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The President, the Press, and the War: A Tale of Two Framing Agendas

Rebecca A. Glazier [a] & Amber E. Boydstun [b]

[a] Political Science, University of Arkansas

[b] Political Science, University of California, Davis

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REBECCA A. GLAZIER and AMBER E. BOYDSTUN

The alignment between media and presidential framing following 9/11, as well as surrounding the Iraq war, has been criticized as an instance of "when the press fails." We explore this idea further by comparing presidential and newspaper framing in the case of 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror." We argue that high president/press framing alignment after 9/11, and again during the start of the Iraq war, was largely driven by institutional incentives. Thus, "failure" of the press should be expected in these cases, as in the case of other crisis events that yield a strong rally response. Because the media and the president operate under different incentives, they exhibit different framing behaviors—and different framing dynamics. The result is that, in general, the framing messages of these two institutions sometimes align, especially at critical moments, but more often differ. And in the case of major crises like 9/11 and Iraq, we should see a distinct pattern in president/press framing alignment over time—namely, high initial alignment followed by steep decay—as incentives lead the president to "stay the course" while leading news outlets to shift their framing in line with elite and public opinion. We test this idea by applying a new measure of framing alignment to over 3,400 news stories and 500 presidential papers about 9/11 and the war. We find support for our theoretical expectations, showing that, despite their immediate similarities in the cases of 9/11 and Iraq, the president and the press exhibited increasingly divergent framing behaviors over time.

[Supplementary material is available for this article. Go to the publisher's online edition of Political Communication *for the following free supplemental resource(s): crisis definition, detailed data and coding descriptions, summary statistics, a sample alignment calculation, and additional figures illustrating frame correlation and media tone]*

Keywords framing, media, president, war, attention dynamics

Public and academic criticism of the press in the aftermath of 9/11 and the lead-up to the Iraq war has been plentiful and strong, with the general conclusion being that the media uncritically conveyed the administration's frames (e.g., Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005).

Indeed, the *New York Times* issued a mea culpa saying its coverage "was not as rigorous as it should have been" ("The Times and Iraq," 2004). The close alignment between how the president and the press framed the post-9/11 response to terrorism, and in particular the Iraq war, has come to be known, as Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2007) describe in their book of the same title, as an instance of "when the press fails." We build on these findings by examining alignment in presidential and press framing of 9/11 and the "war on terror."[1] We argue that the "failure" of the media was largely due to the different institutional incentives driving the president and the press.[2]

Regarding policy issues generally, the president has strong incentives to stay on message over time by continually using a consistent set of favorable frames in order to reinforce support for his or her policy aims, to secure reelection after the first term, and to encourage a strong legacy. The media has very different incentives. News outlets aim not only to bring sharp contrast to new events as they unfold but also to retain the attention of an easily-distracted public, all the while indexing their coverage to elite messages and thereby staying within the margins of a shifting political and social landscape. For most issues, then, these different incentive structures should produce different patterns of framing.

When it comes to crisis issues like 9/11 and Iraq, we expect these different framing behaviors to follow a particular kind of pattern.[3] Immediately following a major crisis, the initial rally in public support and lack of elite criticism incentivize the media to support the president's message, resulting in an initially high degree of president/press frame alignment.[4] Over time, however, incentives will lead the president to continue to use a consistent set of favorable frames but will lead media framing to change. As elites become more critical and the range of socially tractable frames shifts, news outlets will increasingly move away from the president's message and toward these more critical frames. Thus, due to their different institutional incentives, we should see strong initial framing alignment between the president and the press after a crisis, followed by a divergence in their framing behaviors and, thus, a decline in their framing alignment over time.

We test our expectations in the case of 9/11 and the war on terror by tracing the frames used in presidential speeches and statements, and in *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* stories, about 9/11 and the war over time. Employing a new measure of framing alignment that includes both alignment in frame type and alignment in frame tone, we examine presidential and press framing of 9/11 and the war on terror from 2001 to 2006. In line with our expectations, our findings demonstrate a surge and then decay in president/press framing alignment following 9/11 and the Iraq war.

The collective criticisms of high alignment following 9/11 and in the lead-up to the Iraq war have been based largely on our normative notion of the "watchdog" responsibilities of the press (Kumar, 2006). Yet our findings suggest that the U.S. press simply isn't institutionally incentivized to play this watchdog role under all conditions. Immediately following a crisis, "lapdog" behavior is much more likely.

Framing Across Time and Institutions

Although most studies on the relationship between the agendas of the president and the press are concerned with which issues appear on each agenda (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2004; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Wood & Peake, 1998), we think it is at least as important to examine how those issues are framed. Framing is the process by which a given source, such as a newspaper or the president, defines an issue according to one dimension at the necessary exclusion of alternate dimensions, such

as framing a Ku Klux Klan rally as an issue of free speech versus public safety (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). A frame, then, is not necessarily an argument in support of a particular policy stance but rather attention paid to one perspective over competing perspectives (Chong & Druckman, 2007a).

Research has documented the dynamic nature of framing, demonstrating the shifts, both subtle and dramatic, that tend to occur over time in how a given issue is framed in the context of a given institution (Armstrong, 1998; Baumgartner, De Boef, & Boydstun, 2008; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Koch, 1998; Pollock, 1994; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Moreover, we know that the particular design constraints and resulting incentives of an institution shape its operations and output in many ways, affecting behaviors such as legislative decision equilibria (e.g., Muthoo & Shepsle, 2010; Shepsle & Weingast, 1984), Supreme Court nominations (e.g., Moraski & Shipan, 1999), Supreme Court rulings (e.g., Epstein & Knight, 2000; Knight & Epstein, 1996), and—critical to our discussion here—issue framing (Babb, 1996; Benford & Snow, 2000; Cornfield & Fletcher, 1998; Levin, 2005; McAdam, 1996).

Building on this research, we anticipate that the different institutional incentives of the president and the press will yield distinct patterns of frame choice (which frame types and tone are used) and framing dynamics (how use of these frames changes over time) in the case of many policy issues. Like Entman (2003), we understand the framing relationship between the president and the press to be one of mutual influence within a larger network of frame conveyance, and we posit that the framing behaviors of each of these institutions varies over time and circumstance. And in line with Baum and Groeling's (2009) concept of the "elasticity of reality," we argue that the acceptable and employed range of frames will vary for each institution over time due to the different incentives at work.

Of course, in thinking about the dynamics of framing, the role of events is key. "Rally" events can inspire surges of public support (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Mueller, 1973), "focusing" events can bring attention to potentially damaging or negative political realities (Birkland, 1998), and these and other events change the political environment (e.g., Lawrence, 2000, 2001). Indeed, in the case of this study, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent military actions in Iraq are key to understanding the framing behaviors of the president and the press. But while events are certainly important, we are most interested here in thinking about the institutional incentives that drive the president and the press to frame policy issues and related events in different ways, and the different patterns of framing behavior that result. The story we tell is a simplified one but, in the tradition of Mayhew (1974), we aim to see just how much traction we can get from this streamlined version of reality. In the following sections, we take a closer look at the related literature and explain the specific incentive-driven framing patterns we expect the president and the press to exhibit in the context of crisis issues.

A Theory of President/Press Framing Alignment

News outlets can wield profound influence over when and how executive messages are conveyed to citizens and, ultimately, over public perceptions of an administration's policies (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Fleming, Wood, & Bohte, 1998; Iyengar, 1991; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Soroka, 2002). This influence was certainly at work for President Bush in the war on terror. His ability to communicate his message to the public depended largely on the extent to which news outlets positively conveyed the frames he used (Firestone & Harris, 2006).

In order to examine alignment between the president and the press in discussing the war, we go beyond looking at levels of attention, focusing instead on both the frames and the tone employed.[5] Doing so provides a more precise picture of when two institutions' messages are aligned. For instance, even if the president and the media discuss the deployment of troops to Iraq at the same levels, if the president frames the issue in terms of democracy using a positive tone but the media frames it in terms of troop safety using a critical tone, we would hardly claim that the two institutions are aligned.

We argue that the degree to which the framing messages of the president and the press align at any given time is largely determined by their different institutional incentives. In the case of a crisis, we expect that the incentives of the president and the press will lead their framing alignment to vary in predictable ways over time. Specifically, in line with recent research on the temporal dynamics of media messages (Baum & Groeling, 2009), we expect that as the crisis of 9/11 faded, and then again as the Iraq war wore on, the press became decreasingly likely to pick up and convey the president's frames, even though the president used an arguably strategic set of consistent frames throughout the time period we investigate, yielding in turn a decay in president/press framing alignment.

A simple thought experiment may help illustrate our argument. Take the revelations regarding detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib as a hypothetical. No matter the circumstances, we expect that most presidents would frame the event in the same basic way—minimizing blame on the administration (though accepting a certain degree of accountability as mandated by public criticism) and diverting attention to other topics. Yet news outlets are likely to employ a *different* set of frames and tone of coverage according to the sociopolitical constraints at the time (i.e., the level of public and elite support). In the case of the Abu Ghraib scandal, we observed a share increase in the use of detainee-related frames and negative tone, arguably because both elites and citizens had become critical of the war by April 2004. But had evidence of detainee abuse come to light, say, 1 year earlier in April 2003, when elite and public support for the war was high, we expect that the institutional incentives of the press would have produced a more muted version of the same response— still an increase in detainee frames and negative tone, but to a much lower degree, thus yielding greater alignment with the president.[6] So then, in terms of the president's ability to have his or her frames transmitted—and in terms of the consistency of the messages the public receives from the president and the press—the timing of events matters against the backdrop of shifting president/press framing alignment.[7]

In the next two sections, we discuss the specific framing patterns we expect to see— both in terms of frame content and in terms of frame tone—for the president and the press in the case of so-called crisis issues in general, followed by the presentation of our hypotheses for 9/11 and the Iraq war in particular.

Presidential Patterns of Crisis Framing

First-term presidents are steadfast in their pursuit of reelection (Mayhew, 1974), and even second-term presidents tend to be motivated by the electoral success of their party. Additionally, all presidents face the concern of their legacies.[8] These two institutionally driven priorities, placed in the context of an era when presidential image is increasingly important and visible, constrain the framing choices of a president—allowing us to identify and predict presidential framing patterns. Specifically, we expect that the preeminent presidential incentives of reelection and historical legacy predispose the president, in general, to choose frames that (a) are positive in tone (i.e., portray the president's policies

favorably) and (b) are relatively narrowly focused on the aspects of an issue that are most favorable to the president. Of course, there are times when presidents—through strategy and/or conscience—take responsibility for mistakes made, often employing less favorable frames in the process. But we think it is fair to say that these instances are exceptions to the two general framing behaviors outlined above.

Beginning with the first and more obvious of these framing behaviors, it makes sense to expect that a president will choose to discuss issues using frames that positively portray his or her policies (Mayer, 2004). No matter how poorly a presidential policy initiative may be going, or how strongly elites may criticize, the president will usually attempt to communicate to the public that he or she is doing the right thing through the use of positively toned frames (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010). This incentive to maintain a positive tone marks one of the key differences between the president and the press that lead to differences in framing behaviors. For instance, the news media has the option of framing violence at polling stations in Iraq either as evidence of a vigorous insurgency or as an example of brave Iraqis embracing democracy (only two among many potential frames). But realistically speaking, for President Bush, as the face of the Iraq policy, only the latter option was politically viable. Electoral and legacy demands incentivize the president to portray his or her policies using a positive tone and frames that cast those policies in a positive light.

The second major constraint on presidential framing choices comes from the president's incentives to maintain a consistent message. Presidential frames are only valuable if they reach their intended audience—if they are picked up by the media and reported (Edwards, 2003). Presidents strive to ensure that their messages will be conveyed by staying on message (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999) and by making their chosen frame as prominent as possible (Barrett, 2007). Because the president enjoys a certain amount of attention simply by being the president (Kernell, 1986),[9] he or she does not face the same pressures that drive news outlets to present new and changing frames to maintain public attention. The president owes no duty to journalist norms of fairness or economic pressures of diverse opinion but can instead pursue a framing strategy of relying heavily and consistently on frames that advance his or her policies, often using multiple positive frames to support a central message (Hänggli, 2011). The research of scholars like Shafer and Claggett (1995) indicates that the president is best served by sticking with those issues—and those frames—that play to his or her strengths (see also Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). Consistent frames are especially important given the modern political environment, in which frame competition is fierce and first impressions endure (Entman, 2004). Even in the face of elite criticism, attention and policy inertia will lead the president to continue to stay on message by framing policy issues in positive terms (Maggio, 2007; Wood & Peake, 1998) and using the same favorable frames over time, including over the lifecycle of a crisis issue.

Of course, when a major event occurs, we expect the president to respond quickly and in the manner he or she believes to be in the best interest of the country. But it is not the content of the policy itself that concerns us here, only the content and tone of the frames used to communicate the policy. In these terms, we can predict the framing behavior of the president in response to events: While the occasional high-profile event may necessitate a deviation in framing strategy in response, we expect presidents generally to stay on message by using a positive tone and focusing consistently on favorable frames, largely regardless of the level of public support, the presence of elite criticism, and even the unfolding of most events.[10] Media framing, by contrast, is much more sensitive to fluctuations in all of these variables.

Media Patterns of Crisis Framing

Whereas the president's framing choices are driven by the dual imperatives of reelection and legacy-building, we see the media's framing choices as being driven in large part by two different forces: the public and elites (as well, of course, as events). In the case of traditional newspaper and television news specifically, the nature of these news outlets as for-profit (or at least, "not-for-loss") organizations helps direct the frames they employ (Cook, 2005; Hamilton, 2004) as they index their coverage to elite statements and stay in line with the public's mood.

Because elite commentary is the "index" that the press uses to report the news (e.g., Althaus, Edy, Entman, & Phalen, 1996; Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007; Mermin, 1999; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006), if elites are not making critical statements it is difficult for media outlets to report critical news (Cramer, 2007). Thus, the tone of media framing is constrained by the statements of political elites. Similarly, media framing—both in terms of content and in terms of tone—is also constrained by the public. The need to attract and retain readers and viewers drives news outlets to keep coverage fresh and consumption high (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gans, 2004; Graber, 1997; Hamilton, 2004; Scheufele, 1999), in part through coverage that is appropriate given the current political, social, and economic contexts (McCombs, 2004). As a result, we expect media framing to be much more dynamic compared to presidential framing. Whereas the president has incentives to be consistent, the media is structured in a way that encourages it to change frames as elites change frames, as the public demands new news, and as events develop.

Thus, when events occur, we expect the press to be much more responsive and flexible in its framing behavior. As Entman (2003) argues, frames work best when they are "culturally congruent." Elites and the public both influence "the public sphere" of shared national consciousness (Mayhew, 2002)—a public mood that the press makes sure to reflect in its coverage.

For the crisis issues we examine here, we expect the media to reflect the public surge in patriotism and support for the government that follows a crisis, sometimes referred to as the "rally-'round-the-flag" phenomenon (Mueller, 1973). The economic incentives of the media lead it to report the news in a way that supports and reinforces the patriotic impulses of citizens and the press (Bennett et al., 2007; Burgoon, Burgoon, & Wilkinson, 1983; Gans, 2004; Scheufele, 1999). Immediately following a crisis, then, we expect both the public and the concurrent elite rally to influence media framing in a similar direction (Entman, 2004; Zaller, 1994). Although most journalists strive to produce independent and critical reports through a balanced framing lens, under post-crisis conditions journalists not only have few critical elites from which to index their stories, but they are also faced with a public that tends neither to demand nor to consume critical news. In these circumstances, some frames (namely those that cast the administration in a negative light) simply aren't on the table for mainstream news outlets to use (Boydstun & Glazier, n.d.; Entman, 2003).

As time from a crisis elapses, however, new events will arise, public support will decline, and elites will increasingly raise questions and concerns, which in turn will be picked up by the media and communicated to both the public and the president (Howell & Pevehouse, 2007). The result is that the frames that news outlets employ will become more diverse and less likely to be aligned with the president's frames. In short, changes in the political environment following a crisis will produce parallel shifts in media framing, a process that Boydstun and Glazier (n.d.) call the "crisis framing cycle."

We see elite support and public support for the president as sufficient but not necessary conditions for high president/press framing alignment following a crisis.[11] Likewise, we see elite criticism and public criticism as sufficient but not necessary conditions for

low president/press framing alignment. In practice, when elites and citizens are support-
ive of the president (such as immediately after a crisis like 9/11), president/press framing
alignment will be high. Generally, as time passes and new information becomes available,
elite and public support for the president will move (downward) in tandem. Thus, at least
in crises, we believe that the press is institutionally hard-wired to shift its framing over
time in a way that the president is not. As a result, president/press framing alignment will
predictably decline in line with public and elite support.

Hypotheses

Given the different institutional pressures described above, we expect that president/press
framing alignment depends in large part on proximity to the crisis. With the president stick-
ing to favorable frames while news outlets are limited by the current social schema, the
framing efforts of these two institutions will almost naturally fall into sync in the aftermath
of a crisis. And, as the crisis rally fades, the public loses interest, elites begin to criticize, and
other events crop up, the framing behaviors of these two institutions will almost naturally
diverge (usually to the president's disadvantage).

     This understanding of presidential and media framing yields three hypotheses, which
we test in the case of 9/11 and the war on terror but predict in the case of crisis issues more
generally.

Hypothesis 1: Different Framing Dynamics. The president will "stay the course" by using
                    the same basic set of frames and maintaining a positive tone over time, while
                    the press will vary its use of frames, using more critical and negatively toned
                    frames as time from a crisis elapses.

Hypothesis 2: Different Use of Frames. The president will focus on those frames most
                    favorable to the administration, while the press will use a wider array of
                    frames.

Hypothesis 3: Declining Frame Alignment. The level of president/press framing alignment
                    will decrease as time from a crisis elapses.

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we collected random samples of 500 presidential statements,
speeches, and messages from the Presidential Papers archive housed at the University
of California, Santa Barbara; 2,512 *New York Times* (*NYT*) articles; and 901 *Wall Street
Journal* (*WSJ*) abstracts, thus capturing presidential and press framing of 9/11 and the war
on terror between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2006.[12] From these data, we
examine the cases of 9/11 and the Iraq war as two crisis issues that share some important
characteristics but are also different enough that similar results across these two cases will
give us some reason to expect that the framing behaviors we identify will be generalizable
to other crises as well.[13] Both crises are important enough to generate sustained cover-
age by both the president and the media, and both have major international and domestic
implications. Only the case of 9/11, however, is a surprising event. The nature of these
crises allows us to see how framing of an issue unfolds in the long term; we expect that our
results would hold for similarly prominent crises, such as the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 or
Hurricane Katrina in 2005.[14] We think the general pattern of a decline from high to low
alignment should hold as a generalizable phenomenon across major crisis issues involving

a rally event. But variations in factors such as the specific type of event, the population affected, the prior popularity of the president, signals of success/failure of the president's policy handling of the crisis, and of course subsequent events will shape the specific shape and slope of this decline. Crises without a rally would likely exhibit different alignment dynamics.

We coded each sampled document using a coding scheme dividing discussion of the war into 12 frame dimensions: terrorism, democratization and freedom, government strategy, soldiers, September 11, reconstruction, weapons of mass destruction, civil unrest, human rights and criminal abuses, civilians, prisoners/detainees, and economic cost. Using this coding scheme, each news story received one code for the *primary* frame used in discussing the war.[15] Recall that our operational definition of framing is attention paid to one perspective over competing perspectives (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Using this broad definition, every news story necessarily presented a frame in choosing to report the information it did about the war on terror. A story about troop casualties was coded in the soldiers dimension, one about hunting for al Qaeda in Afghanistan was coded in the terrorism dimension, one about new budget allocations for Iraq in the economic cost dimension, and so on. Although most news stories contain multiple frames, pre-tests of the data show that these frames tend to support one overarching frame. For this reason, each news story received only one code.[16]

Each presidential paper, however, was coded according to all of the frames employed. The president is not constrained by the limits of space in the same way the press is; President Bush uses an average of 18.63 frames and 5.56 frame dimensions (out of 12) per presidential paper. Thus, instead of focusing in on only one frame, the president can present a variety of frames from a single dimension or a variety of frames from a few selected dimensions. In any case, the differences in our coding choices reflect institutional differences in the type of medium employed and in the agenda goals of the president and press.[17]

Measuring President/Press Framing Alignment

In order to identify how often the press and the president make the same framing choices, we develop a measure we call *president/press framing alignment*. As discussed in the theory section above, we construct this measure to account for both similarities in frame type and frame tone. To arrive at this measure, we begin by aggregating the counts of newspaper stories and presidential arguments in each of our 12 frame dimensions by month. Then we take a simple framing correlation between the president and press agendas, calculated in each month as the Pearson R correlation between the distribution of presidential arguments on the one hand, and news stories on the other, across these frame dimensions. Thus, regardless of the raw counts, the more the president and the press employ the same frames to the same proportional degree, the higher the framing correlation will be. We rescale this raw correlation to between 0 and 1.

Since we believe that tone is also a critical factor in measuring the differences between presidential and press framing, for each news story we record the overall tone of the story (positive, negative, or neutral) with regard to the government's handling of the war. Thus, tone is coded from the president's perspective, and it is assumed (and verified by the data) that the president's tone regarding his own policies is positive.[18] We then aggregate the counts of positive and negative stories by month, calculating a *net positive tone* measure as the number of positively toned stories minus the number of negatively toned stories in each month.[19] Thus, even if the frames used by the president and the press correlate

highly, if the predominance of news stories are negative in tone, this measure of alignment accounts for the divergence in signals the president and the press are sending to the public. Finally, we arrive at our measure of president/press framing alignment by multiplying the rescaled framing correlation value for each month by the rescaled net positive tone value. The resulting series is thus bound between 0 and 1, offering a summarized measure of the degree to which the president and the press are on the "same page" in the messages sent to the public. While we focus here on the president and the press in the case of the war on terror, this measure could be applied in any comparative study of framing agendas.

Findings

We present the results of our study in sequential order of our hypotheses.

Testing Hypothesis 1: Divergent Framing Dynamics

We examine Hypothesis 1—which stated that while the president will stick to the same frames over time, the press will vary in which frames it uses—by comparing Figures 1 and 2. These figures show the frequency in use of five key frame dimensions over time by President Bush and the press, respectively, presented at the quarterly level. We focus on these five frame dimensions as cases of particular interest. Our research indicates that two of these frames lend themselves toward portraying the president in a positive light (terrorism and democratization) and two frames are not so favorable to the president (soldiers and detainees). The last frame, WMDs, is simply interesting as a frame that initially helped tether and, later, helped threaten to unravel President Bush's arguments justifying the course of his foreign policy regarding Iraq.
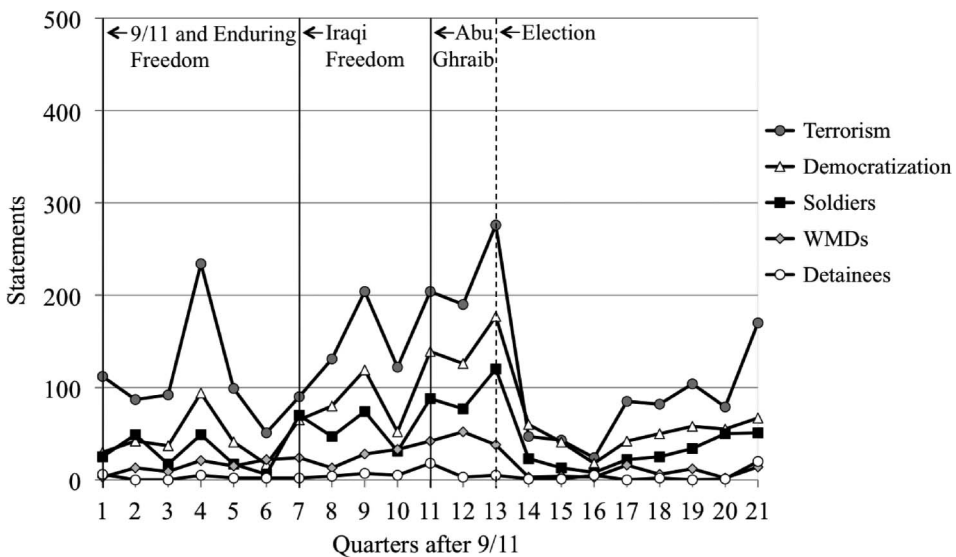

Figure 1. President Bush's use of five key frames in talking about the war (quarterly), September 11, 2001–November 12, 2006.
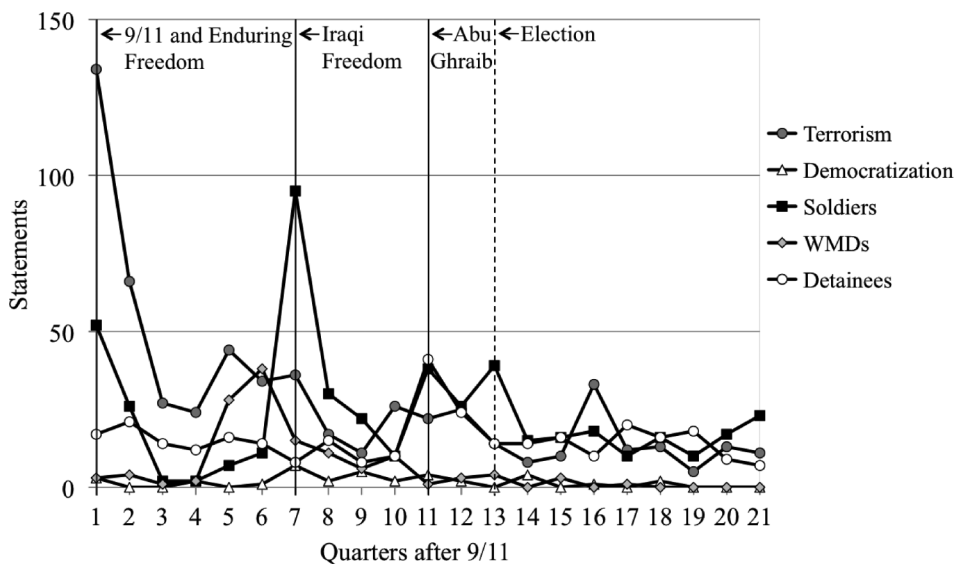
Figure 2. *NYT* and *WSJ* use of five key frames in covering the war (quarterly), September 11, 2001–November 12, 2006.

Figures 1 and 2 show stark discrepancies in how the president and the press changed the frames they used over time. For example, we see that both the president and the press heavily employed terrorism-based frames immediately surrounding the September 11 attacks and the deployment of U.S. troops to Afghanistan. But note that although the president persists in his predominant use of the terrorism dimension, after quarter 5, terrorism is no longer the media's most-used framing dimension—despite surges in executive use of these frames. What is important to note in these figures is not so much the level of attention over time—attention waxes and wanes with both surprising and scheduled events—but the relative use of the five different frame dimensions. President Bush appears almost single-minded in his framing efforts, maintaining essentially the same rank ordering of frame dimensions no matter the time or context. Conversely, the press varies its frames, using frames from the detainees and soldiers dimensions that the president stays away from.

For instance, look at the media's use of soldiers-based frames in the seventh quarter of Figure 2. This surge in frames from the soldiers dimension corresponded with the deployment and early activities of U.S. troops in Iraq. But the media's shift in framing in this quarter did not correspond with a similar increase in the use of soldiers frames by the president, as shown in Figure 1. Similarly, we see in Figure 2 that detainee frames dominated the media's coverage of the war on terror at the time the Abu Ghraib photos were released, but President Bush's use of detainee frames in Figure 1 barely shifts from its baseline of zero. Instead, terrorism continues to be the president's go-to framing message. Thus, it appears that neither time nor events could change the president's frame selection. The entire series displayed in Figure 1 shows terrorism as the president's top frame choice, despite success, scandal, elections, or the passage of time. We also find additional support for Hypothesis 1 when we calculate the standard deviations in the percentage of attention taken up by each of the 12 framing dimensions for each institution. The standard deviation for the media is 0.069 at the monthly level (0.054 at the quarterly level), nearly twice as high as that for the president: 0.039 monthly (0.027 quarterly).

Testing Hypothesis 2: Divergent Use of Frames

We saw in Figures 1 and 2 that while the president and the press framed 9/11 and the early stages of the war on terror in very similar ways, over time the press deviated in its use of frames. Figure 3 shows the results of this difference, offering support for Hypothesis 2, which stated that the president and the press will differ in their overall choice of frames. Here we see the percentage of each agenda consumed by each of the 12 frame dimensions we identify. We have arranged this figure in order of the size of the gap between the percentage of attention the president gives to each frame and the percentage the media gives, from democratization on the left (which the president used heavily but the press used hardly at all) to detainees on the right (which the press employed nearly five times as much as the president). This ordering reveals the sharp discrepancies between presidential and media framing of the war. In particular, Figure 3 shows President Bush's heavy reliance on a single frame—terrorism—nearly twice as frequently as any other. He also drew heavily on democratization and on government strategy frames, showing remarkable consistency in his frame preferences.

What all three frames that dominate the president's discussion of the war have in common is that, when communicated by the press, they lend themselves toward portraying the administration in a favorable light. Figure 4 shows how the frame employed tends to be associated with a certain tone of coverage. Here we see *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* stories across the 12 dimensions, divided by whether the overall tone of each story was positive or negative. Approximately 90% of all democratization frames, 60% of all government strategy frames, and 60% of all terrorism frames are positive in tone; these are stories the president would likely be happy to read in the morning paper. By cross-referencing Figures 3 and 4, we see that President Bush generally selected his frames wisely, using those frames that portrayed his administration positively, as hypothesized.
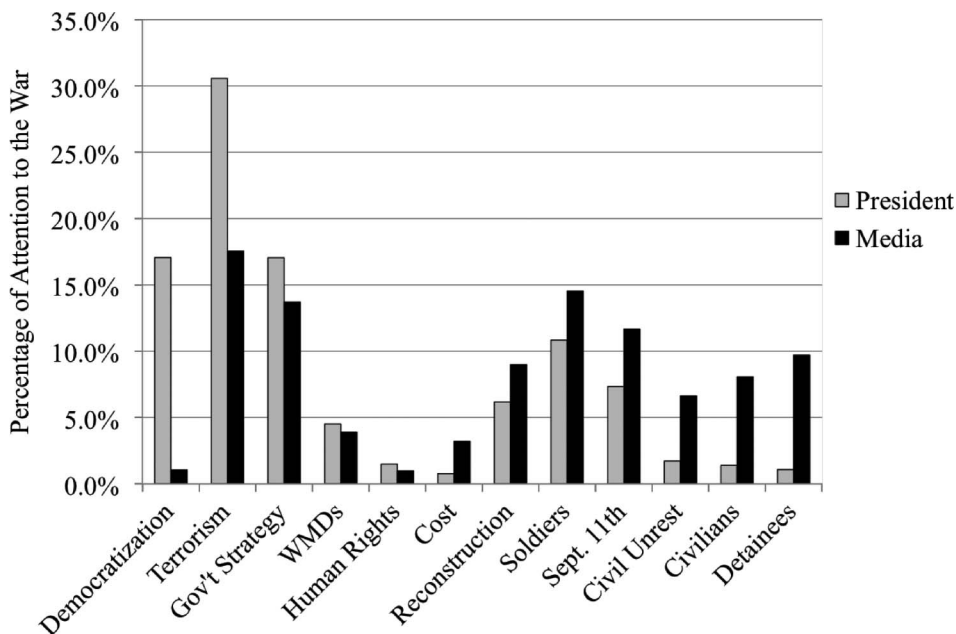

Figure 3. Presidential and press framing of the war by issue-specific dimension of debate. The columns are ordered in decreasing size of the gap between presidential and media use of each frame.
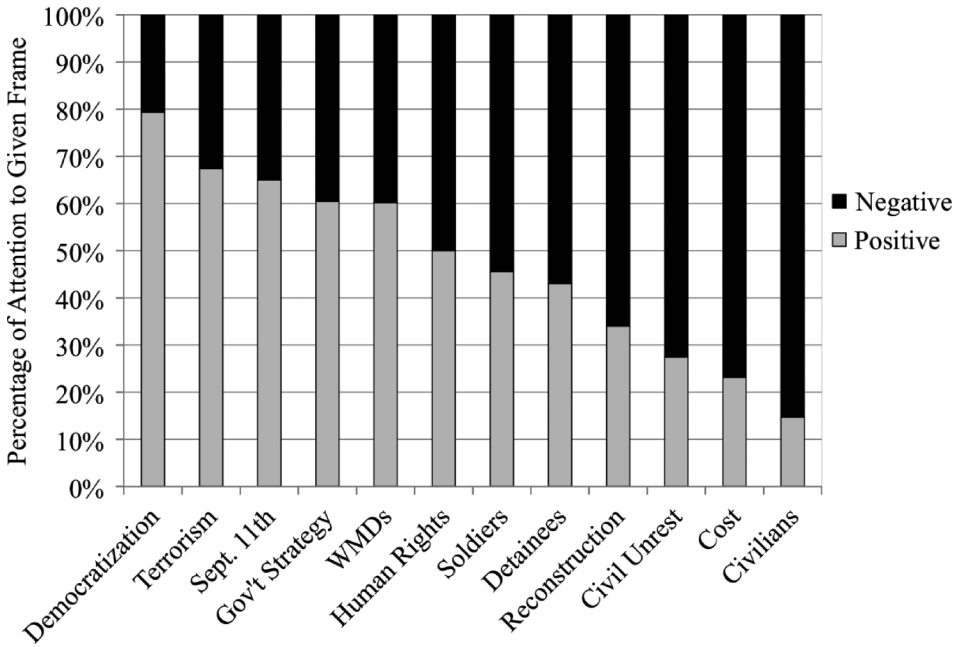
Figure 4. Positive and negative *NYT* and *WSJ* coverage of the war by the dominant frame employed. The columns are ordered in decreasing size of positive coverage.

Contrary to the president's consistent use of a few frames, news coverage was distributed much more widely across frames, as predicted in Hypothesis 2. Returning to Figure 3, we see that news coverage of the war during the years of our study was divided among several frames. The terrorism, government strategy, and soldiers frame dimensions received the most media coverage, with the 9/11, reconstruction, civilians, and detainees frames also frequently employed.

Again, arguably the main reason the press employed a greater diversity of frames while the president chose to stick with a much more narrow framing repertoire is that the frames toward the right-hand side of Figure 3 (those used more often by the press relative to the president) tend to be those that lend themselves to negative portrayals of the administration. The media-favored soldiers dimension was covered positively less than half of the time and the civilians dimension received positive coverage only about 10% of the time, as it focused almost exclusively on the negative impact of U.S. military operations on local citizens in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet government strategy, another dimension that received a lot of coverage, tended towards the positive. These two figures reflect the fact that the press generally opted for variety in the frames it employed, using both frames that lent themselves toward positive portrayals of the administration's policy and more negatively oriented frames. This finding of divergent frame choices across the two institutions is supportive of Hypothesis 2 and very much fits the picture of different framing behaviors we outlined in the theory sections above.

Testing Hypothesis 3: Declining Frame Alignment

In order to evaluate Hypothesis 3, we turn to our measure of president/press framing alignment, which accounts for both frame type and tone as described in our methods section.
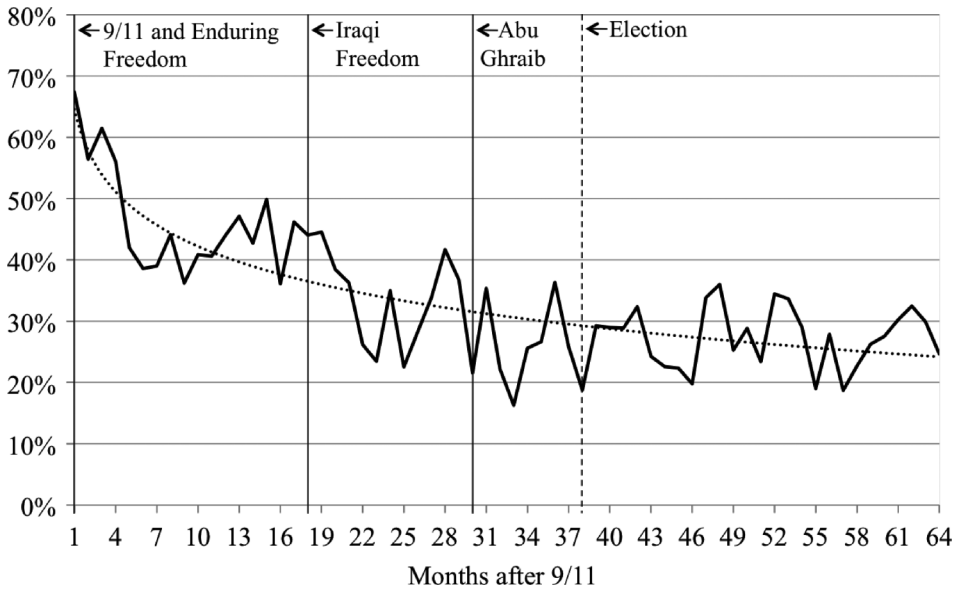
Figure 5. President/press framing alignment (monthly), September 11, 2001–December 13, 2006.

Figure 5 displays this measure at the monthly level, showing a clear decline in alignment over time. We are most interested in looking at the behavior of framing alignment following the crises of 9/11 and the Iraq war. We hypothesize that alignment will decline as time from each of these crises moves on. In fact, we see alignment fall from a high of over 60% in the first full month following 9/11 to around 35% within less than a year. We also see alignment steadily drop from over 40% at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom to less than 30% in just a few short months, before leveling out to an average of about 25% by the end of the series in 2006. Although the alignment measure is noisy in places, the logarithmic trend line illustrates that there is a clear overall decline.

Given the evidence we have seen in support of our theory of presidential persistence in terms of framing, we believe that we can attribute these changes in alignment to changes in media framing of the crisis. The media's use of frames was closely aligned with that of the president following 9/11 and around the time of the Iraq war. But, while the president continued to focus on terrorism and democratization frames, the decaying rally effect and increasingly critical political atmosphere that characterized the post-Iraq period afforded news outlets additional social leeway to turn to a more diverse set of frames—specifically those more critical of the Bush administration.

Summary and Implications

The relationship between the president and the media is certainly complex. It is little wonder that this relationship has been subject to so much scrutiny—and that the press has borne so much criticism—in the years following 9/11 and the Iraq war. Our examination of presidential and press framing of the war on terror has revealed wide variations in framing within this single important issue over time, largely, we argue, because the institutional constraints of these two bodies are quite different. While news outlets operate under incentives that pull the news along the "crisis framing cycle," the president's incentives

instill a steady persistence in executive frames. As a result, we see the press aligning with the president's frames during periods of national unity following a crisis but then diverging as that solidarity fades. While our findings strongly support the conclusion that the press did not perform as a "watchdog" in the time leading up the Iraq war, our examination of institutional framing patterns suggests that the media's framing behavior was directly in line with its institutional incentives, which simply do not dictate scrutiny at all times.

Beyond these normative implications, our findings suggest that president/press framing alignment may decline in predictable ways following a crisis—a suggestion that has very real implications for how the political system responds to a crisis. The shift we document between an initial period of high framing alignment and an eventual state of low alignment is about more than intra-branch relations between the president and the press; it is about the nature of the information environment in which citizens and political actors alike process the crisis. When the president and the press provide a consistent framing message—a united front, so to speak—it creates a profoundly different context for political deliberation than the context in which the president and the press offer discordant frames.[20] Berinsky and Kinder, for example, show how media framing of news in "story" form affects citizens' recall of information and their policy opinions (2006). By extension, it may be the case that president/press framing alignment acts in a similar way, with high alignment providing a more coherent message for citizens to follow, affecting in turn their policy views. Thus, the idea that fading public support and surging elite criticism yield a predictable shift in the cues transmitted by the president and the press—from unity to discord—suggests the possibility of a feedback loop, whereby decaying national solidarity leads both to increasingly divisive political discourse and increasingly divergent perceptions of a crisis system-wide.

The systematic identification of the institutional incentives driving presidential and media framing presented here may elsewhere yield specific expectations about how president/press framing alignment should behave in other policy areas. For example, we might expect that news outlets' strong incentives to stay competitive in the media marketplace by providing rapidly changing and generally critical "horse race" coverage of elections (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004) would lead to a decrease in president/press framing alignment during election season (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998; Tedesco, 2001).

Finally, these insights were made possible through use of the measure of framing alignment that we employ. Applied to comparisons of president and press framing in the context of other crisis and non-crisis issues, this measure can give us better empirical traction toward understanding conditions of influence between these two important bodies. Moreover, this measure could be applied to comparisons of any number of institutional contexts—such as different media outlets, different candidate platforms within and between parties, different Congresses over time, or different international treaties on a common issue—potentially offering insights into questions that span political communication and political science more broadly.

Notes

1. We use the term "war on terror" for simplicity, recognizing that the phrase is itself an example of framing (see Reese & Lewis, 2009, for a discussion of how this label was coined by the administration and adopted and internalized by the press and public; see also Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986).

2. We use the term "the media" (and, interchangeably, "the press") again for simplicity, recognizing that while our study focuses on newspaper coverage, "the media" is multifaceted.

3. See our online Supporting Information document for discussion of how we define a crisis.

4. Snow et al. (1986) use the term "framing alignment" to refer to the linkage of individual and social movement organization interpretive orientations (p. 464), whereas we use it to refer to similarities in how different actors (or institutions) frame a given policy issue.

5. For emerging research on the importance of tone, see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2010).

6. Consider also the Patriot Act as a (highly imperfect) natural experiment. With widespread bipartisan support and scant media criticism (Abdolian & Takooshian, 2003), it easily passed the House and the Senate and was signed into law barely 6 weeks after 9/11. Over time, however, this same piece of legislation came to be seen in a much different light and, by 2011, it was renewed for only an additional 3 months (Lengell, 2011).

7. Although beyond the scope of this article, questions of strategy naturally arise when comparing the framing behaviors of these two institutions. The president wants the press to communicate his or her chosen frames, and the press has a complicated relationship with elected officials (Bennett et al., 2007).

8. Presidency scholars typically also include making good policy in the list of motivations driving presidential decisions (Light, 1999), but we focus here on reelection and historical legacy, viewing good policy as a means to these two ends.

9. Although a changing media environment does mean this attention is dwindling; see Baum and Kernell (1999), Lowry (1997), Young and Perkins (2005), and Cohen (2008).

10. We believe this general pattern holds, but in the notoriously idiosyncratic field of presidential studies (Barilleaux, 1984) we do expect variation in framing behavior across presidents (Rozell, 1995) and personal governing styles (Kumar, 2007).

11. Although work on indexing suggests that elite support may be a necessary condition, we expect that in a crisis scenario characterized by either strong public support or strong elite support—but, for whatever reason, not both—either of these rally markers would be enough to prompt high president/press alignment. But then, we find it hard to imagine a major crisis that would elicit such different responses from elites and citizens.

12. The *NYT* and *WSJ* coverage correlated highly, in terms of both amount of attention and frames used. Because of this high correlation and to maximize the sample size, we combine the *NYT* articles and *WSJ* abstracts (which we call stories, collectively) in our analysis.

13. See our online Supporting Information document for additional details on our study, including discussion of our data sources and collection procedures, Presidential Papers coding examples, correlations between our *NYT* and *WSJ* data sets, and a step-by-step demonstration of how we calculated president/press framing alignment.

14. In fact, in another project (Boydstun & Glazier, n.d.) we find similar patterns in media coverage for Hurricane Katrina, providing additional support for the idea that the crisis framing cycle is generalizable.

15. Our complete codebook—available upon request—includes more than 200 specific frames encompassed within the 12 frame dimensions. Because our analysis here deals exclusively with data at the dimension level, we use the terms "frames" and "frame dimensions" interchangeably.

16. Since we hypothesize that the press will be more dynamic than the president in frame change over time and more varied in the use of different frames overall, limiting each news story to one primary frame (as compared to multiple frame codes where applicable in the case of the Presidential Papers) offers a stricter test of these hypotheses.

17. For the *NYT* and *WSJ* stories, intercoder coding into the 12 dimensions specified correlated at an average of 0.96; intercoder reliability for presidential speeches was 0.92.

18. A random sample of our data shows that President Bush used a negative tone only 1% of the time.

19. As shown in Supporting Information Figures SI2 and SI3, the data are similar when using a percentage-based version of this net positive tone measure, calculated by subtracting the percentage of stories in each month that were negative from the percentage that were positive.

20. Excellent studies of framing competition and deliberation include Chong and Druckman (2007b), Entman (2003), Jerit (2008), Porto (2007), and Simon and Xenos (2000).

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