines torture as "the infliction of excruciating physical or psychological pain for such reasons as punishment, intimidation, coercion, the extraction of a confession, or the obtaining of information" (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9073000?query=torture&pct=>, accessed October 18, 2005.). The International Convention Against Torture includes the purpose of gathering intelligence or extracting information as one element in its definition of torture (see United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2006).
- 3 The search term used to establish the baseline of articles about Abu Ghraib in each newspaper was "hlead (Abu Ghraib or (prison and Iraq*)," meaning that we asked Nexis to find all articles in which the term "Abu Ghraib" or the terms "prison" and "Iraq" were mentioned in the headline or lead of the article. Only articles focusing on Abu Ghraib and/or U.S. treatment of detainees were included in the analysis.

- 4 A broader search of the Nexis database for the terms “abu ghraib and senate and torture” in proximity yielded only three instances between April and June 2004 in which a Senator used the term “torture” in conjunction with Abu Ghraib.

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