

Apologies or Evasions: A Critical Look at the *New York Times's* and the *Washington Post's* Self-Criticism

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Abstract: More than a year after the US invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published self-critical articles regarding their coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War. However, an analysis of this coverage in the five days following the UN speech by then-secretary of state Colin Powell shows both papers' bias to be more profound than these pieces acknowledge. This article quantitatively analyzes each newspaper's coverage concerning how much of a platform each paper gives to pro- and antiwar voices, thereby revealing both papers' reporting to be subject to significant prowar bias. A qualitative analysis of the same coverage exposes the various ways in which this bias comes to the fore. Comparing these analyses to the self-critical pieces reveals a lack of acknowledgment of both the severity and the nature of this bias. These findings, which show that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* downplayed their bias, call into question the ability of these papers to provide balanced news reporting on future proposed military ventures.

On May 26, 2004, the *New York Times* published an apology for their coverage of the run-up to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq entitled "The *Times* and Iraq." Similarly, in Howard Kurtz's August 12, 2004, article "The *Post* on WMDs: An Inside Story," the *Washington Post* critiques its own coverage of the prelude to the war. Newspapers retroactively apologizing for inaccurate reporting is nothing new: For example, the *New York Times* apologized on May 11, 2003, for a series of falsehoods and plagiarism in articles by one of their reporters ("Editors' Note"). However, such far-reaching self-criticism related to paper-wide deficient reporting was unheard of at the time, especially with regard to such a long time period and such an important subject as the Iraq War.

The reaction to these pieces was mixed: Some, such as Marcus Gee in “Say It, Dubya: Mea Culpa,” applauded them as “admirable”; others criticized them for feeling “empty and hollow [and] [t]oo little, too late,” as Megan Boler does in “*NY Times* Apology Feels Hollow.” Eddie Holt even called the *New York Times*’s article “[a] [s]orry [e]xcuse for an [a]pology.” Still others were of the opinion that these apologies were not only unwarranted but a disgrace and a clear sign of bias against President Bush, such as Cliff Kincaid in “Apologize for the Apology.”

In principle, such apologies and the introspection that prompts them are an indication of a self-critical press that is able to draw lessons from past mistakes in order to avoid them in the future. An analysis of their coverage of the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, however, shows that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have either not fully grasped the deficiency in their reporting or chosen not to fully acknowledge these shortcomings. Both papers’ coverage in the investigated period from February 6 to 10, 2003, was subject to a more profound and multifaceted bias than their apologies indicate. This downplaying of the severity and nature of the bias in their reporting calls into question the ability of these papers to provide more balanced coverage regarding future proposed military ventures, thus increasing the likelihood of the US public being deceived again.

The consequences of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq are still playing out, showing the dangers of ill-advised military interventions. The consequences have been disastrous for Iraq in particular, resulting in a high death toll as well as ongoing health concerns and political instability. Furthermore, as Sherry Ricchiardi notes, subsequent US administration rhetoric surrounding proposed attacks on other countries, such as Iran, are strongly reminiscent of the administration’s rhetoric leading up to the Iraq invasion (35). The impact and continued relevance of the Iraq War make it an especially worthwhile subject for studying news media’s bias.

A Gallup poll conducted shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 showed that 73 percent of US Americans felt the invasion was morally justified. Less than a year and a half later, 69 percent believed the US went to war based on incorrect assumptions (Kull et al. 7). According to Ole R. Holsti, this shift in public opinion is most likely due to the Bush administration’s main arguments for the war—Saddam Hussein supporting Al Qaeda and hiding weapons of mass destruction—turning out to be false (158). However, in the run-up to the war, many credible voices, for example UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, had already indicated these arguments to be false (cf. Pitt and Ritter 28-43). Why, then, did so many US Americans believe the administration’s claims and endorse this war? One possible answer is the media’s biased prowar coverage during the run-up to the Iraq War.

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To develop the argument that the papers' apologies underplay the depth of their bias, the reporting by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the run-up to the Iraq War in the period from February 6 to 10, 2003, will be analyzed using a quantitative methodology for measuring bias. For reasons of time and space, only one form of bias will be examined, namely how much of a platform each paper gives to proponents and opponents of the war. A variety of criteria will be used to judge whether each relevant article is balanced or gives more voice to either proponents or opponents. This will be followed by a qualitative analysis of the coverage, which looks more closely at the ways in which bias surfaces with examples from surveyed articles. Subsequently, the two apologies will be evaluated with regard to the results of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis. In this way, it will be shown that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, two major newspapers for shaping public and policymaker opinion, failed to acknowledge both the severity of bias as well as the variety of forms in which it surfaces in their coverage of the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War.

METHODOLOGY

Various scholarly studies have already exposed the news media's bias in the run-up to the Iraq War. Robert M. Entman, Steven Livingston, and Jennie Kim, for example, found that the media's deference to White House officials resulted in positive framing of the war (689). Frank E. Dardis studied the marginalization of war protest groups in the coverage of three major US newspapers, concluding that, in general, they had been neither positively nor negatively reported on (117). Catherine A. Luther and M. Mark Miller, on the other hand, found that antiwar protests were often marginalized (91). Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino looked at bias in television news programs and found that the overall tone of the coverage favored the proponents of the war (59). Srinivas R. Melkote investigated framing in the *New York Times* in the period leading up to the Iraq invasion and found a negative bias towards international opponents of the war (556). No studies as of yet, however, have focused on comparing the apologies of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to their actual coverage. Such a study is highly relevant for US society. A democracy cannot function effectively without well-informed citizens. Therefore, it is desirable for the US public to have access to more balanced news coverage than was the case in the run-up to the Iraq War.

In regard to the selection of the time period to be investigated, one of the most important moments in the run-up to the war was the speech by Colin Powell to the

UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, considered by many, as a media survey by Gilbert Cranberg shows, as providing incontrovertible evidence of Saddam Hussein hiding weapons of mass destruction. Cranberg writes that, “[p]ublic opinion about the war was lukewarm” before the speech, but “turned around virtually overnight in support of the war against Iraq.” Looking at Gallup polls, Cranberg is shown to have exaggerated somewhat, since public support of the war hovered around 55 percent in the months before the speech and rose to 63 percent after it (Gallup). Still, with regards to measuring war support, this is both the highest percentage and one of the largest increases in percentage points between 9/11 and the invasion (Gallup). The media coverage of the run-up to the war in the five days following the speech, therefore, is interesting to investigate. Moreover, examining a set time frame rather than a specific topic or particular journalist should produce a more nuanced picture and limit selection bias, since all relevant articles in the chosen period are reviewed.

Before presenting the concrete methodology that is used to examine bias in the coverage, several key concepts need to be defined. The first of these is bias itself: Although there is a lively academic debate regarding its definition, Dave D’Alessio and Mike Allen’s definition of biased coverage as “containing a preponderance of statements favorable to one side” will be used for the purposes of this investigation (137). In essence, this is what Tawnya J. Adkins Covert and Philo C. Wasburn, among others, call “source-bias,” i.e. measuring “who is quoted/given voice” (691).

The second concept requiring definition is positive and negative framing. This is taken to mean the value judgments which are implicitly attached to information by the use of words carrying positive or negative associations, termed “valence framing” by Kirk Hallahan (207). For example, when reporting on an energetically given speech, it might be framed in a positive way by being described as vigorous, a word with positive connotations, while the same speech may be framed negatively by describing it as violent, which has negative connotations. In this case, the value judgment implicit in the adjective colors the way the speech is interpreted. In this way, bias may be introduced by structurally framing persons or arguments either in a positive or negative way, thereby implicitly supporting or disqualifying that side. Due to its implicit nature, however, it must be noted that qualifying something as positive or negative framing relies in some measure on the researcher’s subjective interpretation.

The final concept that must be defined is that of the government frame on the Iraq War. As Entman describes, a frame “select[s] some aspects of a perceived reality [...] in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). This describes the government’s attempt to influence the discourse about policy by establishing ground assumptions that are taken for granted. Such ground assumptions

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were, for example, the belief that the weapons inspectors were constantly obstructed, that Saddam Hussein was inherently untrustworthy and had links to Al Qaeda, that US motives were unerringly moral and righteous, and that the UN resolution authorized an armed intervention. Tacitly accepting these assumptions qualifies as accepting the government frame. Again, however, establishing both what constitutes the government frame and whether a certain article accepts it or not is, to some degree, contingent upon the researcher's subjective judgment.

The methodological framework employed in this quantitative analysis is based on that of Heinz Brandenburg, which he used in his study of media bias during the 2005 UK elections. Here, Brandenburg uses the well-established notions of coverage bias and statement bias, also employed by, for example, D'Alessio and Allen or Covert and Wasburn (Brandenburg 161-62; D'Alessio and Allen 136; Covert and Wasburn 691). The notion of coverage bias, one side being given more coverage than another, is translated into how much of a platform is given to opponents or proponents of the war as well as to their arguments (Brandenburg 165-66). However, in order to account for the downplaying effects of negative framing on such coverage, the measurement of the arguments is combined with Brandenburg's metric of statement bias, which qualifies statements according to their positive or negative framing in order to count only those people and arguments that are presented in a non-negatively framed manner (173). However, whereas Brandenburg takes lines of text as the base unit of observation, this article uses David Niven's base unit of the paragraph for observation (Brandenburg 163; Niven 317). This modification of Brandenburg's framework was necessary, because focusing on lines of text proved to be too constricting when assessing the effects of framing.

In order to provide a quantitative measure of bias as defined above, the following specific questions will be answered: Firstly, to whom does the paper provide more of a platform, proponents or opponents of the war? Secondly, to what measure does the paper do so? To this end, all *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles in the period from February 6 to 10, 2003, containing the word "Iraq" and addressing the run-up to the war will be judged on the following criteria:

- What kind of article is it? Different types of articles are assumed to be more or less objective and are written by different kinds of writers, causing them to be viewed differently by readers.
 - News articles are written by journalists employed by the paper and are assumed to be the most objective, therefore carrying the most weight.
 - Editorials, including the *New York Times's* "Week in Review" section, are assumed to be more subjective, and thus carry less weight. However,

since they are written by the editorial staff, they do indicate the paper's position.

- Op-eds are editorials written by outside contributors, often well-known journalists, celebrities, or experts from various fields. These persons are not employed by the newspaper, giving them somewhat less weight than editorials.
 - Letters to the editor are assumed to be subjective, are mostly very short, and are, in general, not written by journalists, famous people or experts, giving them the least weight.
- What is the stance of the writer?
 - In favor of the war
 - Accepting the government frame, but not explicitly in favor of the war
 - Neutral
 - Critical of the war, but not explicitly against it
 - Against the war
 - Who, besides the writer, is given a platform in the article? This is measured by the number of paragraphs without negative framing devoted to proponents versus those without negative framing devoted to opponents of the war.
 - No one
 - Only proponents
 - More proponents than opponents
 - No bias: as many for as against
 - More opponents than proponents
 - Only opponents
 - Which arguments are given in the article? This is measured by the number of paragraphs devoted to arguments without negative framing in favor of the war versus those devoted to arguments without negative framing against it.
 - None
 - Only arguing in favor of the war
 - Mostly arguing in favor of the war
 - No bias: as many in favor as against
 - Mostly arguing against the war
 - Only arguing against the war
 - Who is quoted in the article? Direct quotations carry more weight than paraphrases or summaries of positions, and therefore give a more forceful

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platform to the quoted person. This is measured by the number of paragraphs containing quotations that are not negatively framed. Only quotations containing at least a verb and object are counted, since single words or very small phrases are often quoted and carry less weight than full sentences.

- No one
 - Only proponents
 - More proponents than opponents
 - No bias: as many for as against
 - More opponents than proponents
 - Only opponents
- Lastly, taking into consideration the above metrics, the results of which are given below in Tables 1 and 2, each article is judged as giving a platform predominantly to either proponents or opponents of the war or as balanced, i.e. giving as much of a platform to prowar voices as antiwar voices. In order to be judged as giving more of a platform to one side, that side needs to be favored in at least two of the five metrics above as well as in more metrics than the opposing side. If this is not the case, the article is judged as being balanced. The results of this process are given below in Table 3 in both number of articles and percentages.

Using the last metric, a quantitative measurement is derived which shows how much of a platform the two papers give to proponents and opponents of the war. A significant lack of balance in this measurement indicates a bias in favor of the party that is given more voice. Statistical significance will be calculated using a chi-square test, the standard mathematical tool for determining significance. This results in a p value, which is the likelihood the findings are the result of a random deviation from an underlying balanced distribution rather than actual bias. As is conventional, $p < 0.05$ will be considered statistically significant, indicating actual bias with a 95% certainty. All p values are calculated using Kristopher J. Preacher's application. However, statistical significance does not indicate the degree of bias and, unfortunately, there is no widely accepted measure of the severity of bias; most researchers, such as Brandenburg, go no further than concluding whether there is statistically significant bias or not (172). It is a matter of judgment, then, where to draw the line between relatively minor bias and major bias. Indeed, Joseph A. Durlak argues that the interpretation of the strength of an effect must always consider the specific context of the research, making a universal notion of effect strength untenable (923). As a rough, subjective measure to differentiate between degrees of bias, then, statistical

significance combined with twice as many articles favoring one side over the other will be interpreted as representing a major bias, one side greatly outnumbering the other.

It must be noted that, as D’Alessio and Allen argue, individual articles being biased is not in itself indicative of a bias in the paper, as long as they are balanced by other articles equally biased towards the other side (138). In some cases, a lack of bias, i.e. balanced coverage, may in fact result in informational bias, which Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff hazily define as “distorted news” (127). They argue that the balanced reporting regarding climate change misrepresents the “general consensus of the scientific community” on the issue and constitutes a form of bias in itself (128, 134). However, the notion of balanced reporting being biased does not hold in the case of the Iraq War. In scientific contexts in which the scientific method is able to provide a measure of objective certainty, this form of bias is plausible. However, for a political issue such as the Iraq War, there is no scientifically objective truth against which to measure the coverage. Moreover, there was no lack of credible voices on either side of the debate, and the biased coverage thus was not the result of a general political consensus.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED PERIOD

Table 1: The *New York Times*

	Total	Stance of writer					Voices given a platform				
		Pro	Accept Frame	Neutral	Critical	Con	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti
News	66	0	9	57	0	0	20	19	5	7	12
Editorial	8	0	5	3	0	0	2	1	1	1	0
Op-ed	9	3	1	2	1	2	6	0	0	0	2
Letter	21	5	1	0	5	10	6	0	3	1	7
Totals	104	8	16	62	6	12	34	20	9	9	21

	Arguments						Quoted				
	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti	None	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti
News	16	19	7	8	11	5	16	10	5	6	15
Editorial	3	3	1	0	0	1	3	1	1	0	0
Op-ed	3	2	1	1	2	0	6	0	0	0	2
Letter	3	3	1	3	10	1	5	0	1	1	11
Totals	25	27	10	12	23	7	30	11	7	7	28

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Table 2: The *Washington Post*

	Total	Stance of writer					Voices given a platform				
		Pro	Accept Frame	Neutral	Critical	Con	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti
News	53	0	7	46	0	0	16	9	5	11	9
Editorial	9	5	4	0	0	0	5	3	0	0	0
Op-ed	7	3	2	1	0	1	1	3	2	0	1
Letter	8	2	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	0	1
Totals	77	10	14	48	3	2	23	16	8	11	11

	Arguments						Quoted				
	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti	None	Only Pro	More Pro	No Bias	More Anti	Only Anti
News	13	14	5	9	6	6	12	8	6	7	9
Editorial	3	3	1	0	0	2	5	1	0	0	0
Op-ed	2	3	1	0	0	1	2	2	1	0	1
Letter	2	1	0	0	4	1	1	1	0	0	3
Totals	20	21	7	9	10	10	20	12	7	7	13

Table 3: General Judgment

The New York Times

2/6/03 - 2/10/03	Total	Pro	Balanced	Anti	Pro	Balanced
News	66	35	12	19	53%	18%
Editorial	8	6	2	0	75%	25%
Op-ed	9	6	1	2	67%	11%
Letter	21	6	1	14	29%	5%
Totals	104	53	16	35	51%	15%
(no letters)	83	47	15	21	57%	18,00%

The Washington Post

2/6/03 - 2/10/03	Total	Pro	Balanced	Anti	Pro	Balanced
News	53	28	9	16	53%	17%
Editorial	9	8	1	0	89%	11%
Op-ed	7	5	1	1	71%	14%
Letter	8	3	1	4	38%	13%
Totals	77	44	12	21	57%	16%
(no letters)	69	41	11	17	59%	16%

Starting with the results of the general judgment shown in Table 3, the number of balanced articles is small, with 15 percent and 16 percent for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* respectively. As discussed, this is not in itself an indication of bias. At most, it might signify a split into polar extremes, with nearly all articles providing a platform for predominantly prowar or predominantly antiwar voices and a lack of more balanced articles. Looking at Tables 1 and 2 shows this to have some merit: Adding the articles judged “only pro” and “only anti” in the categories of “voices given a platform,” “arguments,” and “quoted,” and dividing them by the total number of articles accounts for 52 percent in the *New York Times* and 42 percent in the *Washington Post*. This means that a large proportion of all articles in both papers are strongly one-sided, though this is more pronounced in the *New York Times* than in the *Washington Post*. Dividing these one-sided articles into prowar and antiwar amounts to 55 percent pro and 45 percent anti in the *New York Times*, which shows that the coverage is not significantly biased ($p > 0.05$). For the *Washington Post*, however, 65 percent of the articles are prowar and 35 percent are antiwar. These results show a significant bias ($p < 0.005$), coming very close to qualifying as major bias, with almost twice as many one-sided articles in favor of proponents of the war than in favor of opponents.

Interestingly, the writers’ stances in news articles, shown in Tables 1 and 2, are overwhelmingly neutral. Still, a sizable minority in both papers reflects the writer’s acceptance of the US government’s claims and framing of the war. Though undesirable for news articles, this is not in itself proof of bias. However, there is not even one article in either paper where a writer’s criticism of the US government’s frame is apparent. This metric is, then, completely skewed towards the prowar side and evinces a major bias in favor of the proponents of the war.

Looking at the figures for editorials in Table 3, it is interesting to note that in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, no antiwar editorials were published. Of the published editorials only very few are balanced editorials and a majority are prowar pieces. It seems, then, that the editorial staffs of both papers were overwhelmingly in favor of the war. The same table also shows that op-eds in both papers are slightly more balanced, as they feature a few antiwar pieces, but are nevertheless dominated by proponents of the war.

Also apparent in the same table, regarding the general judgment, is a 53 to 35 split in the *New York Times*’s coverage in favor of the prowar platform, which narrowly avoids being significantly biased ($p = 0.055$). Looking more closely at the data, however, shows that 40 percent of the articles that favor the opponents are letters to the editor. Though not insignificant and certainly providing a platform, letters are the

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category that carry by far the least weight, since they are written by non-expert members of the general public and not expected to conform to journalistic standards of balanced reporting. As these letters account for 40 percent of all antiwar pieces in the paper, they seem to skew the results inappropriately. If they are entirely discounted, the balance shifts to 47 to 21: a major bias in favor of the war ($p < 0.002$). How to value these letters appropriately remains an open question, but a fairer representation likely lies between the two approaches, yielding something between a significant and a major prowar bias.

Moving to the *Washington Post*, the data in Table 3 indicate that its articles are heavily biased in favor of the war, with a 44 to 21 split ($p < 0.005$). Simultaneously, the *Washington Post* published more letters by opponents of the war than proponents, though not to the same extreme as in the *New York Times*. Moreover, the *Washington Post* publishes far fewer letters than the *New York Times*, which therefore has less of an impact on the results. Taking these letters out of the analysis results in a 41 to 17 split in favor of the war ($p < 0.002$). In either case, this is a major bias towards prowar voices.

Notably, the *New York Times* published three times as many antiwar letters as it did prowar letters. The reason for this is unclear; it could be a straightforward reflection of the opinions of the *New York Times's* readership. This would then indicate that the paper's bias in favor of the war, as shown above, did not represent the views of the readers, nor did it shape their opinions so as to make them mostly prowar. On the other hand, it might have been an editorial choice to print more letters against the war than in favor of it, perhaps as a conscious counterweight to their other mostly prowar articles. This is, however, impossible to discern from the data.

A few reservations with regards to the data are in order. It is conceivable that the selection of the surveyed time period introduced a bias to the data. Beginning directly after the Powell speech, the balance of reporting may have temporarily shifted to the pro side because the speech, which was itself prowar, was heavily reported on. However, balanced reporting would still include enough critics and counterarguments so as to be, if not completely balanced, at least not as imbalanced as the above data indicate. Furthermore, Figure 1, showing the chronological development of the ratio of prowar articles to antiwar articles, excluding letters to the editor, gives no indication that bias correlated with chronological proximity to the Powell speech. In fact, the second-most balanced day of coverage in the *Washington Post* is February 6, the day after the speech. Instead of being related to the speech, bias over time seems to fluctuate randomly. However, in order to substantiate these claims, further research into this matter, covering a longer time period, should be undertaken.

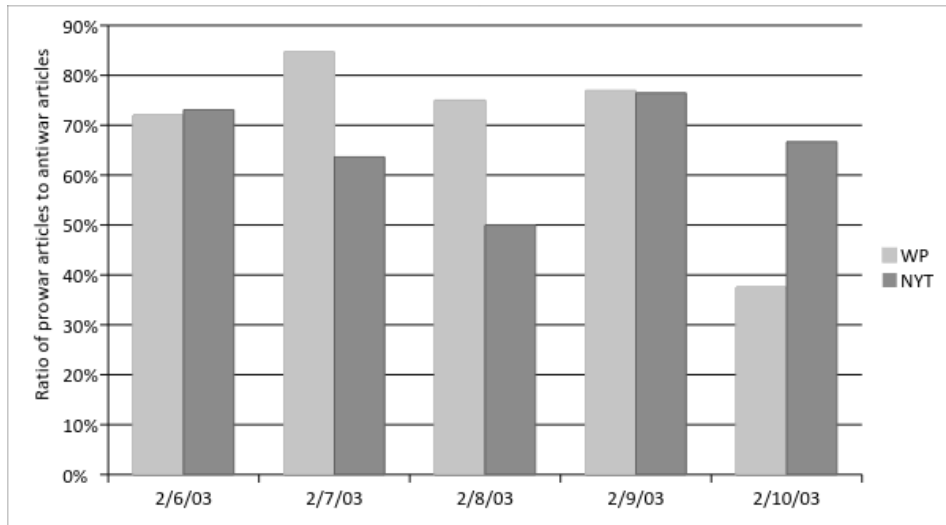


Fig. 1. Chronological Development

The x-axis shows the date of publication, while the y-axis shows the ratio of prowar articles to antiwar articles for each day, excluding letters to the editor. 50 percent denotes balance, anything higher means more pro than antiwar articles, while anything lower means the reverse.

Interestingly, February 8 shows fairly balanced reporting for the *New York Times*, although this is sandwiched between days leaning to the pro side; this may be a statistical anomaly. The same is probable for the sudden imbalance in favor of the antiwar camp of the *Washington Post* on February 10.

Another possible point of criticism lies in the researcher’s assessment of whether an article is in favor of the war, against it, or neutral toward it, which may have been influenced by the researcher’s own opinions. Ideally, the methodology laid out above minimizes the possibility of introducing such researcher bias. Nonetheless, though generally fairly straightforward, determining a person’s stance in an article, the position of the persons quoted, and whether an argument is pro- or antiwar might still be partially dependent on the researcher’s subjectivity. The factor most likely to be affected by researcher bias, though, is determining if a certain argument, stance, or quote is framed in a non-negative way, which has much to do with the tone and feel of an article, qualities that are inherently subjective. The overall assessment of an article, being derived from these metrics, will necessarily reflect any previously introduced researcher bias.

A final, valid point of criticism concerns the distinction between significant bias and major bias, which is, as discussed, a matter of judgment. Nevertheless, statistical

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significance itself is an objective measure, and, regardless of where the boundary should be drawn, everything called major bias in the analysis above indicates a bias far beyond the requirements for significance.

To conclude the quantitative analysis of the selected period, both papers display a significant bias in favor of proponents of the war, with the *Washington Post's* coverage even showing a major bias. This bias has multiple facets. Firstly, there are almost twice as many one-sided articles in the *Washington Post* that give a voice to proponents of the war; the *New York Times*, however, was balanced in this aspect. Secondly, both papers feature a significant minority of news articles in which the writer's acceptance of the US government's prowar frame are apparent; there are no articles in which the writer's rejection of the US government's prowar frame shines through. Thirdly, both editorials and op-eds are heavily skewed towards the prowar side. Neither paper printed a single antiwar editorial, which indicates that the editorial staff of both papers was overwhelmingly in favor of the war. Lastly, in both papers the coverage in general is strongly biased towards giving more of a platform to the prowar side. However, this is true for the *New York Times* only if its published letters, mostly antiwar, are not included. If they are included and given the same value as other types of articles, the bias becomes statistically insignificant. On the other hand, if they are included but valued less than other articles, the bias is again significant and, depending on the exact valuation, could even qualify as major bias.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED PERIOD

The quantitative analysis presented in the previous chapter is derived from a qualitative evaluation of each relevant piece in the two newspapers; as such, separating the two approaches is somewhat artificial. Even so, a more in-depth, qualitative overview of the coverage is necessary in order to understand how the bias found in the previous chapter presents itself in actual articles. Several recurring themes of biased coverage shared by both newspapers become apparent upon reading the reporting published in the investigated period.

One recurring theme of bias in the coverage is the negative framing of opponents of the war, whereas no such framing of proponents was found in the surveyed reporting. In "France, Backed by Germany, Calls for Stronger Inspections," for example, Julia Preston calls the Iraqi ambassador's response to Powell's speech "a belligerent statement." This is interesting, as the statement itself called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and criticized Powell's prowar speech. Nowhere in the

coverage is Powell's call for war described as "belligerent." Another example is Julie Salamon's article "Mobilizing a Theater of Protest. Again," in which she refers to pop singer Sheryl Crowe wearing an antiwar T-shirt at an awards ceremony as "theatricality," undercutting the message by focusing on the method of delivery and casting subtle doubt on the motivation of Crowe's antiwar expressions. In "Islamists in Iraq Offer a Tour," C. J. Chivers writes that an Iraqi militant group, attempting to disprove Powell's claim that their camp was a poison factory, tried to "press its message" on journalists after a tour through their facility—a negative, almost coercive phrase. Furthermore, Chivers describes how one of the guides behaved "alarming[ly]," "advanc[ing]" on the journalists, backed by "stern-faced gunmen," and "point[ing] forcefully," after which the journalists were "allowed to leave." All these terms create an atmosphere of fear that is not further substantiated and which undercuts the credibility of the militant group's arguments.

Another theme, occurring particularly in editorials and op-eds, is calling into question the motives of opponents of the war. While this is not in itself biased and not a problem in opinionated pieces in principle, the motives of proponents of the war are almost never subject to the same scrutiny, but rather uncritically accepted. For example, in a *New York Times* op-ed called "Surprising Germany," William Safire refers to German chancellor Schröder's opposition to the war as an "anti-US crusade," "antiwar pandering," and "isolationism." All these ascribed motives deny the notion that Schröder's opposition to the war could have been based simply on the merits of the case. Similarly, in the *Washington Post* editorial "An Old Trooper's Smoking Gun," Jim Hoagland describes China's foreign minister as "set[ting] an intellectually corrupt tone" and writes that "[n]o evidence that Powell could have offered in New York would have altered China's view," because it was "mesmerized by political considerations seemingly more important than the secretary of state's masterful indictment."

Yet another recurring theme of bias is the uncritical acceptance of the US government's frame in news articles, as mentioned in the previous chapter. An example can be found in the *Washington Post*'s "Bush Keeps Pressure on UN," where Karen DeYoung uncritically repeats President Bush's claim that the UN Security Council made a "pledge to disarm Iraqi President Saddam Hussein with force." In the same vein, in "Powell's Trademark: Overwhelm Them," *New York Times* reporter Michael Gordon describes Powell's speech as "remorseless" and remarks that it will now be "difficult for the skeptics to argue that Washington's case against Iraq is based on groundless suspicions." Even some of the antiwar op-eds, already few in number, uncritically accept the US government's frame. In the *New York Times*, for instance, Adlai E. Stevenson III's piece "Different Man, Different Moment," though arguing

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against the war, takes for granted that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction. The same happens in Jessica Tuchman Mathews's op-ed in the *Washington Post*, entitled "Is There a Better Way to Go?"

Furthermore, both papers uncritically cite the claims of consulted sources, without considering possible ulterior motives that make these claims less trustworthy. A clear example of this is "The Smoking Gun" by Richard Leiby in the *Washington Post*, wherein he uncritically accepts everything an Iraqi refugee tells him about Iraq's supposed nuclear program without questioning the refugee's possible motives of wanting to promote an invasion of Iraq. Another example is found in Chivers's piece, "Islamists in Iraq Offer a Tour," already referred to above. Here, Kurdish officials back up Powell's claim that a certain camp is a poison factory with stories about the production of "poison[ous] paints [...], toxic creams that could be put on doorknobs for assassination attempts, and [...] poison-laced cigarettes." At first glance, these seem like fairly wild stories requiring some evidence in order to be accepted, yet Chivers cites no evidence, presumably because the Kurdish officials gave none. However, Chivers does not qualify the Kurdish claims by pointing this out, allowing a dubious claim to remain unchallenged. Another troubling aspect is that Chivers does not indicate that these Kurdish officials had an interest in backing up Powell's claims, since they were in favor of the war, as noted in Rand Khalid's "No Longer Forgotten," and therefore had a motive for disseminating false claims.

A few final biased patterns emerge from the coverage. One such pattern is the description of the war as inevitable, as Susan B. Glasser, for example, does in the *Washington Post's* "Kuwait Builds up Arsenal" by talking about "the coming conflict." Another pattern is the notable absence of the impact of the proposed war on the Iraqi people. Except for a few scattered phrases, no attention is given to what a war would mean for them. The question of the legality of the war is another uncomfortable subject for the US government that is completely avoided in the surveyed coverage.

In conclusion, there are a number of recurring patterns of prowar bias in both papers' reporting. The first is negative framing of opponents. The second is calling into question the motives of opponents. The third important theme is treating the US government's frame as facts. The fourth pattern is the uncritical reporting of claims made by sources that may have ulterior motives and are, therefore, less trustworthy. Describing the proposed war as inevitable is a fifth recurring biased theme. Finally, the lack of coverage of the impact on the Iraqi people and the legality of the war also bias coverage in favor of the prowar camp.

ANALYSIS OF THE APOLOGIES

Interestingly, both articles, “The *Times* and Iraq” and “The *Post* on WMDs,” do not call themselves apologies. The self-critical nature of these pieces, with their implicit promise to do better next time, however, suggests interpreting them as such. This is shown, for example, by Boler’s “*NY Times* Apology Feels Hollow.” How does the above analysis of the coverage for the examined period match up with these self-critical ‘apologies’ published by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*?

The most prominent self-criticism repeated many times in the two apologies regards the placement of articles critical of the impending invasion: Many critical articles that should have been published on the front page were buried deep in the paper, and critical remarks and counterarguments directed at the prowar camp were stated in the stories’ middle or final paragraphs. The *Washington Post*, for instance, gives the example that in a front page story about Powell’s UN presentation, it only cites a few critical remarks by experts and European officials in the ninth paragraph. The *New York Times* admits that coverage was not always “as rigorous as it should have been,” with “dire claims about Iraq” often prominently displayed, while the critical follow-up was sometimes buried in the middle pages of the paper (“The *Times* and Iraq”). Moreover, the *New York Times* states that it neither adequately qualified controversial information nor presented statements by intelligence sources with sufficient caution. Ironically, for all its contrition over placing critical articles in the back of the paper, the apology of the *New York Times* was itself buried on page A10. To its credit, the *Washington Post*’s apology was printed on the front page.

As the data from the quantitative analysis show, however, these statements about burying articles and criticism are misleading. Rather than the critical pieces being placed less prominently, which is true, the data—which do not take the articles’ placement in the paper into account—show that such pieces were also simply greatly outnumbered. The same holds for criticism and counterarguments to proponents of the war. The *New York Times*’s apology acknowledges this somewhat, admitting that critical follow-up articles were sometimes absent altogether and that, “in some cases,” controversial information was not challenged at all. Considering the data, however, it appears that a more apt description would be ‘in many cases.’

Both apologies go into some detail about the reasons for their less than exemplary coverage. To start with the *Washington Post*, Kurtz repeatedly points to problems with editing. For example, he explains that a story critical of the war—ready to be published before the war began—was not published until March 22, two days after the start of the invasion, due to “a flood of copy about the impending invasion.” Similarly, Kurtz’s

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piece argues that editing difficulties, communication problems and the “sheer mass of information the newsroom was trying to digest” obstructed the placing of critical stories. This reasoning, however, does not hold because these same problems should have prevented the publication of stories in favor of the war as well. It could also be the case that these uncritical stories were subject to less editorial oversight because prowar statements were deemed inherently more trustworthy than antiwar statements, which would, in itself, signify a bias in favor of the war. Similarly, Kurtz quotes Liz Spayd, assistant managing editor for national news as saying that there were so many story lines being pursued—from military readiness to political ramifications to diplomatic maneuvering—that critical pieces about the government’s claims could not always make it into the paper. Here again, articles that were not critical should have suffered the same fate, but this is not reflected in the data.

A more plausible explanation concerning the relative lack of antiwar voices is the attitude of the editorial staff, described as “[l]ook, we’re going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff” (Kurtz). Furthermore, the apology explicitly states that there was strong editorial support in favor of the war and that some reporters complained that the editors were unenthusiastic about critical stories. It seems, then, that the strong opinion of the editors, as shown on the opinion pages, bled into newsroom editing decisions. Paradoxically, the apology goes on to deny this, claiming that because different editors were in charge of the editorial and news sections, there is and was “a church-and-state wall between the newsroom and the opinion pages.”

Another possible explanation Kurtz gives is that high-ranking administration officials had easy access to the paper’s “prime real estate [...], even when their warnings were repetitive.” This claim is further supported by DeYoung, a former assistant managing editor, whom Kurtz quotes as saying that “[w]e are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power,” because if the president says something, the paper must report it. While the latter part is true, this does not mean the paper has to be a mouthpiece. This happens only when such presidential statements are printed without scrutiny and dubious claims are left unchallenged.

Kurtz further describes a bandwagon effect. It appeared to have become conventional wisdom that the claims of the proponents of the war were true, causing the relatively lonely dissidents to be taken less seriously. Furthermore, Kurtz says journalists were afraid both to look silly going against commonly accepted truths and to be laughed at if the government’s claims turned out to be correct. It is interesting that these journalists were, apparently, unafraid of the consequences if the claims proved to be false. An important task of a newspaper that strives for objectivity is not getting caught up in the atmosphere of conventional wisdom that is so easily created when high ranking government officials continually repeat dubious claims. Of course,

the fact that these officials are allowed to make these claims continuously without significant critical analysis contributes to creating this atmosphere in the first place.

One small paragraph in the *Washington Post*'s apology points to a different factor in the dearth of criticism altogether, namely that skeptical stories about government claims usually resulted in receiving vicious hate mail. It is unfortunate that journalists and editors of the *Washington Post* allowed themselves to be intimidated into compromising their coverage. They also may have taken the hate mail as a warning that they might lose readers over their critical pieces, which presents an even worse motivation for compromising coverage, at least within the rationale of objective journalism.

The *New York Times*'s apology is much shorter and less detailed, mostly describing, as mentioned before, the burying of critical comments and articles. Some other points that the apology emphasizes concern the paper's staff being too dependent on those Iraqi sources who were defectors wanting to push for regime change—therefore falling for their misinformation and neglecting to consider these sources' underlying motive. This was indeed shown by the qualitative analysis in the previous chapter. However, the apology does not address the same problem with regard to government officials whose professed motivations for this war were mostly taken at face value.

Interestingly, both apologies emphasize that their coverage was, on the whole, admirable. For example, the *New York Times* claims that its reporting was “mostly proud and accurate,” with only “a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been.” With regards to the *Washington Post*, Kurtz quotes assistant managing editor Spayd as having said that the paper's “overall record was strong” and that “we pushed as hard or harder than anyone to question the administration's assertions,” adding that she did not feel the paper owed its readership an apology. However, the analyses in the preceding chapters do not support these claims, with their evidence of a significant, or, in the case of the *Washington Post*, even major bias in favor of proponents of the war.

In conclusion, the most prominent self-criticism in the apologies, that of burying critical articles deep in the paper and critical comments and counterarguments deep in stories, may be true, but is disingenuous for underplaying the relative lack of these elements in general, as shown in the quantitative analysis. Furthermore, some of the reasons the *Washington Post* cites as causing their deficient reporting are not plausible since they also should have affected the publishing of prowar articles as much as antiwar articles. A more convincing set of reasons, then, is the strongly prowar editorial attitude, which the *Washington Post*'s apology puzzlingly both acknowledges

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and denies, and an uncritical attitude of following conventional wisdom. The *New York Times* rightly criticizes itself for not having questioned the motivations of their Iraqi sources more thoroughly, but neglects to acknowledge that they also uncritically published the opinions of US government officials. Neither paper mentions the negative framing of opponents of the war, the one-sided questioning of their motives, the portrayal of the war as inevitable, or the lack of coverage of both the consequences of the proposed war for the Iraqi people and the legality of the war, which were all shown to be recurring themes in my analysis. Lastly, both papers are undeservedly self-congratulatory about their general reporting. Hence, the apologies of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* underplay the deficiency of their coverage, at least for the investigated period from February 6 to 10, 2003, which was more biased and biased in more ways with regards to the run-up to war than their apologies acknowledge.

CONCLUSION

The self-critical articles by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, “The *Times* and Iraq” and “The *Post* on WMDs,” popularly referred to as apologies, were unprecedented in the scope of their self-criticism. However, a quantitative analysis that focuses on who was given more of a platform in the period from February 6 to 10, 2003, shows that these apologies still severely underplay the depth of bias in their reporting, specifically in terms of D’Alessio and Allen’s definition of biased coverage as “containing a preponderance of statements favorable to one side” (137). Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of the same period shows these papers’ reporting to be deficient in more ways than the apologies address. Lastly, some of the reasons for this unbalanced reporting in the *Washington Post’s* piece, which was far more detailed than that of the *New York Times*, are, at best, implausible and, at worst, disingenuous. Therefore, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were, in the investigated period from February 6 to 10, 2003, more profoundly biased in their coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War than their apologies acknowledge.

Of course, the investigated period is relatively short. Further research is necessary in order to confirm that the results hold for the entire period leading up to the Iraq War. Furthermore, investigating other papers, as well as other media, such as television, is required to give a picture of the entire media coverage during this period. It might also reveal interesting differences between media outlets that published apologies and those that did not. Another avenue for research is investigating what changes the *New*

York Times and the *Washington Post* have implemented to address the issues they pointed to in their apologies, and comparing later reporting with reporting from this period to see what effect these changes have had. Lastly and most importantly, the factors causing the bias found in the two papers' reporting should be researched.

To come to a close, this paper's findings are troubling. The failure of these newspapers to address their mistakes adequately, to say nothing of those news media outlets that found nothing wrong with their reporting in this period at all, increases the likelihood of repeating them. This may prove costly, as a well-informed public is critical in stopping ill-advised military ventures with potentially disastrous repercussions.

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