

PRESS RELEASE

DENMARK - The War in Iraq as Covered in the News Media of a Coalition Country

The sources set the agenda for the coverage of the invasion

The participants in the invasion of Iraq managed to control media coverage at home to a significant degree. One indicator is that the invasion was covered, to a large extent, as a military campaign. The focus was on tactics and strategy, accounts of particular events of the war, the military hardware, etc. And the sources of this coverage were predominantly military personnel especially from Denmark and the US.

Considering this emphasis on describing the events of the war, it is surprising that coverage of the dead and wounded was rather limited. Even though a few newspapers attempted to make this very fact an important theme of their editorials, it actually received comparatively little journalistic coverage.

These are the conclusions of the first comprehensive study of Danish media coverage of the war in Iraq, which has just been published.

The media changed their focus when the war started

Until the outbreak of hostilities, Danish media would cover the political debate regarding the motivations for the war and, not least, Danish public opinion about the issue. But when the war and Danish participation had become a reality, both the motivations and the opposition to the war left the media spotlight. This was partly because the war in itself set a new political agenda, partly because Danish participation made a number of political sources in Denmark tone down the criticism that they had voiced before the war.

Further, neither the question of the Iraqi regime's weapons of mass destruction, nor that of links to international terrorism, which had been among the coalition's motivations for going to war, became central themes after the war had broken out. Danish media did not focus on either Iraq's possible use of weapons of mass destruction, or on the search for these or for terrorist links. During the last phase of the war, instead, attention was devoted to the hunt for Saddam Hussein.

The report, entitled 'Danish media coverage of the invasion of Iraq 2003,' also documents that:

- Especially Danish, American, and British politicians were used as sources, and Iraqi politicians only to a very limited degree;
- Across different media, there was a roughly proportional representation of government and opposition sources;
- The media offered extensive coverage of daily life in the shadow of war. The coverage took the form partly of on-site reports from Baghdad, partly interviews with Iraqis living in Denmark. Such coverage constitutes an independent attempt by the media at providing a different picture of the war than that given by political and military sources.

The media on red alert

The analysis also shows that, in fact, the news media did try to make clear to their readers, viewers, and listeners that they had difficulties securing reliable information. Many items and articles placed questions of censorship, propaganda, and control over the media on an explicit agenda. However, this awareness was not reflected in other news coverage of the war. General news was presented with very few reservations regarding the use of parties to the conflict as sources. And many news items were given with few or no named sources. This was especially true of news stories with a military focus.

In comparison, other journalists were often used as both sources and experts concerning the war, particularly on television. Through frequent live interviews, journalists were given the opportunity to present their own interpretations of the war, including assessments of what might happen in the future. Also in the printed press, journalistic speculation about the prospects of the war in the short as well as the long term was a standard feature.

The report indicates that newspapers actively took a stand for or against the war - and for or against Danish participation. The political leaning of a given newspaper in its editorials could also be traced in its commentary, op-ed pages, letters to the editor, etc. In other words, the editing of opinions favored a particular attitude. Similarly, each newspaper actively used its frontpage to promote its points of view. This approach comes out both in news angles and in the use of images and headlines. The classic separation of 'news' and 'views,' thus, was not maintained in the frontpages of Danish newspapers during the period studied.

Facts about the report

The analysis examined a sample taken on seventeen days during March-April 2003, covering news as well as commentary in three national newspapers (*Jyllands-Posten*, *Information*, and *Politiken*) and on public-service radio and television (DR's *Radioavisen*, DR's *TV-Avisen*, and TV 2's *Nyhederne*).

The report is authored by Professor Stig Hjarvard, University of Copenhagen, Assistant Professor Nete Nørgaard Kristensen, University of Copenhagen, and Assistant Professor Mark Oersten, Roskilde University.

The report is in Danish, but further information on the study and its findings is available from Professor Stig Hjarvard, stig@hum.ku.dk, +45-35328113, whose research profile can be found at <http://modinet.dk/pages/forskere/profiler/StigHjarvard.htm>.