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The Media and the Gulf War: Framing, Priming, and the Spiral of Silence*

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This article analyzes the high and sustained levels of popular support for President Bush's policies during the Gulf War using a composite model of public opinion formation drawing on the rally around the flag effect noted by political scientists, the spiral of silence hypothesis drawn from communications studies, and the concepts of priming and framing drawn from political psychology. By linking the aggregate effects noted in the rally and spiral of silence hypotheses with models of individual cognitive processes, the composite model explains, better than either the rally or the spiral hypothesis alone, the sudden shift toward supporting the use of force on January 16, 1991 and the high levels of support that persisted through July.

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During the fall of 1990, for the first time in nearly twenty years, the United States faced the possibility of large-scale war. As the threat of war with Iraq increased, American public opinion was sharply divided about the government's response to the deepening crisis. While ordinary citizens and political elites alike debated the wisdom of this military build-up during the five-month prologue to the Gulf War, news accounts portrayed an opinion climate characterized by a growing consensus favoring the government's actions.¹ Actual polling data contradict this impression of increasing support for U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf,² showing instead a closely divided public until the commencement of war on January 16.³ In his analysis of American public opinion concerning the Gulf War, John Mueller observes that “. . . a substantial public anti-war movement had been launched in the fall of 1990. . . . It

1. Poll data from August, 1990, until the middle of January, 1991, show a sustained division in opinion; the overwhelming impression given Americans during this time is one of growing support for U.S. Persian Gulf policy. John Mueller, “American Public Opinion and the Gulf War: Some Polling Issues,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 57 (Spring 1993): 80-91.

2. John Mueller, “American Public Opinion and the Gulf War,” in *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), pp. 199-226. By overemphasizing the few changes in opinion, print and broadcast media depicted an initially divided and skeptical public gradually being persuaded by President Bush to accept the impending war. Media also created the impression of a growing consensus by comparing attitudes drawn from polls taken at different times using different question wording.

3. In November, 46 percent of those polled said we should continue sanctions while 42 percent said we should initiate war; by early January, those percentages were not significantly different at 43 percent and 45 percent respectively. Mueller, “American Public Opinion.”

put together protest demonstrations . . . that were larger than most marches of the Vietnam era."⁴ Many Americans wished to avoid war so much that only hours before bombing began, a plurality of the public agreed with a proposal to end the crisis by giving a piece of Kuwait to Iraq, if Kuwait would agree.⁵

News coverage before January 16 did not reflect this debate. Instead, as Gene Ruffini notes, "nightly network news programs largely ignored public efforts to oppose the Bush administration's military policies in the Persian Gulf."⁶ Of 2,855 minutes of TV coverage of the crisis from August 8 until January 3, only 29 minutes, about 1 percent, of the coverage showed popular opposition to the U.S. military build-up in the Gulf.⁷ The media's lack of coverage of dissenting views does not reveal an apathetic public or one that had wearied of tedious dissent. In September and again in early January, the *Times-Mirror* survey reported that pluralities of Americans "wished to hear more about the views of Americans who opposed sending forces to the gulf."⁸

Within hours of the January 16 beginning of "Operation Desert Storm," public debate ceased and differences in opinion that had endured, despite media inattention, shifted instantaneously to an apparent consensus in favor of U.S. military action.⁹ The rally around the flag and spiral of silence hypotheses offer promising interpretations of this immediate shift in opinion. Yet neither hypothesis can completely account for the complex sequence that characterizes subsequent changes or endurance in public opinion during the war. Nor does either theory specify the mechanisms by which media had an impact on these transformations in opinion and its expression.

Our study proposes a comprehensive, empirically grounded explanation of these changes in public opinion by integrating the concepts of media framing and priming with the spiral of silence hypothesis. This integrated model explains not only how the apparent consensus in support of emerging war policy abruptly replaced a sharp division in American public opinion, but also demonstrates why support surged again

4. Mueller, "American Public Opinion," pp. 199, 226.

5. Mueller, "American Public Opinion," p. 207.

6. Gene Ruffini, "Press Failed to Challenge the Rush to War," in *The Media and the Gulf War*, ed. Hedrick Smith (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1992), pp. 282-92.

7. Ruffini, "Press Failed to Challenge."

8. Ruffini, "Press Failed to Challenge."

9. Mueller ("American Public Opinion," pp. 208-09) reports that on January 16 the percentage of those favoring going to war rose 16 or 24 points, depending on the wording of survey questions. On this date, the proportion of those who thought we should wait for sanctions to work dropped 26 points.

after the beginning of the war and was maintained at an extremely high level throughout the course of the war. To illustrate the scope of this integrated model we conduct an empirical examination of media priming and framing effects during the early stages of the Gulf War. Our model serves as a theoretical framework for this empirical look at CNN's and NBC's depictions of dissenting voices, portrayals of elite consensus, and uses of technical language in conveying the success of U.S. policy.¹⁰ Our examination of these broadcasts shows that media coverage primed positive attitudes toward the war effort and negative attitudes toward dissent. In this way, the media affected Americans' interpretations and support of the Gulf War itself.

I. Public Opinion Polls and the Gulf War

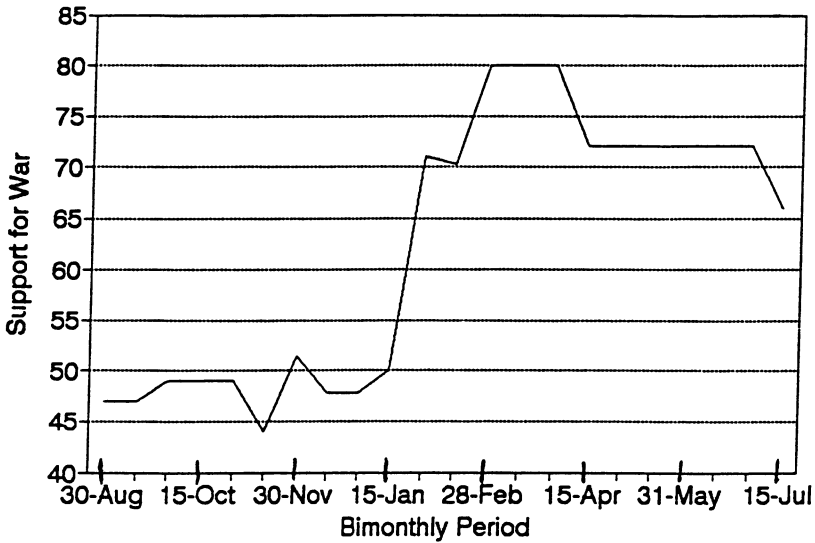
Quantitative evidence suggests that a fundamental shift in opinion took place as the first announcements of American military engagements in Iraq were broadcast on January 16. To determine whether Americans rallied in support of the President's policy and to what extent this rally changed or was sustained, we utilize data from the University of Connecticut's Roper Center survey POLL data base to generate a graph of trends in public support for the Gulf War.¹¹ Responses to survey questions asked between August 1, 1990 and August 1, 1991 indicate an initial rally at the January 16 start of the air war against Iraq, a second surge of support for the President's policy of war by February 28, and sustained support of this policy throughout the next six months.

Data derived from surveys taken during these 12 months have been used to extrapolate the trends in approval ratings depicted in Figure 1. The Roper survey questions took the following three forms: (1) "Do you approve or disapprove of the United States decision to go to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait?" (2) "If the current situation in the Middle East involving Iraq and Kuwait does not change by

10. We analyze CNN coverage for January 16-18 and 29-30, 1991, and NBC coverage on January 16. Barbie Zelizer indicates that CNN's coverage was ubiquitous; early in the war "over 200 news directors at local affiliates abandoned their own network's feed to acquire CNN material" [Barbie Zelizer, "CNN, The Gulf War, and Journalistic Practice," *Journal of Communication*, 42 (Winter 1992): 71]. We compared NBC's and CNN's coverage of the first day's events, and found virtually no differences in framing and priming of war issues. Our analysis takes the form of a complete breakdown of the news segment or story with a visual and verbal analysis of the text. In this qualitative assessment we look at the meta-narrative and subtext of messages about dissent and technology.

11. We appreciate Jenny Chanley's assistance with data analysis as well as the efforts of Professor James Stimson.

Figure 1. Support for the Gulf War
Estimated from Multiple Questions



January, would you favor or oppose the U.S. going to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait?” or (3) “The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that allows one final opportunity to pull out of Kuwait by January 15th (1991) or else face possible military action. If Iraq lets this deadline pass, would you favor the United States and its allies going to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait, or not?” Any method of analyzing data collected at different stages of an event is susceptible to a number of problems. In the case of these data we had three concerns: variation in question wording, questions that refer to specific events in different time periods, and missing data. To overcome these problems and make the three forms of the question compatible, we used regression to extract commonalities among the questions and construct a single approval trend.¹² We used bimonthly

12. Variance due to question wording presented an important problem, because analysis of any variation in question wording from one survey to the next can affect responses. Furthermore, any choice to add or delete a question from their polling roster diminishes consis-

data points beginning at time 1 = August 30, 1990, through time n = July 31, 1991, to alleviate the missing data problem.¹³

As Figure 1 shows, support for President Bush's use of force fluctuates until a dramatic increase occurs (from 50 percent approval to 72 percent approval) between January 15 and January 31, 1991. The initial increase was followed by a second surge of support for President Bush's action, with approval peaking at 80 percent by February 28, coinciding with the ground offensive. This level of support remained steady until April. Yet even then, support was as high as the initial rally rating of 72 percent in favor of the President's actions.¹⁴ Support remains at this level until a decline begins after May 30; by July 15, 66 percent of the public still approved of President Bush's policy. All of these levels are higher than the level of support prior to the January 15 UN deadline. The rally hypothesis can explain much of the initial surge, but the second surge in support in February and the sustained support for the war require further investigation.

II. Explaining the Polls

The Rally Around the Flag Hypothesis

John Mueller argues that the substantial increase in support for the U.S. Gulf War policy can be explained wholly as an example of the "rally around the flag" phenomenon, which he identified in his research on support for other wars in recent American history.¹⁵ Presented originally in 1973, this hypothesis has been characterized by Richard Brody as "a way of accounting for otherwise inexplicable rises in support for the President in the face of surprise and threat."¹⁶ The public's desire to sup-

tent presentation of the same question. James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), specifically pp. 54-57, and Appendix 1.

13. Figure 1 was constructed by adding the slope coefficient and the intercept for each of 22 points from August 30, 1990 through July 15, 1991. The changes in approval shown as a trend in Figure 1 represent actual data from the specific points in time taken from the surveys. Any time points with missing coefficients were assigned the previous date's approval value to create the graph.

14. March 15 and March 31 were missing data and therefore are given the value of 80 as a default.

15. Mueller, "American Public Opinion," p. 208.

16. Richard Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 58. See also John E. Mueller,

port conventional leadership during a crisis propels such rallies in support of the President. Mueller explains that the public “. . . did not want to hear anything critical” during the Gulf War and the media complied by reacting “with predictable boosterism, even sycophancy.”¹⁷ Advocates of the rally around the flag hypothesis further argue that the White House controls information in the early stages of an international crisis, leading opposition elites to suppress their disagreement with the President in public forums, resulting in the appearance of elite consensus. Lacking independent information and fearing they will be perceived as foolish, intemperate, or even unpatriotic, rival politicians who normally challenge the impression of consensus are silent.¹⁸ As the boundaries of public discourse are constricted by self-censorship, media find it more difficult to field the alternative views necessary for debate. Without the usual challenges from political elites, reporters covering elite opinions during this stage of an international crisis are left to repeat information that amplifies support for whatever action the president takes. Journalists thus become conduits of one-sided, supporting messages.¹⁹ In this phase of the rally phenomenon, expected links between journalism and democratic practices are severed.

When legitimate sources of opposition comment are silent or supportive of presidential action, reporters and editors will either have to carry an unusually uncritical mix of news about presidential performance or risk the appearance of searching out negative comment for its own sake. . . . Seeking negative comment from non-legitimate sources, when legitimate sources are positive or silent, is both unprofessional and unnecessary.²⁰

War, Presidents and Public Opinion (New York: John Wiley, 1973), p. 58; and Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1986).

17. Mueller, “American Public Opinion,” p. 211.

18. Brody, *Assessing the President*, p. 63; and Richard A. Brody and Catherine Shapiro, “Policy Failure and Policy Support: The Iran-Contra Affair and Public Assessments of President Reagan,” *Political Behavior*, 11 (1989): 353-69.

19. There is some evidence that during the Iranian hostage crisis, patriotic responses played a lesser role in the rally phenomenon than did elite opinion presented by the mass media. Karen J. Callaghan and Simo Virtanen, “Revised Models of the ‘Rally Phenomenon’: The Case of the Carter Presidency,” *Journal of Politics*, 55 (1993): 756-64. David Weaver [“Media Agenda-Setting and Elections: Assumptions and Implications,” in *Political Communications Research: Approaches Studies Assessments*, ed. David L. Paletz (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1987), pp. 176-93] reviews research that contrasts models of media as a conduit, reflecting reality and models of media filtering and shaping reality.

20. Brody, *Assessing the President*, p. 64.

Because an international crisis provides inherent excitement and emotional intensity, the media need only engage in reporting these events themselves, Brody argues.²¹ The intrinsic drama of international conflict overrides the media's tendency to emphasize the news value of other types of conflict, including disagreement among political elites. During an international crisis, a rally materializes because the public wishes to support its leaders' actions, rival elites see no political advantage in expressing public dissent, and the media have vivid, compelling copy and visuals without disrupting this equilibrium.

The rally phenomenon depends in part on the link between public opinion and elite expressions. Recent empirical work establishes that public opinion is extremely responsive to elite discourse, particularly as it is conveyed by mass media.²² David Fan's work on the impact of persuasive messages in the print media finds that public opinion is shaped and changed according to whether the messages are relatively balanced, favor a particular side of an issue, or shift from one side to the other.²³ John Zaller believes that "the public changes its opinion in the direction of the 'information' and leadership cues supplied by elites," explaining that many Americans lack the interest, knowledge, and attention necessary to resist and combat media messages.²⁴ Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro argue that the salient concern for democratic processes is whether the result of elite and media influences are primarily educative or manipulative.²⁵ To understand more about how the rally phenomenon influences public knowledge and opinion, it is important to look at the role of media and elite consensus in creating a climate of opinion throughout the duration of the international crisis. As it has evolved, the rally explanation for strong public support of the President during international crises suggests the need to analyze public opinion, expressions

21. Brody, *Assessing the President*, p. 64.

22. Benjamin Page, Robert Y. Shapiro and Glenn R. Dempsey, "Television News and Changes in Americans' Policy Preferences," *American Political Science Review*, 83 (1987): 23-44.

23. David Fan [*Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); "Methodological Models for the Impact of Information on Society," *Political Methodology*, 10 (1984): 479-94; "Ideodynamics: The Kinetics of the Evolution of Ideas," *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 11 (1985): 1-24] studies media messages and mass opinion about defense spending, the presence of troops in Lebanon, unemployment, and inflation.

24. John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 311. Television ratings also suggest that citizens were not isolated and uninformed, although they may have been ill-informed.

25. Benjamin Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

of dissent from the public and political elites, and media coverage of both support and dissent.

The rally phenomenon convincingly captures the immediate consequences of managing information to garner emotional support for the President's policies, but, for theoretical and empirical reasons, its picture of opinion change is incomplete in the Gulf War case.²⁶ Although the research inspired by the rally hypothesis identifies the results of elite consensus and self-censorship, it does not clearly specify the psychology of self-censorship, how the media's failure to cover alternative views produces the rally effect, how the mechanisms utilized by the media may influence opinion, or how public opinion develops and changes. Although the White House's success at managing information depends on how long it can monopolize data gathering and dissemination, the effect of media presentations of this information further shapes this message. The rally hypothesis simplifies and underestimates the role media play in opinion formation, perhaps its most significant omission in the case of the Gulf War. In response to Mueller's recent work on the Gulf War, Herbert Kelman argues that the rally effect ignores

An important part of [the rally] process[,] . . . a tendency to suppress or discredit dissenting views[,] . . . [in which] the media played an important role, as evidenced by their choice of commentators and by their tendency to ignore antiwar protests and underreport major demonstrations.²⁷

Our analysis of the POLL data suggests that, without a clear picture of media's role, the rally model may not completely account for the second surge in support at the beginning of the February ground offensive and cannot account for the second increase in support or the duration of this support through June, 1991.

The Spiral of Silence Hypothesis

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" hypothesis addresses some of the rally explanation's shortcomings by examining mass media's

26. The criteria used by Mueller and others to select rally events do not predict which events will actually demonstrate a rally effect and which will not. The rally phenomenon omits the effectuating mechanism of the media's role in leading to the rally event. Brody, *Assessing the President*, p. 58.

27. Herbert C. Kelman, "The Reaction of Mass Public to the Gulf War," in *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 254.

role in public opinion formation. Noelle-Neumann hypothesizes that public opinion in democracies is often constituted through a “spiral of silence” induced by self-censorship on the part of individuals and the ubiquity of a limited set of messages carried by mass media.²⁸ Her theory suggests that rather than understanding public opinion as the aggregate of individual views, scholars should consider a more complex calculation in which individuals’ perceptions of the climate of opinion influence what they say and, in some cases, what they actually think. Because media are important in creating and conveying this climate of opinion, two agents, the media and “the individual in public,” participate in forming the climate of opinion that influences individual belief.²⁹ Both the type of event media choose as newsworthy and media treatment of these events create the framework and meaning of political discourse. In this way, when media set the agenda of public discourse they not only influence opinions about political events, but also provide the premises for conceptualizing the political.

In practice it is difficult to determine if individuals’ proclivities to self-censor initiate a spiral of silence or if they are responding to media portrayals of an opinion climate. However, for the purpose of understanding more easily how individual perceptions and public actions contribute to this phenomenon, we can theoretically separate these two actors. Noelle-Neumann argues that the spiral starts when individuals hold an opinion but fail to express it because they perceive their opinion to be a minority viewpoint and fear that expressing an unpopular outlook could bring social isolation.³⁰ As these individuals choose silence, they actually do isolate themselves. In this climate of self-censorship, the gulf between themselves and those of the perceived majority appears to widen. An increasingly polarized atmosphere results, encouraging those who have suppressed their views to become even more inhibited.

Noelle-Neumann theorizes that a converse set of behaviors follows for those who perceive themselves to be of a majority opinion. Hearing their views reflected in the voices of the like-minded, they believe their opinion is spreading, leading them to express their ideas with increasing confidence. This dynamic of perceptions and resultant behaviors is predicted to cause spiraling, self-reinforcing expression or self-suppression of opinions. From their present assessment of the climate of opinion,

28. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

29. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*, pp. 61-64, 157-64.

30. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*; and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “Turbulences in the Climate of Opinion,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 41 (1977): 144.

individuals calculate the popular standard for future belief and behavior to which they might adhere. In this model, individuals' perceptions of others' opinions is a more immediate determinant of their future beliefs than their own present views.³¹

Noelle-Neumann argues that mass media play a central role in this process by creating the climate that shapes perceptions, influencing choices of debate or self-censorship. Through selective presentation of events, attitudes, and beliefs, media portray some opinions as popular while ignoring alternative views.³² By portraying the opinion climate as one dominated by a single view, media shape the individual perceptions of opinion that contribute to self-censorship and a spiral of silence.³³

Noelle-Neumann argues that the representation of a dominant consensus develops not only through agenda-setting but also through the "gate-keeping" function of media and the natural propensity of human beings to communicate through stereotyping.³⁴ Relying on Walter Lippmann's work, she contends that it is only through substantial simplification by stereotyping that people can attend to several issues simultaneously. However, the less desirable side effect of stereotyping is the formation of a new reality based on mediated or indirect experience. This new reality or, as Lippmann calls it, "pseudo environment," mediates all information taken in by the individual, with the result that people have difficulty distinguishing between directly experienced reality and the newly created reality derived from models or stereotypes. Noelle-Neumann concludes,

31. Noelle-Neumann, "Turbulences."

32. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*, pp. 167-69.

33. Empirical explorations of the relationship drawn by Noelle-Neumann between social institutions and individual choices of self-expression or censorship demonstrate the effects of misperceptions of actual majority opinion (pluralistic ignorance) on the spiral [Garth Taylor, "Pluralistic Ignorance and the Spiral of Silence: A Formal Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46 (1982): 311-35], and how the spiral of silence may affect other behaviors and attitudes such as voting or voting intentions [Carroll J. Glynn and Jack McLeod, "Public Opinion du Jour: An Examination of the Spiral of Silence," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 48 (1984): 731-40; Jack McLeod, "An Essay: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin," *Journalism Quarterly*, 62 (1985): 649-53; Carroll J. Glynn and Jack McLeod, "Implications of the Spiral of Silence Theory for Communications and Public Opinion Research," in *Political Communications Yearbook No. 1*, ed. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 43-65; and Wolfgang Donsbach, "The Challenge of the Spiral of Silence Theory in Comparative Context," *Communicare*, 8 (November 1989): 5-16].

34. Kurt Lewin, Noelle-Neumann explains, uses the term "gatekeeping" to describe how journalists function to admit or restrict the entrance of information into the public. Noelle-Neumann, *Spiral of Silence*, pp. 149, 155. See also Kurt Lewin, "Group Decision and Social Change," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. Theodore M. Newcomb and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), pp. 330-44.

“what does not get reported does not exist, or, stated more cautiously, its chances of becoming part of ongoing perceived reality are minimal.”³⁵ As a result of such blurring of direct and indirect experience, the spiral of silence and the role played by media in opinion formation is largely unconscious. Thus Noelle-Neumann argues that the role of media involves setting an agenda, not only for news, but for defining reality.

Noelle-Neumann’s theory suggests why the support of the first rally was sustained throughout a second rally, rather than decaying as expected in rally event research. Yet the complexity of the Gulf War case suggests that her theory taken alone fails to explain the role of mass media in *effectuating* the spiral of silence that leads to opinion change. To understand more completely the specific mechanisms by which it works, we turn to recent work in the field of political psychology. Two concepts in this literature, framing and priming, suggest how the media induce a spiral of silence by stimulating the individual’s unconscious adoption of symbolic themes and values.

Framing and Priming Effects in Public Opinion

Media framing and priming can predispose individuals to understand and interpret information selectively. Framing describes the process of placing information into a context of preconscious symbolism. Priming concerns the unobtrusive activation of attitude or knowledge constructs stored in memory. In both framing and priming, the unconscious or preconscious references stimulate conscious judgments that might not have occurred if information had been framed or attitudes had been primed differently. A model that integrates research on framing and priming with the spiral of silence will aid our understanding of the ways media influence individual perceptions and public opinion.³⁶

Framing in Politics and the Media. Using the term “framing” to denote methods of presenting information, social psychologists examine how

35. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*, p. 150.

36. Iyengar and Simon’s recent analysis of the media and the Gulf War supports our application of framing and priming to explain public opinion in this case. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, “News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion,” *Communication Research*, 20 (June 1993): 365-83. Our work further develops the fundamental insights of their analysis, showing how framing and priming fit into a larger model of public opinion change. The specific documentation of framing and priming in our research relies on visual and verbal cues from broadcasts, corroborating Iyengar and Simon’s findings drawn from samples of verbal texts contained in the *Vanderbilt Television News Index and Abstracts*.

information's context affects people's evaluation of its content. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky find that people will make different choices, depending on whether identical information is presented in a context that suggests potential gains or potential losses.³⁷ Shanto Iyengar documents the effects of such framing in television news, examining responses to news reports categorized as either "episodic" (reports that focus on specific events or particular cases) or "thematic" (reports that focus on the broader context for the events or cases that may be presented).³⁸ After studying a number of political issues, Iyengar finds significant framing effects on subjects' understandings of these topics. Looking at news stories about poverty, his experiments show that episodic framing leads people to hold the poor responsible for their own plight, while thematic framing leads people to believe that society causes poverty. Iyengar also finds that most news presentations about poverty are episodic rather than thematic, and concludes that "the predominant news frame for poverty has the effect of shifting responsibility from society to the poor."³⁹

"Framing" also describes the use of symbolic language or imagery that characterizes and shapes the meaning of a political event or proposal. Research conducted in the United States by David Sears and others suggests that people develop emotional responses to particular symbols such as the flag early in life, and that their political attitudes are an outgrowth of these "symbolic predispositions."⁴⁰ The use of different symbols and symbolic language can evoke varying interpretations of identical data depending on the beliefs activated by a specific symbol. Thus a conservative Republican may discuss a proposal in terms of "welfare," while a liberal Democrat may discuss the identical proposal using the language of "helping the needy." Their work suggests that

37. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Choices, Values, and Frames," *American Psychologist*, 39 (1984): 341-50; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "The Psychology of Preferences," *Scientific American*, 39 (1982): 136-42.

38. Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

39. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, p. 67. See also Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

40. David O. Sears, "Symbolic Politics: A Socio-Psychological Analysis," in *Explorations in Political Psychology*, ed. Shanto Iyengar and William J. McGuire (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk, "The Role of Self-Interest in Social and Political Attitudes," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Mark P. Zanna, vol. 24 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1991); Jack Citrin, Beth Reingold, and Donald P. Green, "The Politics of Ethnic Change," *Journal of Politics*, 54 (November 1990): 1124-54.

responses to the information presented in these proposals would be shaped by the affect the different symbols evoked.

Priming in Politics and the Media. Social psychologists use the concept of priming to analyze the relationship between attitudes and behaviors mediated by symbolic constructions. Russell Fazio develops a process model of attitude-behavior relations, examining attitudes that are cognitively *available*—attitudes stored in memory. He distinguishes between attitudes that are chronically *accessible*—those readily retrieved from memory with the mere presentation of an attitude object or stimulus, and subsequently used in making judgments—and those that are *temporarily accessible*—attitudes only used in judgment when they are *primed*.⁴¹ Attitudes can be “primed” by presenting people with tasks that unobtrusively require them to access a particular attitude structure. When asked to evaluate an attitude object following such priming, respondents more often use a recently activated attitude structure, rather than other available cognitive ones that have not been primed.⁴²

The availability and accessibility of a particular attitude construct is influenced by how recently it has been used. In addition, priming effects are most powerful when messages lead an individual to access and use a particular attitude or knowledge structure frequently. Attitude priming need not be purposive to be effective. Media may prime attitudes simply as participants in the on-going cultural expression of beliefs. The power

41. Russell H. Fazio, “How Do Attitudes Guide Behavior?” *The Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundations of Social Behavior*, ed. Richard M. Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins (New York: Guilford Press, 1986), pp. 204-43; Russell H. Fazio, “On the Power and Functionality of Attitudes: The Role of Attitude Accessibility,” in *Attitude Structure and Function*, ed. Anthony R. Pratkanis, Steven J. Breckler, and Anthony G. Greenwald (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1989), pp. 153-80; Russell H. Fazio, “Multiple Processes by Which Attitudes Guide Behavior: The MODE Model as an Integrative Framework,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 23, ed. Mark P. Zanna (New York: Academic Press, 1990), pp. 75-109; Russell H. Fazio, J. Chen, E. C. McDonel, and S. J. Sherman, “Attitude Accessibility, Attitude-Behavior Consistency, and the Strength of the Object-Evaluation Association,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 18 (1982): 339-57.

42. People are asked to read several newspaper articles and to evaluate them based on how interesting they are. Later they evaluate several policy proposals, some of which obviously benefit their self-interest, while others do not. People “primed” to consider their self-interest are more likely to prefer the proposals that will benefit them personally than are people who have not been primed in this way. See Jason Young, Cynthia J. Thomsen, Eugene Borgida, John L. Sullivan, and John H. Aldrich, “When Self Interest Makes a Difference: The Role of Construct Accessibility in Political Reasoning,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 27 (1991): 271-96.

of media to access preconscious attitudes comes from the ubiquity of the message rather than from any coordinated plan to persuade recipients of information in any particular way. In their study of news priming, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder demonstrate how focusing attention on some news stories while ignoring others influences how the public judges political leaders.⁴³ Conducting a series of experiments, they find that when people evaluate the President's overall performance, issues receiving the most attention in newscasts are given more weight. Thus, Iyengar and Kinder conclude that the very standards used to evaluate political leaders can themselves be strongly influenced by media priming.⁴⁴

III. Framing, Priming and the Spiral of Silence in Public Opinion Formation

Framing and priming models suggest that media's influence over public opinion involves more than agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions. An integrated model of information framing, the priming of cognitive structures, and the spiral of silence hypothesis provides a logic that can account for public opinion change and sustained support in the case of Operation Desert Storm. At the start of the Gulf War, opinion unified in ways characteristic of the rally around the flag effect. The appearance of consensus and the visual and verbal repetition of symbols of consensus in the early hours of the bombing triggered a spiral of silence resulting in increased self-censorship. The persistence of this spiral of silence can only be understood by considering the type of information presented on war protests and the war's prosecution, because dissensus characterized the period immediately before bombing, significant protest continued, and information was available to citizens around the clock.

In this composite model of media's role, media framing and priming effects reinforced and solidified the initial burst of support for the war. This priming and framing of war support created a new baseline for the second rally at the start of the ground assault. The surge in support at the start of the ground war reflected the additional contributions of silencing dissent through media framing and priming. While the second rally decayed to the level prior to the ground assault, the first rally was sustained throughout the war's duration. An analysis of the complex meanings of the initial consensus, coupled with the models of a spiral of silence and framing and priming effects explains individual opinion, its public

43. Iyengar and Kinder, *News*.

44. Iyengar and Kinder, *News*, p. 63.

expression, and changes in popular attitudes about the Gulf War throughout the war's duration.

IV. Applying Theories of Public Opinion to the Gulf Conflict

Conditions making media framing and priming most effective prevailed during the Gulf War. Broadcast media covered the war continuously, beginning with CNN's on-the-spot reports the instant bombs illuminated the night in Baghdad. Radio news programs, such as National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," extended news broadcasts with constant live coverage for the first weeks of the war. Network television suspended regular programming to cover the war throughout its early days. Continuous coverage meant neither uninterrupted nor unedited filming of unfolding events. Military briefers as well as journalists managed coverage, affecting public opinion through a controlled, comprehensive narrative with limited presentation of alternative views. The continuous, repetitious, redundant, and unbalanced nature of media coverage contributed to the framing and priming of the war, reinforcing the potential for a spiral of silence to operate once the initial rally phenomenon dissipated.

The Research Group of the Gannett Foundation Media Center interviewed a broad cross section of the 1,400 journalists who covered the war from the Persian Gulf. Outright censorship, they reported, was minimal, but the pool system was fraught with delays and changes in coverage and stories. These obstacles, along with restricted access to people and places, hampered independent assessment of the war.⁴⁵ Pool coverage, they said, had a number of problems, including the limited number of pool positions and the system's failure to account for different mediums' needs. They explain that this system may have contributed to competition rather than cooperation among pool members, tending to centralize access and homogenize reports.⁴⁶ Rather than resulting in a deepening analysis of events in the Gulf, these deficiencies in the pool system produced repetition and redundancy.

The Pentagon's Joint Information Bureau (JIB) achieved highly effective control of media coverage not only through pool reporting, but also

45. Journalists were not permitted to travel or speak to respondents except when they were accompanied by military personnel. Everette E. Dennis et al., *The Media at War: The Press and the Persian Gulf Conflict* (New York: Gannett Foundation Media Center, June 1991), pp. 29-30.

46. The Gannett study quotes *Wall Street Journal* reporter Bob Davis, who spent seven weeks on assignment in the Gulf, as judging pool reports to have been "90 percent junk." Dennis et al., *The Media at War*, p. 28.

through press briefings.⁴⁷ These briefings, believed by journalists to be “a convenient vehicle for much disinformation—and little real information” may have more importantly served the strategic function of determining the priorities for reporting.⁴⁸ For example, these military reports set the media’s agenda by “directing the press’s attention first to a scud attack, then to a potential amphibious assault, then to a successful allied bombing raid in Baghdad.”⁴⁹ Media presentations of public opinion at home, where there was no news pool, still did not reflect Americans’ complex responses to the crisis. Although the potential for dissent seemed ever-present, a consensus for disagreement never materialized. In spite of the thousands across the country who took to the streets in protest, without media coverage of visible protest it was difficult to establish a common ground for unified dissent. The lack of media coverage contributed to the impression that opposition was minimal, making it more unlikely that Americans who opposed the war would locate many who agreed with them. Media depictions of opposition tended to oversimplify and underrepresent the meaning and extent of dissent.

To illustrate how the actual coverage and presentation of dissent and dissenting voices intensified the spiral of silence effect, we document the coverage of dissent in CNN and NBC Gulf War broadcasts. We also argue that the kind of technical and military language that was privileged in war coverage framed the war in a way that made dissent more difficult and discouraged genuine democratic debate.

Themes of Dissent and Technology

The symbolic framing of the government’s war policy and the actions of those who disagreed undoubtedly affected Americans’ interpretations and support for the Gulf War itself. This claim can be illustrated by a focus on two different aspects of war coverage: the kind of language chosen and the symbolic frame of reference adopted by CNN, and the way in which protest and dissent were presented and described. The language of war and coverage of dissent reinforced the potential for a spiral of silence to operate once the initial rally around the flag effect dissipated.

Silencing of Dissent and the Ascent of Patriotism. Media contributed to

47. Dennis et al., *The Media at War*, p. 30.

48. Dennis et al., *The Media at War*, p. 30.

49. Dennis et al., *The Media at War*, p. 31.

the silencing of dissent not only by framing protestors in a negative way, but also by promoting a limited set of patriotic themes. Although patriotism is understood in a number of ways,⁵⁰ Gulf War coverage gave primary emphasis to views that conflated patriotism, militarism, and nationalism. Media framing augmented the spiral of silence and sustained the positive evaluation of war by invoking symbolic patriotic values that equated attachment to country, national unity, and collective interests with conformity to majority sentiment. By exploring patriotic themes and depictions of dissenting voices in selected CNN and NBC Gulf War broadcasts, we move towards a more sophisticated analysis of media priming and framing effects on the spiral of silence.

Early in the first night's coverage, CNN broadcast a segment providing the domestic response to the news that the United States had begun bombing Iraq. A short news clip on war protestors was presented immediately after two short segments depicting Americans praying in a church, and huddled around a television set in their living rooms. The protest story depicted a bearded, bedraggled protestor being dragged away by the police as drums beat in the background. The male voice-over of the CNN reporter noted that there was some protest of the decision to go to war.

A similar juxtaposition occurs in another segment that same night, beginning with a story on the UN Secretary-General's response to the American decision to begin the war. A woman reporter provides a very short recap of the Secretary-General's response. The segment then shifts to the streets with a voice-over noting that while the Secretary-General talked to reporters, demonstrations were occurring outside the UN building. A male reporter stands in front of a crowd of people milling around behind police barricades, waving signs. The crowd is making very little noise. Belying what we see and hear, the reporter begins by noting that while "the rest of New York City" is quiet, down by the UN it has been noisy all night long. The reporter explains that we are viewing an anti-war demonstration that "started kind of impromptu" and "was a very dangerous time for a while." Although we see nothing of this danger, the story closes ominously, "It was a very dangerous situation today and these anti-war demonstrators plan to do it again tomorrow night." The media message appears to be that while the protestors do not look dangerous, they are. This message is conveyed by presenting the demon-

50. John L. Sullivan, Amy Fried, and Mary G. Dietz, "Patriotism, Politics, and the Presidential Election of 1988," *American Journal of Political Science*, 36 (February 1992): 200-34.

strators in visual and verbal context suggesting they are unruly, uncivilized, atypical Americans who were not supportive of the troops. These images are invariably juxtaposed with images of supporters of the war as quiet, praying, more typical Americans.

Dissenters in this story were framed symbolically as untrustworthy, disheveled, non-conforming "others" who personify a threatening strangeness.⁵¹ The attitudes primed include the negative stereotypes of people who cannot fit in, contributing to the viewer's fear of social isolation as a consequence of identification with an unpopular cause. Other possible frames for these activities were available, including the portrayal of these people as caring individuals standing up for their convictions, or as thoughtful people able to engage in mature political judgment through critical reflection. If these frames had been emphasized, it seems plausible that different attitudes toward dissent would have been primed. The framing and priming found in this segment triggered the fear of isolation, contributing to a spiral of silence. Such an atmosphere does not encourage open expression of complex or ambivalent views about the war.

This same juxtaposition of negative protest images and positive patriot images continued throughout the evening's broadcast. Later in the evening, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw introduced a human interest segment: an interview with the parents of Derek Hartsfield, a pilot in the Gulf. The mother, who is interviewed first, says that she is frightened but: "We are behind President Bush. We understand this had to be done and support him fully." The pilot's father explains that he is very proud of his son and the others in the Gulf, but he wishes his son were not there. When asked by reporter Roger O'Neal how he feels about the anti-war demonstrators, the father says the demonstrations hurt, "as if it is a demonstration against our son. It is a great country because of people's right to do that, but it does not ease the pain." Tom Brokaw responds, emphasizing that "those protesting against the war say that they are not against Derek Hartsfield, but it is for his security and safety. This is what makes this political process the envy of the world."⁵² Although CNN, too, provided individual statements that protestors are exercising impor-

51. See Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); Vamik D. Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1988); John E. Mack, "The Enemy System," in *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, ed. Vamik D. Volkan, Demetrios A. Julius, and Joseph V. Montville (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), pp. 57-70; Rafael Moses, "On Dehumanizing the Enemy," in *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, pp. 111-18.

52. NBC, January 16, 1991.

tant rights and could also be seen as patriots, the framing of dissent as atypical and dangerous undermines these messages and statements of ambivalence and moral and ethical concerns.

In contrast, coverage of supporters of the war was much more prevalent and favorable from the beginning of the war chronicle. In the first night's coverage, most reporting about citizens' approval of the war was centered on Americans' responses to President Bush's speech announcing that the war had begun. In one piece, a group of Navy wives in San Diego assembled in a warm, comfortable-looking living room. They are first asked who their husbands are, where they are stationed, and so on, and then how President Bush's speech and the fact that the U.S. was at war made them feel. One woman says that President Bush's speech "made me feel safe," and another expressed support for the war, saying, "I feel a sense of relief that it has finally started." The male reporter ended the story by saying that "the women here are proud of their husbands, proud of our troops, and proud to be Americans."

Within fifteen minutes, there was another story about public opinion on the outbreak of war. Interviewing people at a sports bar near Shaw Air Force Base in North Carolina, the male reporter asked the people at the bar what they thought about the war and whether they supported the President's actions. All expressed support. Included in the responses from the group of mostly young males were statements such as, "I'm behind the President 100 percent" and "I'm glad we kicked butt." The reporter ended the story by noting that they were "all very proud" of their country.⁵³

In these segments, attitudes of safety around the American hearth are primed through identification with the reporters and respondents in comfortable and safe environments. The attitudes conducive to a spiral of silence are also primed by the ideal of benevolent leadership, the President as the country's father figure, ego identification with the winning team, and the belief that winners should feel justifiably proud. Such a feeling of pride and belonging, such identification with the dominant consensus, is the antithesis of social isolation, the underlying cause of the spiral of silence. A particular patriotic attitude—support of the soldier—is required and those who do not support the war are outsiders and will be isolated. The totality of such framing makes it a risk to conclude anything contrary to the consensus in support of the war. By subtle means we are shown the popularity of pro-war opinions in all walks of life; the ubiquitous conclusion—the war is right—appears preordained.

53. NBC, January 16, 1991.

Presentation of Elite Consensus. Uniformity of the elite cues presented in the media also enhanced the spiral of silence.⁵⁴ Early in NBC's coverage, anchor Tom Brokaw and Capitol reporter Andrea Mitchell explain that the President is sharing all information with the Congress and the Senate. She concludes, "Of course, the political leaders are falling in behind the President, even those who voted against the resolution for war."⁵⁵ She moves on to an interview with Senator David Boren (D., Oklahoma), who voted against the war resolution, asking him first if he believes the massive attacks are working. Boren replies the United States appears to be moving quickly against the right targets. Regardless of the exact level of success, Senator Boren is clear that the President will avoid the quagmire of "another Vietnam" because the President "has the unanimous support of the people."⁵⁶

In contrast, media characterized congressional dissent unfavorably. In an interview with Representative Ron Dellums "from Berkeley," who disagrees with the president's actions, NBC labels his response "atypical."⁵⁷ CNN and NBC broadcasts similarly frame the story of a lone congressional protestor repeatedly throughout the evening.

A significant illustration of CNN's negative framing of limited, non-conformist elite dissent follows a long report from John Holloman, live in Baghdad, about American technological superiority. CNN next covers a story of British protesters outside government buildings in London. Close-ups show one long-haired protestor holding a *Socialist Worker*, the font of its red banner as large as the CNN logo. CNN returns to Wolf Blitzer at the Pentagon, who reminds us of the "massively successful collaboration" that is waging war. A tape of congressional reaction follows in which Senator Alan Simpson hypothesizes about the problems the Iraqis will face without their Command and Control Headquarters, while Representative Les Aspin warns "not to get carried away with optimism."

The female anchor in the studio has the last word, noting: "One California Congressman was outraged by the war effort, but most were supportive. And by the end of the week it is expected that there will be a resolution supportive of the war."⁵⁸ The male anchor makes the transition to the next news segment, noting that Fidel Castro says it is an unnecessary war.

54. Fan, *Predictions of Public Opinion*, shows the strong impact of such conformity on public opinion.

55. NBC, January 16, 1991.

56. NBC, January 16, 1991.

57. NBC, January 16, 1991.

58. CNN, January 16, 1991.

The juxtaposition of patriots, radicals, and socialists in the context of an enormously successful mission suggests that even messages of guarded optimism would be interpreted as opposed to mainstream opinion and the logic of success. These segments communicate that dissent among elites is very limited (in fact, only a 1960s-style radical from Berkeley is seen to dissent), such dissent is harmful, and dissenters are outsiders to a community that has unified in a time of crisis.

By the end of January, the earlier coverage of dissent—unfavorable though it was—had all but disappeared. The only coverage of dissent in the January 29 broadcast emerged inadvertently and was summarily stifled. In a live story on soldiers in the field, one soldier of the five interviewed about their response to the President's State of the Union address expressed the attitude that "No war is necessary. No man should be forced to go to war." He is cut short. The interviewer shifted immediately to a soldier who talked about the pain that demonstrations at home are causing the troops, asserting that support for the troops requires support for the war.⁵⁹

This segment perhaps most directly extinguishes debate and induces the atmosphere conducive to a spiral of silence. If soldiers (who, in this instance are legitimate opinion leaders) are against the war, we are not going to hear from them, nor are we going to hear their rationale. If all soldiers at the front support the war, we must support the soldiers and, in a simple psychological syllogism, we must support the war. Failure to follow this logic places one outside the patriotic mainland of an American consensus.

With modern technology one might expect media to reduce the political isolation of individuals by providing them vital information and furnishing people with means to locate others with similar views.⁶⁰ The spiral of silence hypothesis suggests, paradoxically, that the opposite occurs more frequently for those who hold dissenting views. Actual management of information by key sources, ubiquitous coverage of a topic, repetition, redundancy, and stereotyping create a normative view of what issues mattered and how these issues should be addressed. If the messages that citizens receive are biased in favor of support for presi-

59. CNN, January 29, 1991.

60. Few studies have explored the conditions that led to expectations of privation as a consequence of expressing an unpopular view as a cause of self-censorship. Allen discusses the institutional designs that may result in the political isolation that she argues is antecedent to the social isolation that causes the spiral of silence. See Barbara Allen, "The Spiral of Silence and Institutional Design: Tocqueville's Analysis of Public Opinion and Democracy," *Polity* (Winter 1992): 40-64.

dential policies and they receive no help from experts who argue an alternative position, they will lack sufficient expertise to argue effectively against an authoritative position.⁶¹ Opinions that are contrary to perceptions of the popular view are isolated and suppressed.

The presentation of an apparent elite consensus contributed to framing support of the war as indisputably good and wise, while it simultaneously reinforced the threat that dissent would lead to social isolation, the fear-filled motivation underlying the spiral of silence. As an alternative framing, the media could have provided accessible discussions of the historical, cultural, political, moral, or religious issues involved, relying on additional types of "experts." These other types of experts would have helped the public think about the war in different ways, providing an alternative language and multiple models of opinion leaders. Instead of encouraging thoughtful discussion of complex issues, elite and media priming of specific patriotic attitudes framed the war with distorted images of loyal dissenters as contentious and ambitious, and supporters as patriotic. This framing contributed to an environment overwhelmingly supportive of the war effort and hostile to dissent.

The agenda not presented in these segments is just as important in creating a new reality. Questions pertaining to the war refer solely to our technical expertise, one particular type of patriotism, and one kind of political objective and means of pursuing it. Questions regarding the morality of war (or this particular war), other views of patriotism, or alternate ways to support the troops, without supporting the war, are not framed, and moral discourse is not primed. There is little discussion of the overall meaning of this war or its geopolitics and regional history.

The Role of Technical Jargon in Maintaining the Spiral of Silence. The use of technological jargon also contributed to the silencing of dissent in the Gulf War. As the literature about priming and framing suggests, frequent repetition and redundancy increased the probability that citizens would access and use particular attitude structures related to technology in evaluating the war. Euphemism and metaphors of technological precision, although first used by military experts, soon permeated the speech of CNN and NBC correspondents. The use of this jargon by experts, its adoption and repetition by media, and its recurrence in presentations on CNN and NBC broadcasts created a specialized, abstract language.

The military-linguistic framing of the war appeared first at military briefings covered daily by print and broadcast media. Most visual media

61. Zaller, *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.

reporters adopted this ubiquitous technological discourse and described the war using the language and framing provided by the U.S. military. Before long, the “language of war” supplanted any other political or moral discourse, resulting in a “barrier between the public and the realities of war.”⁶² The use of this language defined the frame through which the public understood and evaluated the war effort.

Broadcasts used several types of language and metaphor provided by the military. In an uncertain environment, these experts’ use of euphemisms (“collateral damage,” “softening up the enemy,” “flying sorties against the infrastructure”) appeared to simplify complex information, relieving the public’s anxieties about the war. It may also have made citizens more dependent on expert opinion in evaluating the war’s success. The language of “technology” taught the public the difference between a B-52 and F-16, what AWACS, Tomahawks, Patriots, and Scuds were, and what was meant when a General spoke of the difficulty of doing “BDA in the KTO.”⁶³ This abstraction and metaphor deflected attention from actual killing and reinforced the belief that the U.S. military had the technology to avoid harming innocents. Through this exaggerated focus on U.S. weaponry’s technological precision and sophistication, expert commentary reassured the public of the military’s capabilities for pinpoint accuracy to accomplish its mission, and framed the evaluation of the war’s success.

According to a Gannett Foundation Report, just 38 individuals served as these expert commentators. This small group of military experts, government officials, and opinion leaders were central to creating this opinion environment and defining how the war was presented to the American people. Of the top 15 experts most often mentioned on television, five men account for 36 percent (545 of 1531) of the quotations and other discussions.⁶⁴ There are few if any discussions of the war by

62. Carol Cohn, “The Language of the Gulf War,” *Center Review: Publication of the Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age*, 5 (Cambridge: Harvard Medical School, 1991), pp. 14-15.

63. Cohn, “The Language of the Gulf War,” p. 15. “BDA in the KTO” meant “Bomb Damage Assessment in the Kuwaiti Theater of Operations.”

64. Dennis, et al., *The Media at War*, pp. 43-44. The Gannett Foundation Report shows Admiral William Crowe, former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to have been the most quoted expert overall in both newspapers and television broadcasts. He is surpassed in television coverage by Marine General George Crist, CBS News consultant and Marine Commander of Central Command for the Persian Gulf Operation; Anthony Cordesman, ABC News consultant and Georgetown University Professor of National Security Studies; and Johns Hopkins University Professor of Middle East Studies, Fouad Ajami, a Lebanon-born Arab and CBS News consultant. Colonel Harry Summers of the Army War College follows these experts as the most quoted on television during the Gulf War.

anyone other than military experts, political decisionmakers, and consultants who adopted the kind of military and technological jargon described, and who supported the ostensible goals of the war.

This technological jargon and linguistic framing in terms of military requirements begins to appear within the first few hours of coverage on January 16. One of the first instances of this framing occurs when Colonel Harry Summers, a retired military strategist, was interviewed. He described the bombing as “smart bombs homing in on their targets . . . a surgical strike.” He noted shortly afterward that the bombers were “probably trying to be careful about collateral damage.” Barely two hours into the first night of the war, the Pentagon reporter noted in a briefing about the bombing that Kuwait was a “target-rich environment.” A few minutes later, after the Pentagon correspondent’s report, Summers returned to the screen and described the allied attack as “an attempt to get as much control as possible.”

This metaphor of “control” appears several other times as well in the very first night’s broadcasts. The correspondent from Riyadh notes that American bombers are flying in formation and their “bombing is tightly controlled.” Later in the coverage, the Pentagon reporter, while giving a recap of the situation, was asked by the anchor about the chances for a pause in the bombing. His reply was that there may at some point be a short pause but “key targets have to be taken out” before there can be any “bomb-damage assessments.”

Similar antiseptic language occurs at another point in the first night’s coverage when Senator David Boren was interviewed. Senator Boren said that the U.S.’s first goals in the war were “to decapitate the leadership and command and control facilities.” The use of euphemism can also be seen in Fred Francis’s report from the Pentagon to Tom Brokaw. He explained U.S. strategy, concluding “then the U.S. can move in with its slower moving A-10 Warthogs and Apache helicopters to start killing those tanks.”⁶⁵ Such color commentary reassures the public that we will not engage people directly, nor will people be killed; only weaponry loses its life.

A later three-and-one-half minute segment of the first night’s coverage underscores the emphasis on a massive, precise strike, accompanied by sounds of bomb blasts and visuals of a map of Iraq. Wolf Blitzer reports from the Pentagon, describing the strikes as massive, devastating, and impressive. Once again he recounts that “all Iraqi air bases appear to be destroyed, pinpointed by the F-15’s and F-16’s.” The voice-over narra-

65. NBC, January 16, 1991.

tion reports that officials were more cautious in their reports, airing a tape of Dick Cheney and Colin Powell in which they report that information on casualties will be released at the appropriate time, but that the U.S. has very encouraging reports on its destruction of strategic sites.⁶⁶

Although a message of caution is embedded in this summary, this information is overwhelmed by the reassuring frame of success without loss of life. Not only does this story itself frame threatening or disturbing information in a positive way, but earlier stories have also suggested even more clearly that this is a clean war without losses. Although we discern from reports in the following weeks that the first evening's coverage overestimated U.S./UN success considerably, the message of a quick, clean offensive had been implanted, and was not easily dispelled by facts.⁶⁷

As Carol Cohn concludes, this "language of war" supplanted any other political or moral discourse, leading military briefings to act "as a diversion that filled our minds with slick high-tech imagery; . . . as a conjurer's trick that made dead bodies vanish and hid human suffering; and finally, as a selective medium, which allowed certain kinds of discussion but not others."⁶⁸ The language of clean technology directs us to evaluate the war's success in terms of the technological precision of weapons, rather than in terms of other values, including loss of life, environmental damage, or even U.S. policy objectives. In an interview with Tom Brokaw on January 16, James Zogby, President of the Arab American Institute, said, "As I listen to the military analysts, it is so crisp and so clear. And the numbers are rather antiseptic; the human factor has not been considered. There is a short term [response] as dawn comes, but in the long-term reaction, we need more moral authority to speak and act in the Arab world."⁶⁹ Views similar to Zogby's appeared infrequently in the media and were often reframed to emphasize other concerns.⁷⁰

66. CNN, January 16, 1991.

67. "Did Patriot Missiles Work? Not So Well, Scientists Say," *New York Times*, April 17, 1991, p. 11; "Pentagon Increases Figure on Casualties from American Fire," *New York Times*, August 14, 1991, p. 8.

68. Cohn, "The Language of the Gulf War," p. 15.

69. NBC, January 16, 1991.

70. NBC, January 16, 1991. This segment is an excellent example of framing. Following this exchange, Tom Brokaw turns to Fred Francis, reporting on the latest briefing at the Pentagon. Francis begins with the ubiquitous salutation from the Pentagon, "Tomorrow will bring even more massive bombing," and Brokaw interrupts to ask him to comment on Zogby's point about military reports, reframing the issue as "how concerned are they about spillover into civilian neighborhoods?" Francis reframes Zogby's concern about long-term policy and casualties hidden by military jargon as a question that betrays doubt

Antiseptic language continued throughout the duration of the war as did media's continued promotion of the accuracy of U.S. military technology.⁷¹ Visual clips of technology in action blurred the thin line between myth and reality, fiction and fact. In numerous taped segments we are shown targets destroyed by missiles and bombs. Without narration, however, it is not clear what successful maneuver has occurred. Often the videos lack clarity, frame of reference, or an indication of scale. As novices, the American people depended on expert commentary to interpret the videos. Experts tell of "smart bombs" as we view a projectile entering what appears to be the front door of a small building. While viewers watched an explosion, experts interpreted it as a Patriot missile intercepting an Iraqi Scud. Factual information was continually filtered through the initial belief in U.S. technology's perfection, although narrations by experts were often inaccurate and their interpretations of statistics misleading.⁷² Media reports did not cover the imprecision and inaccuracy of U.S. technology until long after the war had ended. The technological precision that was used as the main criterion for evaluating U.S. policy success defined a phenomenal control and ability to pinpoint destruction, hitting only the villainous foe and non-human target.⁷³

about technology. This question can be addressed by assurances of the accuracy, planning, and control of the entire operation. "There have been many bombings in the west suburbs of Baghdad where chemical plants produce poison gas and weapons, these plants are not fully integrated—not in those civilian neighborhoods. I'm not saying that there is not going to be some collateral damage, there will be some civilians killed, but no reports of strikes in downtown Baghdad. Yes they are troubled about it, but they've had five months to plan it, the targets haven't moved, they knew what the chances were for significant human casualties from a long time ago. The threat caused by Saddam far exceeds what civilian casualties there might be in Iraq."

71. Similar language continues throughout the January 29 and 30 CNN broadcasts, two weeks later. General Norman Schwartzkopf covered statistical and technical information on KIA's (killed in action) "sorties," "tomahawks," and "MIG25 foxbats" with their "killbox aiming device."

72. Professor Theodore A. Postol, an M.I.T. engineer, testified to Congress on the issue of successful performance and accuracy of the Patriot missile in the Persian Gulf War. In a lecture given at the University of Minnesota, October 23, 1992, he pointed out that the video clips were misinterpreted. They were seldom if ever Patriots hitting a Scud. Often they were clips of Patriots or Scuds self destructing. In the most telling example, Sam Donaldson called two Patriot misses "intercepts," instead, and was then speechless ("Uh, Oh," he uttered), when the Scud exploded upon impact with the ground.

73. U.S. technology was also described as better and more sophisticated than Iraqi weaponry, described as inaccurate and primitive. Early in the January 16 CNN broadcast, General Perry Smith described allied forces as overwhelming, with success becoming easier

This frame of the U.S. as benevolent leader with superhuman control, led to complications when technology was imperfect and U.S. intentions unknown. Events such as the bombing of a baby milk factory and a civilian-filled bomb shelter undermined this framing. In a frame of human enterprise dependent on “fallible judgment,” it could have been argued that mishaps occur in war. However, given the need for control and unblemished accuracy, the U.S. was forced to reframe and promote the idea that the baby milk factory was a bomb factory or that a bomb shelter shielded military targets. Only by arguing that the Iraqis are lying can the imagery of control be maintained when technology fails to be perfect.

Such framing and priming put the spiral of silence into motion on the first day of the war. The reporting, recounting, and recapping of ubiquitous information by the media; the creation of a common language that served as a barrier to perceiving the war in any way other than as a military-technological event; and the news briefings, controlled by the military and limited to only a few speakers and questioners, not only set the agenda for what was reported to the public, but served as a gate-keeper of information. The control of coverage was so complete, that by the end of the first day of the war a spiral of silence could prolong an initial rally in support of the President and overwhelm the dissent and debate of the previous 24 hours.

V. New Realities through Framing and Priming

Our goal in this analysis has been to explain change and endurance in public opinion during times of international crisis, by explicating a model of the relationship between media and perceptions of global opinion. Our model suggests how the specific mechanisms of framing and priming enhance a spiral of silence, inducing the climate of sustained, consensual support for presidential policy in wartime. To illustrate this model we have analyzed a small sample of critically timed media coverage of the Gulf War. Our results suggest that media may play a larger, more subtle role in shaping democratic debate than even the

as “wave after wave of the well-planned, well-executed, successful mission” was carried out. Although he says he would “be surprised if there were no losses,” the female anchor asks him as a follow-up to describe “what has happened strategically” (CNN, January 16, 1991). General Perry’s answer focuses on the precision and sophistication of U.S. weaponry, particularly the aircraft in use. His early caution not to be too optimistic because “war is hazardous,” is replaced by the reassuring discussion of the pinpoint accuracy of U.S. weaponry and overall control of the mission.

observations of Noelle-Neumann's or Mueller's hypotheses identify. Mueller and other analysts recognize that the public is responsive to elite cues presented through the mass media. These conclusions proceed in tandem with Noelle-Neumann's more specific concern with media gate-keeping, agenda-setting, and silencing in shaping political reality. Noelle-Neumann draws our attention to the underlying psychological dynamics that influence political discourse by introducing the widespread human aversion to social isolation. Yet more is required if we are to understand the means by which media provoke this fear and influence the natural human tendency to monitor the environment for cues about social norms. The consequences of the psychological mechanisms of priming and framing help explain more specifically the role of elite and media cues in the spiral of silence process.

Taken together, framing, priming, and the spiral of silence offer an explanation for the second increase in public support for Operation Desert Storm and for the endurance of overall support, long after most rally effects would have dissipated. In this war, media provided the public with ubiquitous, redundant, repetitious messages of support. More than serving simply as conduits for military information, media also framed and primed views of dissent, patriotism, technology, and elite consensus to construct a reality that stifled dissent and influenced citizens' evaluations of military actions. Continual, positively framed repetition of a message of support and suppression or negative framing of dissent is likely to have activated a spiral of silence, resulting in prolonged consensus.

The framing of U.S. technological superiority, the language of technology and military jargon, and the priming of a limited understanding of patriotic values also contributed to the spiral of silence. Television news coverage, such as CNN's, with its emphasis on simplification through quick, easy-to-digest video clips and soundbites, stereotyping, and repetition, is an ideal vehicle for the transmission of symbols capable of promoting a spiral of silence. This video jargon and pictorials made sophisticated technology appear as part of a video game, not as methods of destruction. The spiral of silence occurred in a context of priming cognitive structures and framing information through the construction of visual and verbal cues that led the viewer to a particular language for understanding and evaluating the Gulf War.

If framing in the first evening's coverage constructed a reality in which precise U.S. military actions achieved tremendous gains without significant losses, it seems possible that individuals who might have favored an economic blockade over military intervention could change their perceptions, not their positions. Through CNN reports, framing events in the

logic of technological superiority, such individuals could define the operation's success in those terms. Based on a belief that the U.S. goal of ending aggression (a norm linked to justice, liberty, and self-determination, all of which are foundational democratic values that could readily be primed) could be achieved swiftly with few or no casualties, individuals might stifle their dissent not only because it might be unpopular, but because it would show how uninformed they are about how humane, efficient, and effective a modern war could be. After all, the reports came from individuals who were in Baghdad; these reporters witnessed the rocket's red glare.

Media conveyed another reality during the first evening's reports to those holding values opposed to any war or doubting that Iraq threatened U.S. strategic goals and democratic values: Operation Desert Storm was not really a war. Framing instructed viewers that the U.S. and UN troops were destroying technology that could threaten freedom if *Iraq* engaged in war. A precise operation, expected to be swift and sure, authorized to prevent Iraqi aggression, was framed as a peacekeeping action—action taken by the U.S. and UN not against persons, but against technology.

This new reality could evoke existing cognitive structures related to patriotism and stimulate a spiral of silence by suggesting that any other reading of Operation Desert Storm would not only be unpopular, but a misjudgment of American purpose and promise. Bill Moyers and Walter Cronkite offered a cautionary note during these proceedings: We must get all the facts, they recommended, and Vietnam taught that even protestors were patriots. Despite their warnings, the preponderance of early Gulf War coverage produced an opinion environment that overwhelmed competing beliefs about the prudence and justness of Operation Desert Storm.