

Mission Impossible?

Some Notes on Journalistic Shortcomings in the Coverage of War and Terrorism

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The outcome of the war in Iraq in the spring of 2003 surprised almost nobody, except perhaps the Iraqi Information Minister. However, the different phases of the conflict, through to the day of the anticipated US-allied victory, surprised almost everyone, even the most distinguished observers, such as highly qualified political and military analysts.

Yes, the Americans and the British won the war, but not in the expected way. At first, during the beginning of the war, there were small-scale attacks instead of the much-expected “big bang”, US troops were on the ground more rapidly than expected and there were also serious unpredicted military clashes with ordinary Iraqi troops. Finally, the much-feared confrontation with the troops of the Republican Guard and the presumed bloody street fighting in the centre of Baghdad never actually took place.

As with other wars of our time, the war in Iraq was not only a battle of weapons, but also a battle of opinions. The world community was deeply divided on the necessity of a war in Iraq to stop the supposed production of weapons of mass destruction. As an alternative, the UN Security Council was promoting the idea of continued weapon inspections by UN officials. A few countries supported the war, though most states argued for a peaceful solution sanctioned by the UN.

In situations such as this, war propaganda plays an important role in portraying the conflict and the war in the most favourable way for each side. The propaganda strategies are most often oriented towards the media arena, as the media provide the main source of information for citizens today. Thus,

studies of media coverage of wars and other crises are essential for understanding the opinion formation processes occurring during dramatic events.

Forthcoming academic research on media coverage of the war in Iraq will surely answer important questions about how journalists and editors handled foreseeable outcomes and the highly unpredictable chain of events: Were professional standards in reporting achieved? Was the public well informed about the development of the war? Were the news departments open-minded in telling their audiences about the problems of evaluation of conflicting statements and contradictory news stories?

Until this research on media coverage of the war in Iraq is completed, there are good reasons to reconsider the role of professional journalism in crises communications. Why is it sometimes successful and why does it sometimes fail? In this article, we will thus examine the challenges facing professional journalism and its core values during times of war and terror. We do so by introducing a model for analysing the media’s ability to cover different serious crises, and we test our thesis using empirical data from two earlier dramatic events, the terror attacks in the US on September 11, 2001 and the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan in October 2001. In the last section, we discuss the possibility of analysing the conflict in Iraq in the same way.

The Noble Art of War Reporting and Its Not-so-Noble Enemies

Wars and war-like situations undoubtedly pose huge and different challenges for news reporting. First of all, much of war reporting relies on political and military sources, whose incentives are often to cover up the truth and manipulate media reporting.

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From a historical context this is nothing new, as a war without propaganda is unthinkable. Propaganda is necessary to mobilize the people against an evil enemy and to provide arguments as to why the war is the best solution to a nation's problems. The word "propaganda" may seem obsolete in post-modern and individualistic Western societies, but propaganda is a complex concept (Ellul 1973). There is agitatorial propaganda of the kind we often see in totalitarian states, with mass demonstrations, tributes to single-party leaders and systematic suppression of opposing views and groups. There is also, however, social propaganda focused on building common values and consensus and alienating deviating arguments. Social propaganda is often less articulated, but can be very effective when conducted by governments utilizing public relations experts, who in turn use modern communication technology. Thus every state, totalitarian or democratic, uses different types of propaganda *before* the war (to prepare and mobilize), *during* the war (to confuse and encourage) and *after* the war (to justify and "write history").

The continuous existence of propaganda in times of war is a challenge for every media organization, as it makes criticism of sources, balanced news selection and editorial independence more difficult to achieve. Most studies of the subject confirm assumptions about biased news reporting, asymmetrical reliance on sources and neglected areas of coverage. Also, most scientific research reports on media activities during war doubtless support the oft-mentioned expression that "the first causality of war is the truth" (Nord & Strömbäck 2002; Riebert 2002; Zelizer & Allan 2002; Bennett & Paletz 1994; Kennedy 1993; Hadenius & Stür 1992; Hvitfelt & Mattsson 1992; Nohrstedt 1992; Hallin 1986).

However, some conflicts have been covered with more journalistic quality than have others. The obstacles to war reporting may exist in every case, but they can be easier or more difficult to overcome depending on the prevailing circumstances with regard to political viewpoints and/or professional premises.

To start with, the political perspectives on a conflict may vary. There are conflicts that are covered by the rules of international law and there are also conflicts that are extremely controversial in this regard. When the political elite are united and in favour of a war, the likelihood of patriotic reporting in national media will increase (Rosen 2002; Kalb 1994). On the other hand, if the political elite are divided on this issue, the national media will probably describe the conflicting positions more care-

fully and cover the war more comprehensively (Bennett 1994).

The American political scientist Daniel C. Hallin studied war reporting in Vietnam in what is probably the most important research on the relation between media and political elite positions (Hallin 1986). Hallin noted a dramatic change in American media coverage of the war, from more docile journalism at the beginning to more critical reporting later on when there was growing opposition to the war on the part of a variety of domestic political groups. According to Hallin, there are different types of conflicts in society and the ability of the media to cover these conflicts varies. Consensus or "legitimate controversy", to use Hallin's term, applies to situations that are easier for the media to cover than are conflicts in which one or more parts are outside the political establishment.

Hallin refers to the nation-state state in his works, but his conclusions could also be applied at the international level, as news reporting is nowadays global in nature. If the international community is unified and in favour of a war, the reporting will likely deviate dramatically from how it would take shape in a situation where powerful nations disagree about the necessity of the war. Wars in the name of the United Nations and with the support of resolutions from the Security Council are probably reported in a somewhat different way compared to wars initiated by single countries and questioned by many other countries. Another conclusion with regard to the globalization of news is that patriotic national media coverage may be less decisive if international TV channels and the Internet are able to cross national borders and thus allow other perspectives on the events.

The quality of war reporting is, however, not only a matter of political consensus or controversy. There are also, inevitably, internal factors of production within media organization – factors of great importance for the quality of media coverage (McNair 1998; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). In war reporting it is relevant to ask *where* journalists are working, *when* journalists are publishing the results of their work and, perhaps most importantly, *how* journalists are working within the media organization.

The first question about where the journalists are based may appear to be trivial, but it is nevertheless an essential element in ensuring objective and balanced reporting. A net of correspondents on both sides of the battlefield increases the possibilities for comparing military statements and for complementing official declarations with personal field

reports or new perspectives on current events. The ability of journalists to move freely within a conflict is one of the key factors for independent and adequate reporting. Most modern wars are, however, marked by the opposite conditions for most journalists. All wars, since the Vietnam War 30 years ago, have been difficult for the media to cover in a professional manner, as journalists are subject to severe military restrictions, which regulate all media activities. The journalists have been obliged to follow well-directed press conferences far way from the war zone or to join well-organized and supervised tours to the frontier. Another feature of the modern war is a mixture of censorship and self-regulation, which obviously also obstructs fair and balanced news reporting.

Second, there are obvious reasons to evaluate material published by a journalist that is about the war and for the public. Publishing once involved a struggle to print or broadcast breaking news every day, but nowadays involves instant breaking news. Historically, war journalism appeared in newspapers and broadcast news with stories about yesterday's actions. A considerable time passed between events and news, which gave news departments a reasonable chance to confirm new facts, complete stories and analyse the recent development from different perspectives. There was plenty of time to explain the whole situation and evaluate different testimonies.

Today, the leading feature of reporting is 24-hour news production. TV channels are producing news all the time, and websites on the Internet are updated instantly (Seib 2001). The latest news becomes an old story very quickly. The instant demand for news influences journalistic practices in many ways. It may even be problematic when nothing substantial happens, the media then has news holes that have to be filled with something. That "something" may more often than not be non-events or pseudo-events or commentaries involving large amounts of speculation. The increased competition, spurred on by more market-driven media organizations, especially tabloid newspapers and commercial TV stations, tends to produce less serious journalism and more sensational news (McManus 1994; Underwood 1993). When recurrent deadlines are obsolete and everyone seems to be online all the time, high quality reporting, especially about dramatic events, is less likely to occur.

The American media researchers Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel describe, in their book *Warp Speed*, how the pressure for news has created a mixed US media culture with some distinct features.

This involves less complete and more fragmented journalism, the increasing power of sources in news reporting, decreased importance of professional journalistic values and commentaries replacing information. The authors explain the development in terms of a new situation where news departments have to fill the void in the 24-hour news cycle, but have insufficient economic resources for gathering the news (Kovach & Rosenstiel 1999: 60).

Finally, apart from *where* and *when*, war reporting is naturally a matter of *how* to report.

Evaluation and criticism of sources is of great importance, as is the ability of media professionals to verify and follow up statements from different groups involved in the conflict. There are reasons to believe that opportunities for adequate reporting increase if media *routines* already exist and that it is possible for the media to make adequate *preparations*.

It may be possible to look at previous media routines in cases where there have been similar events, and media professionals may also be acquainted with these types of crises. If journalists can refer to other events and recognize significant patterns of the conflict, they will presumably be more successful in scrutinizing and questioning official views. On the other hand, if the reporters face a completely new crisis in which there are no media routines to follow, fewer possibilities will exist for high quality reporting. In this situation, there is a greater risk of circulating false information and confusing news reporting.

Of equal importance is the possibility for media organizations to make adequate preparations before the outbreak of a war or a crisis. If the event can be anticipated, news departments can change their priorities, time schedules and working procedures in order to improve the coverage of the forthcoming event. Experts can be alerted and contacts can be established within independent news sources. When a conflict starts with no notice, however, journalists have limited opportunities to check facts and value partisan statements, at least at the outset.

No two crises are identical, and as regards media coverage of a crisis, we think the ability to give adequate information to citizens is dependent both on the existence of media routines and on the ability of the media to make adequate preparations. The greater the opportunity to prepare and to use existing routines, the more likely it is that citizens will be adequately informed. In accordance with this, it is possible to consider four types of crises with regard to which the media's ability to inform differs significantly (Figure 1).

Type I represents a kind of crisis that we have never heard about before and have no possibility to foresee. The Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine in 1986 is perhaps the best example, but the killing of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 and that of the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 could also fall into this category.

Type II and Type III represent situations where the quality of journalism is usually higher, but still far from excellent. In Type II a new crisis develops that the media have been able to prepare for. The outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 is a good example. This new kind of war was difficult to cover and a great deal of disinformation occurred. However, preparations eliminated some of the problems. Type III-crises, on the other hand, happen suddenly, but have happened "before". Airplane accidents, earthquakes and floods definitely belong to this category.

Finally, Type IV represents a kind of crisis that presents the media with few problems. The situation is possible to prepare for (such as sending correspondents to a war region and consulting political experts), and there are media routines for these kinds of events. As a result, media coverage of a Type IV-crisis is more often characterized by journalistic professionalism. The American invasion of Somalia – where TV crews waited for the marines to reach the shores for their "live" reports from the war scene – is probably a good example here.

To sum up, both the existence of media routines and the possibility to make adequate preparations should influence the quality of war reporting (Nord & Strömbäck 2002).

Given all these considerations, it is clear that "the noble art" of war reporting could be described as

something of a "mission impossible". However, there are strong indications that media coverage of crises does differ in many ways dependent on the prevailing conditions. Sometimes there is neither time to prepare for a forthcoming event nor a chance to lean on existing journalistic routines, and sometimes crises are both foreseeable and recognizable. There are good reasons to believe that journalistic quality should be generally better in the first situation, with better use of reliable sources, less speculating and less biased reporting. Thus, to test this argument, this article compares two cases: Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks on September 11 and of the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan in 2001. The terror attacks are studied as they represent the most surprising and unexpected news imaginable, if not in over-dramatized Hollywood productions. The war in Afghanistan, on the other hand, is examined as this war outbreak was expected by the news media and is indeed similar in structure to other modern wars. Thus, the question is: did Swedish media cover the war Afghanistan much better than they did the terror attacks on September 11?

Empirical Data

This case study focuses on three main research questions. First, how did the Swedish media report the terror attacks against the US on September 11, 2001 and during the subsequent five days? Second, how did the Swedish media report the US attacks in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 and during the subsequent five days? Third, how did the reporting of these events differ with respect to the use of sources, speculations and anti-American and anti-Muslim reporting?

Figure 1. Media and Crises, four typical cases

		Media Preparations	
		Bad	Good
Media Routines	Bad	Type I (New and surprising events)	Type II (new, but expected events)
	Good	Type III (surprising events which have happened before)	Type IV (expected events which have happened before)

The data used in the present study include all news journalism related to the terror attacks in the US and the US attacks in Afghanistan in the four main newspapers and the three main television news shows in Sweden. For the television news shows, the main show each day was chosen, while for the newspapers, the supplements were excluded.

Two of the newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, are traditionally broadsheet newspapers, though *Svenska Dagbladet* is tabloid in form. The other two newspapers, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, are up-scale tabloids in both their form and journalistic style. One of the television news shows, TV4 Nyheterna, belongs to a commercial station, while the other two, *Aktuellt* and *Rapport*, are part of the public service broadcasting company (Sveriges Television, SVT) in Sweden. In both cases, the first five days of reporting were chosen. Because the newspapers, with one exception (*Aftonbladet*), did not report about the events on the day they happened, while the news programmes could report in real-time, the time periods included in the study depend on the medium. For the newspapers, the first five days of reporting occurred between September 12-16 and October 8-12, respectively, while for the television news, the periods were between September 11-15 and October 7-11, respectively.

All news articles and news features in the above-mentioned media that explicitly referred to either the terror attacks or the US attacks in Afghanistan were chosen for study. The material was examined using quantitative content analysis.

Swedish Media in Transition

The design of this study allows us not only to compare the media reporting of two similar but non-identical events, but also to compare journalism in different media characterized by different traditions. This is occurring in a time marked by media convergence, an expanding news system, real-time news and growing commercialization of the Swedish media system.

Since the end of the 1980s, the Swedish media system has gone through major structural changes (Hadenius & Weibull 1999; Strömbäck 2000; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001). Before that time, no private television or radio stations were allowed. The market for newspapers was stable and profitable. In 1990, surveys showed that 81 percent of the Swedish population read a morning newspaper at least five days a week (Eriksson 2002:193-211).

On New Years Eve in 1987, however, the public service monopoly in television was broken for the first time by the private channel TV3, broadcasting from London. Two years later another private cable channel started broadcasting, and in 1991 the first private terrestrial television in Sweden (TV4) received permission to start broadcasting. Two years later, the public service radio monopoly was broken, which means that Sweden, similarly to most other countries in Western Europe, now has a mixed public service/private-system in television and radio.

The 1990s in Sweden was a period of economic downturn, causing major problems for the newspapers, which lost both advertisers and readers. The worst year was 1996, when readership dropped to 71 percent. In an international comparison this is still a high percentage, but the change in readership forced the newspapers to cut down on staff and develop new strategies to compete in the context of a deepening struggle to survive and maintain profitability. One effect was that the Swedish newspapers, according to observers, became increasingly market-driven (Hvitfelt 1999, 2002; Hultén 1999; see also McManus 1994; Underwood 1995). For economic reasons, several regional newspapers also merged or entered into different kinds of partnerships (Alström & Nord 2002). Another change is that foreign media companies now own parts of different Swedish newspapers, and that the links between the newspapers and the political parties, whose influence used to be very strong in the party-press-model, have now generally disappeared.

Traditionally, the broadsheet papers and the public service broadcast news are known for the quality of their coverage of public affairs, while the commercial news media and particularly the tabloids are generally considered to be more market-driven and oriented towards infotainment. Recent research, however, indicates that there seems to be a convergence of the journalism in these different media (Strömbäck 2001).

One theory that is relevant in describing the changes that have taken place within Swedish journalism is a theory regarding a certain kind of media logic, first developed by Altheide and Snow, but further elaborated upon by other scholars. According to the former, "media logic consists of a form of communication, the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is pre-

sented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication” (Altheide & Snow 1979:10).

Building on this and on theory developed by Hernes (1978) and Asp (1986), Strömbäck has argued that the concrete expressions of this media logic are certain storytelling-techniques. The substantial storytelling techniques that follow from this media logic are simplification, personification, polarization, intensification, as well as concretion, stereotyping and enhancement (Strömbäck 2000).

In a time marked by a surplus of information and a deficit of attention, there has been increasing competition among the different news media for people’s attention. One result is that the news media have come to adapt to this media logic to a larger extent than before. This has led to a journalism that often tends to interpret rather than describe, speculate rather than stick to known facts, that blurs the line between straight reporting and so-called ”news analysis”, and gives the journalists themselves a more prominent position within the news (Strömbäck 2001; Nord & Strömbäck 2002; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001).

These features of modern Swedish journalism can be found not only in the commercial TV news and in the tabloids, but also in the public service news and the broadsheet papers – although not necessarily to the same extent. Whether the former has adapted to the latter or vice-versa is an empirical question that still awaits a definitive answer. Most observers, however, would agree that there is a convergence and that it is the growing commercialization that drives the changes observed in journalistic content (Strömbäck 2001; Hvitfelt 2002; Nord & Strömbäck 2002).

To conclude, there are reasons to believe that increased media competition generally affects news reporting, encourages media logic elements and de-

creases journalistic quality with respect to criticism of sources, reliance on facts and non-partisan reporting. However, journalistic quality may vary with opportunities for media preparation and the existence of media routines in each case. If the preparations are good and the routines are well known, the risks for lower quality in reporting may not entirely vanish, but they are nevertheless reduced.

Within this theoretical framework, patterns of Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks in the US and the war in Afghanistan will now be investigated.

Perfect News

To start with, it is obvious that the terror attacks against the US were a much bigger news event for the Swedish media than were the US attacks in Afghanistan. In total, 482 news articles and 179 news features were published about the terror attacks, while 272 news articles and 76 news features were published about the US attacks in Afghanistan. In both instances, the tabloids devoted more space to the events than did the broadsheet papers. At the same time, the public service news shows broadcast more features about both events than did the commercial TV4 Nyheterna (see Table 1). The main explanation for this pattern is that the commercial news show is shorter than the news shows in the public service channels.

In a cynical sense, the news about the terror attacks against the US was perfect news, even for the Swedish media. It fit perfectly with the criteria that Swedish media are found to employ when judging the newsworthiness of different events. According to professor in journalism Håkan Hvitfelt, the probability that something will become news increases 1) if it concerns politics, economics or

Table 1. *Number of Articles and News Features about the Terror Attacks in the US and the US Attacks in Afghanistan*

	Dagens Nyheter (BS)	Svenska Dagbladet (BS)	Expressen (T)	Aftonbladet (T)	Rapport (PS)	Aktuellt (PS)	TV4 Nyheterna (C)	N
Terror attacks in USA	110	102	127	143	65	74	40	661
US attacks in Afghanistan	63	49	77	83	28	33	15	348
Sum	173	151	204	226	93	107	55	1 009

Note: BS=Broadsheet, T=Tabloid, PS=Public Service, C=Commercial.

crime, 2) if there is a short geographical or cultural distance, 3) if it pertains to events and conditions that 4) are sensational or surprising, 5) about elite persons, 6) and can be described sufficiently simply, but 7) are important and relevant, 8) that take place within a short period of time or as part of an established theme, 9) with negative elements, 10) and with established authorities as sources (Hvitfelt 1985:215-216).

One other important explanation for the difference in coverage concerns the availability of pictures. The terror attacks against the US were unique not only in themselves, but also in that they could be witnessed live across the globe and in that important parts of the events that followed were photographed and recorded on video. In contrast, during the war in Afghanistan, there was a lack of pictures and during the first five days of the war no Swedish journalists managed to get into Afghanistan to report what they saw.

Sources in the News

When almost five hundred news articles are published and almost two hundred news features are broadcast within just five days – as in the case of the terror attacks – without any possibility for the news organizations to prepare beforehand, there is an obvious risk that quantity will push quality aside. The demand and striving for fast news may compromise the demand and striving for correct news.

In Swedish journalism, there are certain ethical guidelines and traditions concerning the use of sources. One such guideline, by no means unique to Sweden, is that journalists should always use two separate independent sources, especially if the 'facts' being reported may be controversial. There is also a tradition that the use of anonymous sources should be restricted. Furthermore, there is a tradition that the news should include balancing sources (Spelregler för press, radio och TV 2001; Fichtelius 1997; Sahlstrand 2000; Leth & Thurén 2000:22-36). This last guideline is considered especially important in times of crisis, war or other instances when the news may otherwise take sides in a conflict.

Normatively speaking, surveys have shown that the three most important tasks for the Swedish media, according to the journalists themselves, are 1) to present information that can help citizens to freely and independently form their own opinions, 2) to be a watchdog against those in power and authorities, and 3) to give visibility to different opin-

ions and cultural expressions (Strömbäck 2001; see also Melin 1991; Djerf-Pierre 2001). Each of these journalistic virtues may be compromised in a situation where there is great pressure on the news organizations to report, when there is a shortage of time and where there is a lack of consideration of the context of what is being reported. The last condition refers to a situation where, for example, journalists do not see any underlying conflicts that may exist and that are not immediately apparent.

To see whether this was the case in the media coverage of the terror attacks against the US and the US attacks in Afghanistan, we studied the percentage of articles and news features that explicitly included at least one anonymous source. In this case, only individuals count as a source, which means that if a news article referred to an institution such as "the FBI" or "the American government", that will count as an anonymous source. We also studied how many quoted or mentioned sources were used on average. The results are shown in Table 2.

The results show that anonymous sources were used much more frequently in coverage of the terror attacks than in coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan. In the latter case, the results also show that the extent to which anonymous sources were used varied between the different media types. Interestingly enough, the news media that most frequently included anonymous sources was Dagens Nyheter, a newspaper that in Sweden is traditionally considered to feature journalism of the highest quality.

Obviously, these results cannot be explained by structural factors such as media category (TV vs. newspaper), media type (tabloid vs. broadsheet papers) or ownership (private vs. public service). Instead, explanations must be found either at an editorial or individual level. Regarding the difference in use of anonymous sources between the two events, however, the explanation may be that, in the case of a war, journalists are generally conscious of the fact that wars are fought not only with weapons, but also with propaganda. That is a lesson they learned during both the Gulf War in 1991 and the war in Kosovo in 1999. Thus, journalists were much more critical of their sources and less willing to risk becoming a party to the war by uncritically reporting what anonymous sources say.

The results in Table 2 also show that the number of sources used varies between the different types of media and between coverage of the terror attacks, on the one hand, and coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan, on the other. On average, more sources were used in coverage of the terror attacks than in

Table 2. *Use of Sources in the Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the US and the US Attacks in Afghanistan*

	Media coverage of the terror attacks against USA		Media coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan	
	Percentage of articles/news features which includes at least one anonymous source	Average number of quoted or mentioned sources/ news article or news featur	Percentage of articles/news features which includes at least one anonymous source	Average number of quoted or mentioned sources/ news article or news featur
Dagens Nyheter (BS)	54	2,8	43	2,2
Svenska Dagbladet (BS)	56	3,3	26	1,9
Aftonbladet (T)	50	3,3	29	1,9
Expressen (T)	49	5,2	13	1,8
Rapport (PS)	49	3,0	29	3,6
Aktuellt (PS)	53	2,9	30	2,3
TV4 Nyheterna (C)	50	3,1	13	2,4
Average percentage or number of sources	52	3,4	26	2,3

Note: BS=Broadsheet, T=Tabloid, PS=Public Service, C=Commercial. Numbers of sources and percentages have been rounded off.

coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan. In the latter case, in three of the media studied, the articles on average included less than two sources. That is remarkable, given a) the principle of using two separate independent sources, and b) the fact that what we are counting here is number of sources used, not whether they are independent of each other.

Besides the number of sources used, it is also important to note what kind of sources the different media used. Because it is the sources that provide much of the information that journalists transmit to the audience, the use of different types of sources inevitably has consequences for journalistic content (Sahlstrand 2000; Gans 1980; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Thus, Table 3 shows how frequently different kinds of sources were used in coverage of the two events.

The results show that in coverage of the terror attacks against the US, American and Swedish elite sources were the two most frequently used sources. Following these were the victims of the terror attacks, including the relatives, friends and colleagues of those who died due to the terror attacks, and in some cases even those who actually died. The latter may sound strange, but the explanation is that in some articles and news features, quotes that were said to come from passengers in the hijacked planes or persons who died in the World Trade Center were included as if these people were still alive. This is an example of how the media sometimes

dramatizes the news in a way that blurs the distinction between fact and fiction.

As can be seen from Table 3, even in coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan, the two most frequently used source types were American and Swedish elite sources. Afghani elite sources were, relatively speaking, less commonly used.

What is also notable is the absence of spokespersons for the United Nations as sources. Even though this was and is an international conflict in which the United Nations has an important role to play and where its views are important for the legitimacy of American military action, Swedish journalism failed to report on the views and declarations from the United Nations.

These results indicate that there was a bias in the media coverage of these two events, which ultimately favoured the American side of the conflict. These results should not, however, be seen as an indication that the Swedish media were intentionally biased in their selection of sources. The explanation is more likely that American elite sources – as well as Swedish elite sources – were more accessible than, for example, Afghani elite sources.

Another likely explanation is that Swedish journalists in their reporting were very dependent on American news media and their reporting. In many cases, it is obvious that what on the surface appeared to be original reporting from the Swedish journalists, were actually re-writes of articles or news features from various American media. That is

Table 3. *Types of Sources Used in Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the US and the US Attacks in Afghanistan (%)*

	Media coverage of the terror attacks against USA		Media coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan	
	Percentage of news articles that includes different types of sources	Percentage of news features that includes different types of sources	Percentage of news articles that includes different types of sources	Percentage of news features that includes different types of sources
American elite sources	40	42	35	46
Afghani elite sources	4	4	18	26
Pakistani elite sources	1	4	8	12
Palestine elite sources	2	4	3	1
Israeli elite sources	2	2	0	0
Swedish elite sources	23	22	32	32
Spokespersons for countries within the European Union (EU)	8	7	8	3
Spokespersons for EU-institutions	1	1	1	0
Spokespersons for United Nations	1	0	3	4
American or Afghani victims	13	10	2	8
Eye-witnesses	5	4	2	5
Ordinary American or Afghani citizens	8	10	4	6
N	482	179	272	76

Note: Percentages have been rounded off. Included in the different "elite"-categories are politicians, experts and military spokespersons.

the case particularly in coverage of the terror attacks. However, if one judges from explicit references in the articles and news features, the media studied used other media as sources in no more than ten percent of their coverage of the terror attacks and in 26 percent of the news features about the US attacks in Afghanistan (see Table 4).

In coverage of the terror attacks, different American media besides CNN were used as sources in 10 percent of the articles and eight percent of the news features. But as noted, because Table 4 only shows how often different media were explicitly used as sources, this is without doubt an underestimate. In coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan,

Table 4. *Percentage of Articles and News Features that Explicitly Use Other Media as Sources*

	Media coverage of the terror attacks against USA		Media coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan	
	Percentage of news articles that uses different media as sources	Percentage of news features that uses different media as sources	Percentage of news articles that uses different media as sources	Percentage of news features that uses different media as sources
CNN	8	3	3	4
Other American media	10	8	6	0
Al-Jazeera	0	0	3	26
Afghani media	0	0	3	0
International news bureaus	8	3	8	13
Other Swedish media	6	1	1	0
N	482	179	272	76

Note: Percentage has been rounded off.

Al-Jazeera was explicitly used as a source in 26 percent of the news features. In most instances, however, only pictures from Al-Jazeera were used.

The fact that the Swedish media largely used foreign and international media as sources, even though they did not always explicitly state this, raises a question concerning the credibility of the news. The reason is that every time journalists choose or are forced to rely on other media instead of doing their own original reporting, there is a risk that disinformation and errors will keep circulating throughout the news pages and news shows. Several examples from coverage of the terror attacks illustrate this (Leth & Thurén 2002). For example, on the first day of reporting, one could learn from the Swedish media that a bomb had exploded outside the State Department, a report that later proved to be incorrect. Another example is that, on September 13, the Swedish media reported that five fire fighters had been found alive in the ruins of the World Trade Center, which also proved to be incorrect.

In a situation of confusion, time pressure and a lack of reliable information, it is especially important for readers and viewers that the factual information provided by the media is correct. If one media outlet relies too much on another medium – which is also under stress and lacks reliable facts – for information, the risk that factually incorrect information will spread is obvious and one of the main reasons why the media should rely primarily on their own original reporting. If this is not possible,

they should at least state clearly where they have obtained their information, whether it is from other media or other types of sources. In this respect, the Swedish media often failed, which made it harder for readers and viewers to separate fact from fiction and information from disinformation.

Moreover, the results so far also show that Swedish journalism actually often failed to fulfil the journalistic virtues journalists themselves theoretically hold as very important. While this may be understandable given the chaotic situation that characterized the terror attacks and their immediate aftermath and given the lack of access to Afghanistan during the US attacks, it is no less important – during situations such as these – for journalists to act as responsible gatekeepers. The use of two separate independent sources, the task of providing reliable information and acting as a watchdog are no less important in times of crisis and war. On the contrary, it can be argued that these journalistic virtues are more important during such times than under more ordinary conditions.

The Occurrence of Speculations

In this study, we also examined how frequently three kinds of speculations occurred in coverage of the terror attacks and how frequently three other kinds of speculations occurred in coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan. The results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. *Occurrence of Speculations in Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the US and the US Attacks in Afghanistan (%)*

	Speculations about the number of dead due to the terror attacks	Speculations about those responsible for the terror attacks	Speculations about how the US might respond to the terror attacks	Speculations about the number of dead due to the US attacks	Speculations about future development in the war in Afghanistan	Speculations about future attacks terror	N
Dagens Nyheter (BS)	11	27	20	10	27	18	173
Svenska Dagbladet (BS)	22	28	15	10	16	20	151
Aftonbladet (T)	12	30	12	12	17	27	226
Expressen (T)	13	27	17	10	20	25	204
Rapport (PS)	18	20	25	21	32	18	93
Aktuellt (PS)	22	24	24	12	24	18	107
TV4 Nyheterna (C)	19	35	22	20	47	13	55
Average	17	27	19	14	26	20	

Note: BS=Broadsheet, T=Tabloid, PS=Public Service, C=Commercial. Percentages have been rounded off. Speculations are defined as statements about reality based on 'facts' that do not yet exist.

The results show that speculations of different kinds were rather common, and that it is obviously wrong to view modern journalism as merely descriptive. This is particularly true regarding speculations about who might have been responsible for the terror attacks and how the war in Afghanistan might develop, both of which occurred rather frequently. The results also show, once again, that it is hard to generalize from structural factors when trying to explain journalistic content. As before, neither media type (TV vs. newspaper) nor media category (tabloid vs. broadsheet papers) nor ownership (private vs. public service) can explain these patterns.

Furthermore, these results illustrate how facts, interpretations and speculations intermingle even in what are seemingly ordinary news articles or news features, which helps to contribute to a blurring of the line between fact and fiction. This blurring is exacerbated by the fact that it may often be hard to detect speculations when the texts are not read carefully. The speculations were often reported as if they were facts.

Partisan Supporters or Neutral Observers?

In the Swedish debate following both the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan, the Swedish media were accused of being too pro-American and too anti-Islamic in their coverage. In an attempt to study whether this criticism is warranted, this

study sought to discover how often different rhetorical figures were featured in the news articles and the news features. By rhetorical figures we mean the use of certain stereotypical descriptions of reality, such as "Muslims are fanatics" – or the rebuttal of such stereotypical descriptions. In both cases, the rhetorical figure is part of the journalistic content, because, for example, an argument that Muslims are not fanatics would not be made without the assumption that they might be considered fanatics.

The usage of these stereotypical descriptions must not be explicitly stated. If, for example, one Muslim is portrayed as a fanatic and at the same time it is implicit that he or she is acting as a representative of Muslims in general, then this is counted as an instance of the rhetorical figure "Muslims as fanatics" occurring in the article.

In this study the occurrence of six rhetorical figures was examined. The results are shown in Table 6.

The table shows several results. One pattern is that the occurrence of these rhetorical figures was, generally speaking, larger in coverage of the terror attacks than in coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan. Perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that journalists had more time to prepare their coverage of the attacks in Afghanistan than that of the terror attacks, and that the debate about coverage made them conscious of the risk of portraying Muslims in an unjustifiable and unfavourable way.

A second result is that the occurrence of these rhetorical figures, to some extent, mirrored the underlying events. So, for example, the anti-Muslim

Table 6. *The Occurrence of Different Rhetorical Figures in Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the US and the US Attacks in Afghanistan (%)*

	Media coverage of the terror attacks against the US		Media coverage of the US attacks in Afghanistan	
	News articles	News features	News articles	News features
The Muslim world is a threat to Western societies	10	4	6	4
Muslims are fanatics	19	13	3	3
Muslims are oppressed by the Western world	5	2	4	13
The US is the defender of freedom and democracy	10	8	6	1
The US is an oppressor of the poor in third world countries	5	3	3	7
The US acts as a self-appointed world police force	14	14	6	5
N	482	179	272	76

Note: Percentages have been rounded off.

rhetorical figures were more prominent in coverage of the terror attacks, where Muslim individuals were actually responsible for the attacks, than was the rhetorical figure "Muslims as oppressed by the Western world," which occurred more often in coverage of the war in Afghanistan, where Muslims were, to some extent, actually the targets of the US-led attacks.

If one counts the total number of anti-Muslim and anti-American rhetorical figures, the former occurs in 170 news articles and news features, while the latter occurs in 128. The inference from this is that the coverage was, to some extent, biased against Muslims and the Islamic world. If, however, we study whether these rhetorical figures gain support or are rebutted, we find that particularly the rhetorical figure "Muslims are fanatics" was criticized more often than it was supported. If we consider not only the occurrence of, but also the degree of support for these rhetorical figures, the results show that, generally speaking, it is not warranted to accuse the Swedish media studied of having been biased against Muslims.

Of course there are examples of articles that, perhaps inspired by Samuel P. Huntington's theory about future clashes of civilization (Huntington 1996), portrayed Muslims as fanatics in extremely stereotypical ways, and the Muslim world as a threat to the Western world. On balance, however, those articles and news features were exceptions. Overall, there is no reason to claim that the picture of Muslims in the Swedish media was particularly negative or that the coverage was particularly pro-American.

Conclusions

For anyone following the Swedish debate about the journalistic coverage of the terror attacks against the US and the US attacks in Afghanistan, the conclusion must have been that the main problem was that the Swedish media were too pro-American and too anti-Muslim.

What our study has shown is that such conclusions are largely unfounded. The main problem was not any ideological stand towards the US, Afghanistan or Muslims. There is little support for the notion that there was a particularly strong, if relatively unconscious, right- or left-wing bias in the news.

What the study has shown can be summarized as follows. First, the use of anonymous sources was rather frequent, particularly in coverage of the terror attacks. Second, American elite sources and, to a

lesser extent, Swedish elite sources dominated the coverage. Third, the average number of quoted or mentioned sources was rather low, particularly considering that we have studied not whether the sources used were independent of each other, but only the number of sources used. However, if several parts of the media did fail to provide two sources or slightly more per news article or news feature, then it is highly unlikely that they succeeded in using two separate independent sources.

Fourth, the study has shown that the Swedish media largely relied on the American media as sources, but did not explicitly tell the readers and the viewers the extent to which this was the case. Fifth, the occurrence of speculations was very common in all the media studied.

These are some of the concrete empirical findings, and they point to a sixth finding. Namely that it is almost impossible to explain these results by looking at structural factors such as media ownership (private vs. public service), media type (TV vs. newspaper), media category (tabloid vs. broadsheet) or structural position in the audience market (elite media vs. popular media). This indicates that there is indeed a growing media convergence, not only in a technical sense, but also as regards journalistic content in the different types of media. If we are to explain the differences between the different types of media, we must therefore study the editorial or individual level of the news organizations.

What this indicates, in turn, is that all media are affected by the growing competition for people's attention, that all media are increasingly market-driven, and that they all seem to rely more on this particular media logic than was previously the case.

One result is that the line between fact and fiction is sometimes increasingly hard to discern, due to the frequent use of speculations, the blending of straight reporting and commentary, and the use of story-telling techniques following from this media logic – techniques such as personification, simplification and enhancement. This is especially true when the news concerns events that involve limited scope for media preparations and a lack of media routines.

The basic assumption of this article – concerning the importance both of preparations and of routines for journalistic quality – has been supported to some extent by empirical data from the case study of coverage of September 11 and Afghanistan. For example, the appearance of anonymous sources was much more frequent in terror reporting, as was that of negative stereotypes of Muslims in news stories. However, there were no significant differences in

the occurrence of speculations in the two cases. One explanation for the better quality of the news reports about Afghanistan is the fact that the war gave less “perfect news”. Half the number of stories and features during the first five days gives less space for over-dramatization and the replacement of professional journalistic norms. As an explanation for news quality, media preparations and media routines seem to be at least as important as opportunities for “live” reports and the existence of “good” photo opportunities. Generally speaking, the relatively prepared war correspondents around the Pakistani border did a better job than did most of the confused local TV news crews a few blocks away from the World Trade Centre in South Manhattan.

The differences in media coverage of the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan were also substantial enough to raise the question of whether it is relevant in media research to compare coverage of these kinds of events. Undoubtedly, modern terror activities and modern warfare challenge modern media reporting in quite different ways.

War, in present circumstances, is fairly easy for the media to recognize. There are at least two parties to a conflict and they are usually engaged in an intensive and well-recognized propaganda war as well as the ongoing military war. Nowadays, also uneven propaganda resources often characterize wars, in that the only existing superpower in the world, the United States, has much better information channels, as well as the capacity and the possibility to influence the global media in particular ways. However, awareness of this superpower superiority also makes the media more cautious. Many media organizations seem to have learned a lesson from the 1991 Gulf War, with regard to which they were heavily attacked for their biased and uncritical pro-Western reporting.

With respect to terrorist acts there are no such lessons to be learned, as these acts are, by their very nature, somewhat surprising deviations from normality and not a foreseeable development, as are some wars. The empirical data presented in this article support this conclusion. The number of anonymous sources was much greater in the terror news as was the frequency of negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. Thus, the war in Afghanistan was covered as a normal conflict between well-defined political actors and this aspect seems to have made traditional professional journalism more effective. On the other hand, the new elements of the conflict and the basic confusion surrounding the terror attacks resulted, generally speaking, in lower journalistic quality in articles and the TV news.

No two crises are identical, and as regards media coverage of crises, we think the ability to give adequate information to citizens is dependent both on the existence of media routines and on the media’s ability to make adequate preparations. The greater the opportunity to prepare and to use existing routines, the more likely it is that citizens will be adequately informed. Thus this case study of leading media organizations in Sweden shows that coverage of the war in Afghanistan was of generally better journalistic quality than was coverage of the terror attacks in the US.

This brings us back, finally, to the remarks in the introduction of the article about the recent war in Iraq in spring 2003 and its mixed character as both an expected and an unexpected event. Is it reasonable to assume that Swedish media coverage in this case would be more like the Afghanistan case with many “lessons learned”, or were there too many surprising events, making the coverage more like that of the terror attacks?

The War in Iraq – Both Easy and Difficult to Cover?

The war in Iraq is now over and media reporting about the war will probably be of significant interest for media and communication researchers in forthcoming years. It is essential to compare the coverage of this war with studies from other wars and to draw conclusions based on the existence of similar patterns or significant differences in the reporting. There is also a need for more research about how increased media competition affects the content in the different media forms, including broadsheet dailies, tabloids, public service broadcast companies and commercial TV stations and the Internet. The war in Iraq undoubtedly represents another interesting case study of the functions of professional journalism under external and internal pressure.

The model for analysing media’s ability to cover crises proposed in this article may also be useful in studies on coverage of the war in Iraq. As mentioned initially, this war was characterized by an expected outcome after a much less expected chain of dramatic events. Given these facts, the media’s ability to cover the war in a professional manner may have varied during different phases of the conflict.

These assumptions have yet to be examined, but the war in Iraq is hard to categorize as belonging to only one of the four types of conflicts previously described in this article. Yes, media preparations were obviously satisfactory, as the American military build-up had been going on for months before

the first attack. News departments definitely had their working plans and background stories ready for a long period of time. These facts, as well as the predicted outcome, support the expectation of high quality war reporting in this case.

On the other hand, during the war many events developed in unexpected ways. Reporters prepared to report about “business as usual” suddenly had to produce new stories about CIA-initiated missile attacks, American prisoners of war and a battlefield development nobody had foreseen. The routine coverage of the war should have been disturbed by this almost endless chain of unpredictable events, and thus resulted in some war reporting of lower quality.

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