

*Summary*  
**Swedish Media Coverage of the War in Iraq 2003**  
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The overall purpose of this study is to examine how leading Swedish news media in television and the press covered and described the war on Iraq during the first five days (the initial stage) and the last five days before Baghdad fell (the concluding stage). The review looks specifically at the sources that are used, open or anonymous, the thematic perspectives that dominate the war, and the players that are described. Special attention is paid to the balance between fact and speculation in the different thematic areas. The study is linked theoretically and methodologically to an earlier study that the Institute for Democratic Communication carried out for the National Board of Psychological Defence (“Ten days that shook the world. A study of the media’s description of the terrorist attacks in the USA, and the USA’s attacks on Afghanistan”, Nord & Strömbäck 2002).

The central questions in this study are:

- How comprehensive was the reporting?
- What are the most frequent themes in the reporting?
- What are the most frequent sources in the reporting?
- How frequent are different types of speculation?
- How frequent are Swedish aspects of the events?
- How frequent are anti-American, respectively anti-Muslim, rhetorical figures?

**About the study**

The nationwide media that was examined in the study included the morning papers: Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet, evening papers: Aftonbladet and Expressen, commercial TV4’s news programme: Nyheterna, and public service television’s news programmes: Aktuellt and Rapport. The study includes all news-journalism media content including vignettes, headings, pictures/graphics or words linked to the war in Iraq. In the case of newspapers, this includes news articles, news analyses, news coverage and special features on news pages by employees or freelancers. It does not include editorials, polemic articles and letters to the editor, however, as these cannot be classified as news-journalism media content. In the case of television news, and apart from normal news features, this includes news flashes, documentaries, remarks by the editorial office’s own employees and invited guests, and features where journalists in the studio interview journalists “on location”.

Two different time periods are studied. The first period comprises media reporting from March 20-24, the first 5 days of the war. This period will generally be referred to as the “initial stage of the war”. The other period is referred to as the “final stage of the war”, which explains why the study also includes media reporting from the period April 10-16. The war was symbolically terminated or won on April 9, when civilian Iraqis pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Paradise Square in Baghdad with the help of American soldiers. Overall, the study includes ten days of news-journalism reporting in the leading national newspapers and television news broadcasts. Both time periods, although predominantly the first, also present good opportunities for comparing the results with how the media reported during the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan.

### **The scope of media coverage**

The attack on Iraq by a US-led coalition, and the continuing events and consequences of the war created major news in all media. This applied particularly to the initial stage, even though the war did not begin with the massive assault that many expected. All media reporting focused considerably more on the Iraq war during the first five days than during the last five days. The greatest imbalance between the two periods was seen in Expressen. 67 per cent of the total articles published by Expressen during the ten days of our study were published during the initial stage. The greatest balance was seen in Aktuell, where the corresponding amount was 55 per cent. For the other media, results showed that they published between 61 and 64 per cent of all articles and features that we studied during the first five-day period. In general, this shows that news about the outbreak of war in Iraq held greater value than news about the continuing events in the war on Iraq. The more current this kind of news is, the greater its value. This has also been observed in media reporting on the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan.

### **News reporting sources**

In reports on the Iraq war, there was at least one anonymous source amongst an average of 57 per cent of the articles and features. This is somewhat higher than in the coverage of the terror attacks, and considerably higher than in the coverage of the war in Afghanistan.

The most frequent anonymous sources were in Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet, as was the case in coverage of the terror attacks. Apart from that, any pattern in the frequency of anonymous sources in the various media is difficult to detect, whether reporting in Iraq is seen as an isolated case or compared to coverage of the war in Afghanistan and the terror attacks. If a high frequency of reporting from anonymous sources is considered to indicate poorer quality journalism, it is interesting to note that the “better quality” media, i.e. the morning papers and public service – do not figure positively here. If anything, they figure negatively.

The average number of cited sources in the Iraq reporting is less than in the coverage of both the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan. In relation to the average number of referred and named sources, reporting on Iraq is more similar to reporting on the terror attacks than to the war in Afghanistan. At the same time, the differences between how events are covered by different media are significant. In the Iraq reporting, Expressen has the highest average number of cited, referred and named sources, as is the case for the coverage of the terror attacks, and in relation to the cited sources in the war in Afghanistan.

It is obvious that a high degree of media reporting on the war on Iraq and both the other events does not comply with demands for using the two-source rule when quoting anonymous sources, when such a large percentage of the articles and features do not even have two sources combined. The largest number of articles/features with less than two sources was in Aktuellt, regardless of whether they came from cited, referred or named sources. In this respect, Expressen seems to have handled its coverage of the Iraq war best. At the same time, it is also difficult to see any improvements when comparing reporting on the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan.

In relation to the question, “What are the most frequent sources in the reporting?” it is obvious that elitist sources dominate both Swedish and Iraqi citizens. The most common category of elite sources is constituted by official American sources, followed by named Iraqi sources. Official British sources are less frequent. Of the war’s three “principal players” George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Saddam Hussein, George W. Bush dominates strongly. Similarly, American politicians and military officials dominate over British, respectively, Iraqi politicians and military officials.

The conclusion is, therefore, that a general imbalance exists between the war’s conflicting parties: the US-led coalition was more often cited than the Iraqi side. Now, this is hardly surprising. The previous study showed similar results in the coverage of the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan, and the reason given then is equally valid now: from a global perspective, the USA dominates a powerful information asymmetry due to well-developed systems for gathering, processing and spreading information. The superior strengths of the USA encompass not only military and economic resources, but propaganda resources as well.

### **Speculation and bias**

On average, the most-frequent speculation focused on future military action – which figured in 33 per cent of the articles and features. This speculation figured most frequently in Aktuellt (42 per cent), followed by TV4 Nyheterna (37 per cent). Speculation figured least frequently in Aftonbladet (28 per cent) and Dagens Nyheter (29 per cent).

The next most-frequent speculation focused on what could happen when the war was over. On average, this type of speculation figured in 14 per cent of the articles and features. Any pattern concerning a specific individual media where journalistic speculations are most

frequent is difficult to discern. This is also the case when comparing the different categories of media: morning papers, evening papers, public service television and commercial television.

The total results, when considering all the factors referred to in this study of Iraq reporting, show a pro-America trend in the journalism. There is an overrepresentation of sources belonging to the US-led coalition; the rhetorical figure: “America, the defender of freedom and democracy” is more common than its functional counterparts: “America, the oppressor of poor people in the third world” and “America, the world’s police”; America is portrayed as the liberator of Iraq more often than as its occupier; and the war is rarely described as a crime against international law.

That journalism on the war on Iraq has a pro-America trend does not, however, indicate that it has an anti-Muslim or anti-Iraq trend. There is no evidence to support that journalism paints Muslims as fanatics, or the Muslim world as a threat to the West.

### **Journalism or pseudo journalism?**

Yet this study of the coverage of the Iraq war shows that journalism does not always live up to the standards that are reasonable to expect. There is a well-defined distance between ideal and reality, and this is striking in some cases. The abandonment of the two-source rule when quoting anonymous sources, the reliance on anonymous sources, the amount of speculation and the haziness between confirmed and unconfirmed information are all clear indications of this. Even the imbalance between the use of sources that favoured the US-led coalition is problematic, but our assessment is that journalism’s problems are not due to ideology but to the mechanisms that enable or impede good journalistic quality.

The same laxity appeared when reporting on the terror attacks in the USA and the war in Afghanistan in autumn 2001. In some cases, this laxity was more obvious then; in other cases, it was more obvious when reporting on the war on Iraq. In conjunction with the terror attacks in the USA, this laxity could however be explained by the total unexpectedness of the events, and the fact that the media had neither the preparedness nor the routines for reporting them. None of these explanations appear particularly likely in reference to the laxity in Swedish media’s coverage of the war on Iraq. Everyone knew that the war was coming, and even though some media predicted an earlier outbreak, the media and newsrooms had plenty of time to prepare themselves. With reservation for the fact that all events bring surprises and unforeseen events, both preparedness and routines should have existed for covering the war on Iraq. And yet this study observed the same laxity that appeared when studying the terror coverage and the war in Afghanistan, and that these laxities, in some cases, were even more common in the Iraq reporting. There are now, as then, numerous examples of articles and features that give undoubted expression to good journalistic practice. And certainly many journalists now, as then, produce notable work under extremely difficult circumstances. And

certainly, the journalists succeeded now, if not even better than then, in balancing the reporting to avoid becoming a weapon in one of the conflicting side's propaganda machinery. At the same time, we cannot ignore this basic fact: if we are serious about the ethic rules of journalism and the standards that are reasonable to expect from the content of journalistic media, some parts of the Iraq reporting were close to pseudo journalism.

The reasons for this are probably the increasingly high tempo, a hardened fight for people's attention, a growing space for news that must be filled, difficult financial conditions, limited editorial resources, and a powerful propaganda machine that journalism can hardly withstand. At the same time, none of the critical media are solely restricted by forces beyond their own control. This becomes most obvious when none of the results can really be explained by ownership situation (privately-owned or public service), media type (television or newspaper), media category (evening or morning paper) or the structural position in the popularity market (elite or mass).

#### **“From an uncertain source”**

This research report on the Iraq reporting in Swedish media has been titled “From an uncertain source”. The aim of the report is to show how the communication process in an international conflict of the scope demonstrated by the war on Iraq is impacted in several ways and several steps.

Firstly, there are laxities in relation to the sources relied upon by the media. Elite American sources and a high frequency of anonymous sources, both cited and referred, have been observed in the news reporting. The media's good preparedness for a war, or the fact that world opinion was divided does not seem to have encouraged a greater balance between the uses of cited and referred sources. Instead, other factors, such as journalistic practises and traditional news value have played an important role. Players that usually dominate the news flow, who have the most power and greatest resources, have also found it easier to claim a place in the media.

The bias and dependency of some sources create problems for journalism, but also for the public and its ability to evaluate the information it is given. The media's image of an international conflict will in most cases determine people's information and knowledge, and will therefore risk laxity in the criticism of its sources in order to prevent citizens from forming their own opinions from different versions and accounts. Therefore, the media's relation to those sources is more than just a practical and professional issue for editorial offices. It has considerably broader democratic dimensions, and as such is worth taking very seriously.

In a war, there are always plenty of self-assured assertions and absolute denials aimed at hiding the truth. This is exactly why war journalism should abandon its present dependency on uncertain and unbalanced sources.