

Watchdog or Cheerleader: The Role of American News Media in Covering Political Leader's Speech

JINBONG CHOI

Sungkonghoe University, South Korea

News media studies, especially in the field of the political economy of media, have traditionally been looking at frames used by news media. Structures are usually examined as follows: the words or phrases emphasized; the images excluded or trivialized; and what these frames suggest about the mediated image of public issues. Recent studies in the field of media framing have also looked at how framing is evident in media messages, which have been shown to exert some influence on the formation of attitudes, opinions, and understanding of public issues. The present study theorizes that American news media are adopting and using their government's preferred versions of foreign issues when they frame the international issues. Based on looking at the frames used by two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, this study examines news media coverage of President George W Bush's 2002 State of the Union address.

Keywords: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, North Korea, media, political leader speech, message

On January 29, 2002, then the U.S. President George W. Bush (hereafter referred to as Bush) introduced the phrase "axis of evil" and selected three undeveloped and unconnected countries to be labeled "evil" countries: Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. By employing the "axis of evil" frame, Bush tried to persuade his audience to support his war on terror. Further, Bush selected the "axis of evil" frame not only to prosecute the war on terrorism but also to justify military actions. Moreover, he described the three "evil" countries—Iran, Iraq and North Korea—as the world's most dangerous regimes. However, he failed to explain why and how he chose the term "evil" instead of other words to label these three countries. Furthermore, he failed to provide any evidence that those three countries were terrorist allies (Noah, 2003).

Thus, this study aims to examine media coverage of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, reviewing the frames used by two newspapers—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. That is, it analyzes how framing is used by the two newspapers by examining newspaper coverage of presidential rhetoric in texts, particularly about North Korea, and explores the role of media representation in the construction of the national image of North Korea as an "axis of evil" country.

Literature Review

In the past four decades, international news coverage in U.S. newspapers has been studied continuously by journalism scholars. Studies have largely focused on differences between

Correspondence to: Jinbong Choi, Department of Media and Communication, Sungkonghoe University, 320 Yeondong-Ro, Guro-Gu, Seoul, 152-716, South Korea.

firsthand experience and the mediated version of events or issues. Several studies have used framing analysis as a research method to analyze media texts, although the studies have not explained that framing analysis was adopted as a research method. Lin (1983) studied news coverage of Sino-U.S. normalization in Chinese and U.S. newspapers and found that different pictures (or images) about the same event were presented in these newspapers. Through this study, Lin concluded that there was a strong relationship between the political system, media system, and media representation (Lin, 1983). In conducting this research, Lin examined the coverage of different newspapers through how they framed (portrayed) the same event in different ways.

Radikov, Radushinskay, Morozova, and Belous (2018) covered current trends and resources of media influence in Russia and found that residents did not demonstrate high political engagement and civil activism. However, another study in Russia by Kalinina, Yusupova, and Voevoda (2019) explored the idea that media is used to manipulate the speech influence. Further, the study stressed on the lexical toolkit, which includes euphemisms, dysphemisms, slogan words, and speech metaphorization.

Lee (1998) also analyzed the coverage of three U.S. newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Kansas City Times*) regarding Chinese mass movements in 1966, 1976, 1986, and 1987. According to his study, the three U.S. newspapers placed major emphasis on mass conflict. Further, he argued that the worldview of these three U.S. newspapers, influenced by political relationships and the foreign policy of their government, colored how they viewed and portrayed international news events or issues (Lee, 1998).

In addition to the analysis of Chinese politics, Mousa (1981) examined the Arab image in *The New York Times* from 1917 to 1947 and argued that news coverage of the newspaper was event-oriented, conflict-oriented, and unfavorably positioned against the Arabs. Further, he explained that *The New York Times* used more information from British, French, and Jewish news sources than Arab sources during the inter-war period to emphasize aggressive and dangerous images of Arabs. Due to reliance on British, French, and Jewish sources, mostly unfavorable attributions and reports about the Arabs were represented by *The New York Times* (Mousa, 1981).

Communication scholars like Gitlin and Kellner examined the relationship between media frames and hegemony. Kellner (1992) applied frame analysis to analyze news media coverage of the first Gulf war using a qualitative methodological approach. In this study, Kellner analyzed a series of propaganda campaigns orchestrated by the state and the military and how they used news media to promote widespread support for the war. In his research, Kellner revealed how news media presented the war by analyzing its dominant images, frames, and messages and “how the news media audience bought into the Bush (father of George W. Bush) administration/ mainstream media version of the war” (p. 7).

According to Kellner’s study, the U.S. mainstream media were manipulated and controlled by the Bush (Senior) administration and Pentagon to manufacture consent for their policies, while reporting the first Gulf War (Kellner, 1992). In short, the U.S. mainstream media provided audience members information based on the government policy of the first Gulf War through media framing. Further, the U.S. news media framed and portrayed the first Gulf War as a necessary military action to justify the invasion of the Bush (Senior) administration (Kellner, 1992). Similar to news coverage of the first Gulf War, according to the findings of Kellner’s study, it is assumed that the U.S. news media framed North Korea’s public image, which is reflected in Bush’s policy against North Korea.

Gitlin (1980) qualitatively studied news coverage of the Student Movement for a Democratic Society (SDS) during the public protests on the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Gitlin examined how the U.S. news media trivialized a

significant student movement and influenced shaping the social hegemony of the campaign during the chaotic 1960s. He found that social movement groups were marginalized and discounted depending on how the news sources were represented. In most cases, the government influences news coverage by providing social hegemony (Gitlin, 1980). He also tried to analyze how mass media frame the SDS movement in historical time, and in doing so, centered on *CBS News* and *The New York Times* for several reasons: they were “influential in powerful circles and inside the movement; they were in some sense the best of the mainstream media, and their archives are relatively accessible” (p. 17). The study suggested that the news coverage disparaged the group’s effectiveness through various framing techniques such as trivializing their activities, emphasizing internal dissension, and relying on statements of more credible government officials.

The reviewed literature provides ideas and methods that guide the present research in analyzing framing strategies that news media adopted to represent national images of other countries. The following are the research objectives:

- (i) To understand the representation of President Bush’s framing of North Korea in major American newspapers,
- (ii) To investigate Bush’s rhetoric on North Korea in American newspapers, and
- (iii) To determine similarities and differences among American newspapers in Bush’s framing of North Korea.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theory of social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1999; Tuchman, 1978) because to some degree, the importance of identifying and examining consistent media framing of a particular issue is realized when the social construction of reality is considered (Smith, 1997). The social construction of reality regards communication as created and negotiated; in other words, the meaning is neither fixed nor transmitted. Meanings (such as, of messages, signs, symbols, etc.) are not fixed but instead negotiated. According to Hall, “meaning is not given but produced,” the meaning of realities is socially constructed and interpreted (Hall, 1982, p. 67).

The most notable pioneers in proposing the theory of the social construction of reality are sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. They were primarily concerned with what they called “the contents of the reality encountered in the natural attitude” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 195). When examining the North Korean public image in U.S. newspapers, this theory helps understand how the “reality” of North Korea was narrated and constructed by the newspapers. Johnson (1995) explains the relationship between media representation and social reality and argues that media information influences people’s awareness of objects and issues. He insists that “most of our knowledge of the world is a mediated reality. We learn of the world through switching on the television or opening up a newspaper.”

Methodology

In this study, representations of the 2002 State of the Union address in two major American newspapers are studied to identify how the coverage framed North Korea. In other words, the respective response to President Bush’s speech from the two major American daily newspapers *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* is analyzed to reveal how the two newspapers represented Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address and how the two newspapers framed North Korea while reporting Bush’s speech. The study chose both the

newspapers as they are widely regarded as “papers of record” that influence coverage in the regional press (Norris & Carroll, 2003, p. 4). Many researchers have shown *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are essential in setting the media plan for international issues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Gans, 1979; Reese & Danielian, 1991). Further, these two newspapers are considered to be elite publications (Weiss, 1974) because primary readers of these newspapers are educated.

To collect empirical materials for analysis, the researcher selected a one-year period from January 2002 to December 2002. This one-year period began with President Bush's 2002 State of the Union address and ended with the withdrawal of North Korea from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT). For collecting data, this study used a constructed week sampling technique. Constructed week sampling assumes cyclical variation of newspaper content for different days of the week and requires that all the different days of the week be represented (Stempel, 1989). Constructed week sampling requires all the different days of the week to be represented. It is more thorough than other sampling techniques, such as simple random and consecutive day sampling (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). In their study, they compared simple random, consecutive day sampling, and constructed week sampling. After they examined these three similar sampling techniques, they concluded that “constructed weeks produce better estimates than purely random samples of days because they avoid the possibility of over-sampling Sundays or Saturdays” (Riffe et al., 1993, p. 139). Furthermore, their comparisons with consecutive day sampling demonstrated that “consecutive day samples are straightforward and convenient to use, and different weekdays may be represented, but are not a reliable means of estimating content for six months or longer.” (Riffe et al., 1993, p. 139). Consequently, according to their study, constructed week sampling is more efficient than pure random or consecutive day sampling. Regarding how many constructed weeks are most productive, they have suggested that four constructed weeks are sufficient: “...for a population of six months of editions, one constructed week was as efficient as four, and its estimates exceeded what would be expected based on probability theory” (Riffe et al., 1993, p.139).

The researcher selected eight constructed weeks from the study newspapers. The first four weeks were from January 2002 to June 2002. The second four weeks were from July 2002 to December 2002. To construct sampling weeks, the study selected four to five days from each month and chose the same weekdays from different months (e.g., to create Monday, the researcher decided dates from January, February, April, and June). While using qualitative research methods, “complete escape from subjectivity is never possible because of [humans'] very nature as a cultural animal; however, the constraints and guidelines of the [research] methodology are intended to minimize [researchers'] perceptual and analytical bias” (Saville-Troike, 1989, p. 4).

The study also used multiple coders to code the newspaper texts for content analysis. Lauffer (2000) identifies the “use of multiple coders helps to establish and maintain conformability as well as helps to represent adequately and believably the realities of the documents being studied (p. 90).” Three coders participated in coding process. Except for the author, the other two coders were undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota and majoring in journalism and Asian languages and literature. The study has considered 159 news stories for coding.

Findings and Discussion

After Bush labeled North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as an “axis of evil” in the 2002 State of the Union address (January 29, 2002), two newspapers *The New York Times* and *The Washington*

Post presented his speech using specific frames. Presenting Bush's "axis of evil" speech, the two newspapers showed a similar trend in portraying the public image of North Korea. Both the papers described North Korea negatively in their reportage on Bush's speech. By quoting sensationalistic words from Bush's speech and providing reasons why Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are corrupt, the U.S. newspapers supported Bush's labeling of "axis of evil" and emphasized negative images of North Korea. Specifically, both the newspapers without investigating the reason behind the labeling, delivered Bush's rhetoric without critiques (even without commentaries). With no investigation of Bush's rhetoric, the U.S. newspapers parroted Bush's "axis of evil" label.

The newspapers used words and phrases lifted from Bush's speech: "to develop biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons" (*The Washington Post*, January 31, 2002, p. A16); "to acquire weapons of mass destruction" (*The Washington Post*, January 31, 2002, p. A16); "support for terrorism" (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, p. A1); "group of dangerous regimes" (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, p. A12); "the threats posed by Iran, Iraq, and North Korea" (*The Washington Post*, January 31, 2002, p. A16). Three news articles from *The New York Times* described responses to Bush's speech from the world, including Asia, Europe, and Russia. For example, the headline of an article was "South Korea and Japan begin to sweat after Bush turns up the heat on North Korea" (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, A 12). Another news article reported that:

from Western Europe to Russia to South Korea today, several allies of America said they feared that Mr. Bush's strong language would widen the fissures in the coalition against terrorism, set back reformers in Iran, and shut down talks with North Korea (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, A 1).

The other news article represented voices from other countries as follows:

Josef Joffe, a German foreign policy analyst, said: "What was particularly striking is the way Mr. Bush countenances the projection of American power from anywhere to anywhere. He described America in a truly global war able to fight anywhere. There is no allusion to allies at all. But in practical terms, the U.S. cannot fight wars without allies" (*The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, A 12).

As manifested in these examples, the U.S. newspapers represented other countries' reactions to Bush's speech without their investigation and criticism of the speech. The U.S. newspapers implicitly supported the Bush administration's foreign policy against these three countries by emphasizing and repeating Bush's powerful and damaging words and images. Thus, they implicitly supported Bush's "axis of evil" frame.

Hallin (1994) explains the relationship of the U.S. news media to political authority. According to him, the U.S. media usually devote their coverage to the governing institutions (e.g., the president and administration officials).

The findings of this study also show that media frames work effectively to create particular images of social issues or objects. While reporting social issues or purposes, news media produce and use frames to create specific pictures of the problems or objects; subsequently, these became dominant. Further, news media reproduced these dominant frames and even defended them. According to the findings of this study, the U.S. newspapers framed the public image of North Korea negatively as dominant structures and used these dominant frames whenever they portrayed issues related to North Korea. To defend these dominant frames, for example, the U.S. newspapers supported Bush's "axis of evil" label by providing reasons regarding why Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are corrupt countries.

The findings of this study support the research of (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Entman, 2004; Gitlin, 1980; Kellner, 1992) that media framing influences and interacts with the construction of hegemonic meanings. According to Kellner, “hegemony is constructed when a coalition of social groups imposes its agenda on the public, and attains dominance” (1992, p. 62). The newspapers both actively and subtly supported establishing the Bush administration’s hegemony by transmitting its negative language about North Korea and through the omission of alternative (positive) discourses about North Korea.

According to Gitlin, “works of hegemony... consist of imposing standardized assumptions over events and conditions that must be ‘covered’ by the dictates of the prevailing news standards” (1980, p. 264). Constructing and using negative images and assumptions that, through their repetition, became standardized, demonstrate that the U.S. newspapers contributed to the hegemony. The idea of consent is also crucial to hegemony because it “depends on a combination of force and consent” (Hall, 1979, p. 332). For Hall, “hegemony is in operation... when they (the ruling class) not only possess the power to coerce but actively organize to command and win the consent of the subordinated classes to their continuing sway” (1979, p. 332). In other words, hegemony is accomplished when the ruling class acquires the consent of the subordinated classes about specific policies and agendas through the support of the press that transmits these policies and programs to the public. Hegemony theorists acknowledge that “government officials keep the information available to the public within such narrow... boundaries... and consistently produce pro-government propaganda—and public consent or acquiescence to White House decisions” (Entman, 2004, p. 4). In this process, the press acts, “for the most part, as a vehicle for government official” (Entman, 2004, p. 4) statements and practices. In other words, the media contribute to producing public consent to their government’s policy and plan.

By consenting to the Bush administration’s foreign policy, the U.S. newspapers attempted to influence the public common sense in North Korea. According to Gitlin, “the hegemonic sense of the world seeps into widespread ‘common sense’ and gets reproduced there; it may even appear to be generated by that common sense” (1980, p. 254). In other words, the media, as an ideological and cultural industry, propagate specific ideas and assumptions constructed by political elites and impose them on the public’s common sense in an attempt to influence the public’s understanding of an issue or object. For example, the stories that this study analyzed were attempts to change the public’s common sense about North Korea as they constitute the only sources of North Korean information for the vast majority of the people.

Conclusion

The hegemonic process was vigorously at work in the U.S. news coverage of the 2002 State of the Union address. While covering this speech, the U.S. newspapers adopted Bush’s viewpoints about North Korea and transmitted them to aid Bush and his administration and its foreign policy toward North Korea. This result also supports Hallin’s (1994) assertion that “the media themselves are subject to the hegemonic process” (p. 59). That is, news media propagate and celebrate the dominant political ideology (Hallin, 1994) while portraying international issues. The U.S. news media often work as a vehicle for governing institutions to market their ideas to audience members, primarily while covering global matters or events. When the U.S. news media cover foreign news, they typically adopt and use their government’s perspectives and foreign policy rather than conducting their investigation. The U.S. newspapers did this precisely by quoting Bush’s rhetoric and continuing to use it while covering issues related to North Korea.

The selected newspapers framed issues related to North Korea through several framing devices, such as selection, salience (emphasis), and exclusion. Of these framing devices, salience was used most powerfully by both the newspapers that are picked up for study. The two U.S. newspapers frame issues related to the 2002 State of the Union address following their governments' foreign policies. This is a perfect example of news media adopting and using their government's preferred versions of external issues or events when they frame international matters or events.

Even though "ideally, a free press balances official views with a more impartial perspective that allows the public to deliberate independently on the government's decisions, ... in practice, the relationship between governing elites and news organizations is less distant and more cooperative than the ideal envisions, especially in foreign affairs" (Entman, 2004, p. 2). In framing the 2002 State of the Union address, the U.S. newspapers supported the White House line.

Consequently, the U.S. newspapers supported the Bush administration in establishing negative images of North Korea as a hegemonic project, and they were, on the whole, successful. The U.S. newspapers did not fulfill their "watchdog" role. The U.S. news media render devoted service to the political-economic institutions that give them power and economic-political advantages, and this study illustrates this as a case in point.

References

- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.
- Carragee, K. M. & Roefs, W. (2004). The neglect of power in recent framing research. *Journal of Communication*, 54(2), 214-233.
- Dearing, J. W., & Rogers, E. M. (1996). *Agenda-setting*. CA: Sage.
- Entman, R. M. (2004). *Projections of power*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS evening news, NBC nightly news, Newsweek, and Time*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. California: University of California Press.
- Gitlin, T. (1987). Television's screens: Hegemony in transitions. In D. Lazere (Eds.), *American media and mass culture: Left perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hall, S. (1979). Culture, the media, and the ideological effect. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass communication society* (pp. 315-348). California: Sage.
- Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of 'ideology': Return of the repressed in media studies. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, society, and the media* (pp. 56-90). London: Methuen.
- Hall, S. (1999). Encoding, decoding. In S. During (Eds.), *The cultural studies reader* (pp.507-517). New York: Routledge.
- Hallin, D. C. (1994). *We keep America on top of the world*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, T. (1995). *The rehabilitation of Richard Nixon*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Kalinina, A. V., Yusupova, E. E., & Voevoda, E. V. (2019). Means of Influence on Public Opinion in Political Context: Speech Manipulation in the Media. *Media Watch*, 10(2), 309-322. DOI: 10.15655/mw/2019/v10i2/49625
- Kellner, D. (1992). *The Persian Gulf T.V. War*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Lauffer, K. A. (2000). Defining and dramatizing death: A framing analysis of newspaper coverage of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in selected Michigan newspapers from 1996 to 1999. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Florida: University of Florida.

- Lee, M. H. (1988). *A content analysis of the coverage of Chinese mass movements by three newspapers: The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Kansas City Times*. Unpublished master's thesis. Missouri: Central Missouri State University.
- Lin, C. (1983). *Content analysis of the coverage of Sino-U.S. normalization by three newspapers: The New York Times, The Central Daily News, and the People's Daily*. Unpublished master's thesis. Iowa: Iowa State University.
- Mousa, I. S. (1981). *The Arab portrayal: The New York Times 1917-1947*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Washington: University of Washington.
- Noah, T. (2003, January 9). Axis of Evil" Authorship Settled!. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2003/01/axis-of-evil-authorship-settled.html>
- Norris, P. & Carroll, S. J. (1997). The dynamics of the framing process: From Reagan's gender gap to Clinton's soccer moms. Working Paper Series in the WAPPP (Women and Public Policy Program). Retrieved from <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/wappp/research/working/index.html>.
- Radikov, I. V., Radushinskaya, A. I., Morozova, S. S., & Belous, V. G. (2018). Political Activity of Russians: Current Trends and Resources of Media Influence. *Media Watch*, 9(2), 245-256. DOI: 10.15655/mw/2018/v9i2/49382
- Reese, S. D., & Danielian, L. H. (1991). Intermedia influence and the drug issue: Converging on cocaine. In D. L. Protesse & M. McCombs (Eds.). *Agenda setting: reading on media, public opinion, and policymaking* (pp. 237-249). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Riffe, D., Aust, C. F., & Lacy, S. R. (1993). The effectiveness of random, consecutive day and constructed week sampling in newspaper content analysis. *Journalism Quarterly*, 70(1), 133-139.
- Saville-Troike, M. (1989). *The ethnography of communication: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith, J. M. (1997). Visual and verbal claims-making about the endangered species issue on network television: A media framing analysis. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
- Stempel, G. H. (1989). Content analysis. In G. H. Stempel b! & B. H. Westley (Eds.). *Research methods in mass communication* (2nd ed.) (pp. 119-131). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Weiss, C. H. (1974). What America's leaders read, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 38, 1-22.

Jinbong Choi (Ph.D., University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, USA, 2005) is a Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at Sungkonghoe University, South Korea. Before joining Sungkonghoe University in 2012, Dr. Choi also worked for Texas State University-San Marcos, Minnesota State University-Mankato, and Bemidji State University as a faculty member. His area of research interest includes the political economy of mass media, media framing, and international communication.