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## CONQUERING THE MINDS, CONQUERING IRAQ

The social production of misinformation  
in the United States – a case study

*In the lead-up to the Iraq War, the Bush administration rallied the American public for war via claims that they held unassailable evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and through the insinuation that links existed between Iraq and al Qaeda, and Iraq and the 11 September 2001 attacks. Despite the introduction of compelling evidence that these claims were false, more than 18 months after the official end of the war half of the American population continued to believe that either weapons of mass destruction had been found or that Iraq possessed a developed program for creating them. The prevalence of these misperceptions suggests important questions: How and why could such a significant percentage of the population remain so misinformed? What was the social process leading to the widespread adoption of misinformation? And what were the political effects of these misperceptions? This article proposes an analytical model that outlines both the production of these misperceptions and their political ramifications. It argues that the misperceptions about the Iraq war were socially produced via a complex interaction between a variety of factors including: the general climate of fear in America in the post-9/11 era, Bush administration agenda-setting strategies, and brokering between the political and communication establishments.*

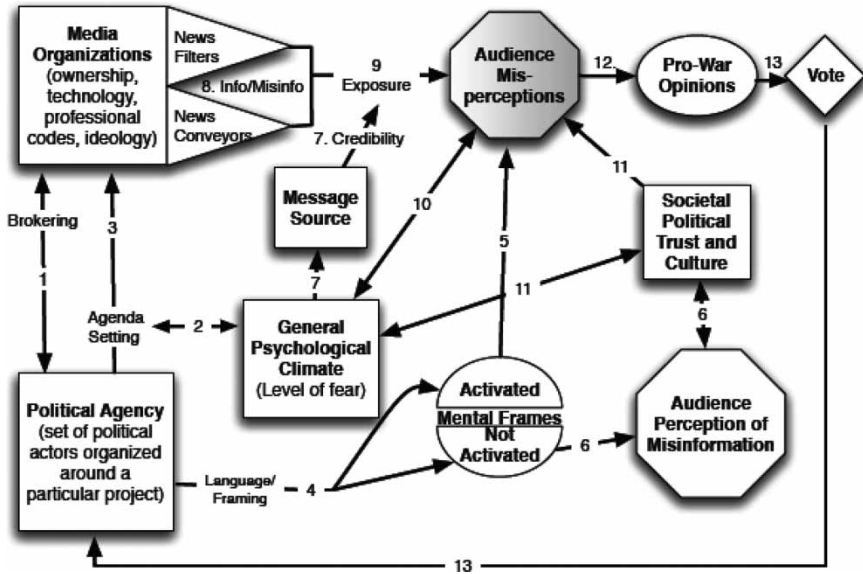
**Keywords** weapons of mass destruction; misinformation; agenda-setting; framing; political communication strategy

## Introduction

As late as August 2004, 35 percent of Americans believed that the United States had located weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq and an additional 19 percent believed that while no weapons were found Iraq did possess a developed program for creating them. Moreover, 50 percent believed either that 'Iraq gave substantial support to al Qaeda, but was not involved in the 11 September attacks' (35 percent), or that 'Iraq was directly involved in the 11 September 2001 attacks' (15 percent) (PIPA 2004a). Furthermore, the Program for International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted this poll after multiple governmental sources had confirmed that these perceptions were wrong, and less than a month after the bi-partisan Senate Select Intelligence Committee (2004) released a blistering indictment against prewar intelligence regarding WMDs in Iraq. The prevalence of these misperceptions suggests important questions: How and why could such a significant percentage of the population remain so misinformed? What was the social process leading to the widespread adoption of misinformation? And what were the political effects of these misperceptions?<sup>1</sup>

In this article we propose a tentative analytical model that outlines both the social production of misperceptions and their political ramifications.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, our model posits that a set of complex relationships between media organizations and the political establishment resulted in the dissemination of misinformation regarding the presence of WMDs in Iraq. Due to differences in organizational structures, newsroom policies and political connections, certain news channels such as Fox News Channel (FNC) played a more pronounced role in the dissemination of misinformation. Audience adoption of this misinformation depended on the interaction of their source of news, level of trust in the US government, responsiveness to the administration's framing and agenda-setting strategies, and levels of concern/fear about the War on Terrorism and 9/11. A diagram of this model is presented in Figure 1.

In order to test whether this model adequately captures the production of misperceptions about the Iraq War, this paper offers empirical evidence in support of each relationship depicted visually in the diagram. Admittedly, we are unable to provide definitive proof for each analytical connection and we certainly accept the possibility of alternative and/or contributing explanations. However, by integrating the various relationships into a tentative explanation of the overall process, and by documenting critical linkages, we believe that we offer a plausible interpretation of the social logic underlying the deliberate production of misinformation. In elaborating on this model, we hope to contribute to a rigorous discussion on a topic that is usually the domain of ideological confrontation. We will proceed by presenting evidence for each one of the relationships postulated in our model.



**FIGURE 1** Social process of the production of misperceptions about the Iraq War.

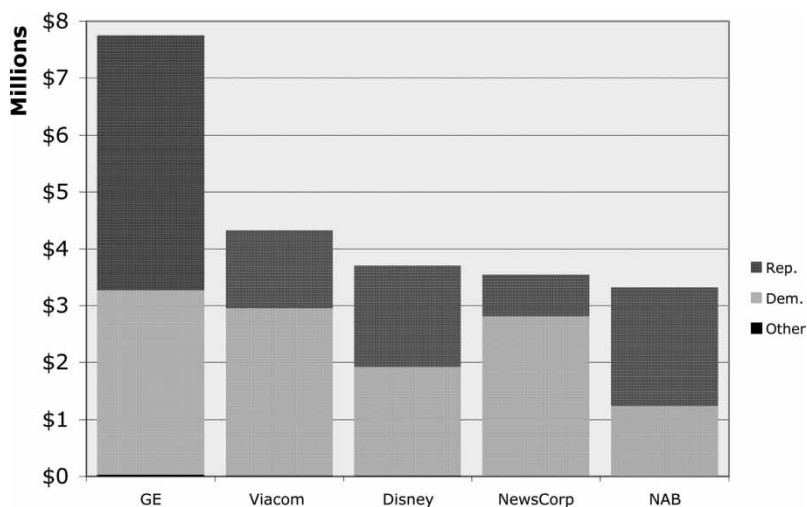
For identification purposes, each numbered section below corresponds to a numbered relationship depicted in Figure 1.

### 1. Political agency ← brokering → media organizations

The model begins with the power-brokering between the political agency and media organizations, although the political effects of this brokering are far from simple. By political agency we mean the set of political actors, both in the administration and in other branches of government, who are organized around a particular political project. In this article, political agency refers specifically to the political actors responsible for designing the United States War on Terror policy. By media organizations, in the context of this study, we mean corporately owned broadcast and cable television networks. We believe there is no evidence to suggest that new media platforms fundamentally affected the social process of misinformation regarding the Iraq War. During the period under analysis, the vast majority of Americans continued to cite television as their main source of information about the Iraq War (83 percent). Moreover, 72 percent of those who access political news from new media sources rely on major news organization websites such as CNN.com and FoxNews.com (72 percent) (Horrihan *et al.* 2004). Thus, we focus our analysis on the brokering between mainstream media organizations and the political establishment.

Financial contributions made by media organizations to political actors provide the most overt evidence of the brokering between the government and media establishments. In 2003, NewsCorp – the parent company of FNC, widely considered to be the Bush administration’s most ardent cheerleader – spent US\$2,840,000 on lobbying and donated over US\$3 million in campaign contributions. NewsCorp donated the majority of its funds to Democratic candidates, thus belying the conservative inclination of NewsCorp and Rupert Murdoch. Indeed, the spreading of business contributions across party lines is a necessary component of media/political brokering. NewsCorp needs Bush administration officials as sources of information to increase the credibility of their FNC coverage, while at the same time they need to maintain relationships with key Democrats in order to make sure that communication regulations remain favorable. As Figure 2 illustrates, this pattern of financial brokering is not limited to NewsCorp.

Power-brokering between media conglomerates (which own and operate all of the news outlets discussed in this article) and political agencies is neither straightforward nor uniform. Moreover, the nature of their interaction does not necessarily reflect a clearly articulated strategy on either side and is fundamentally shaped by the market demands of political news consumers. News outlets, due to increased corporatization, have become what Bennett calls ‘active boosters of market values’ (2004, p. 137). Similarly, in order to attract voter approval and political legitimacy, politicians are



**FIGURE 2** Top broadcast contributors (1998–2004).

Source: Data compiled by the Center for Public Integrity from the Federal Election Commission contribution records (1998–2004).

guided by market values – framing their agenda in language that appeals to the broadest voter demographic possible. Thus, pressure to conform to market forces plays a key role in facilitating the close interaction between the media and politicians as documented by scholars such as Kellner (2005), McChesney (2004), and Zaller (1994). News outlets need political actors to deliver sensationalist stories that attract audiences as much as they need political decision-makers to relax regulation and conglomeratization laws. At the same time, politicians need media organizations to deliver their messages to the public in a way that activates the median voter.

This interdependence, shaped by market forces, is reinforced by the structural configuration of news-making. In a study of WMD news coverage, Moeller (2004) illustrates that, regardless of the ideological leanings of Fox and its peers, journalistic conventions facilitate a news environment that prioritizes the Bush administration's political messages. First, the 'inverted pyramid' convention requires that news stories begin with an announcement by a major figure, allowing the administration to dominate news coverage because, regardless of the veracity of their claims, critics are typically less prominent in the public eye and thus less newsworthy (also discussed by Levine 2004). Hence, WMDs become a major news story only when administration officials place it on the agenda. Second, journalists tend to rely too heavily on statistics, even when they are irrelevant or spurious, which often 'obscures' rather than clarifies government claims about WMDs (Moeller 2004, p. 39). Furthermore, because journalists typically anchor their stories on attention-grabbing quotations made by government officials, prejudicial terms like 'terrorist regime' and 'evil doers' make their way into news stories with little qualification or contextualization. Finally, stories involving national security issues like the presence of WMDs commonly rest on either highly technical and/or classified information, which few non-governmental experts are able or willing to challenge on the record. Journalists are therefore less likely to present counter-evidence, and, as Kull *et al.* point out, often serve as 'a means of transmission for an administration, rather than a critical filter' (2003–2004, p. 593).

In summary, brokering is not simply about the exchange of financial contributions for political favors or about media propaganda in support of a particular political action. It is about the intertwining of interests between the media and political establishments, and the journalistic rules of engagement that intensify this mutual interdependence.

## 2. Psychological climate (fear after 9/11) ← → agenda setting

In *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism & Democracy*, Barber (2003) maps out the role that fear played in promoting the Bush agenda. By framing American actions in

Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the War on Terror, Bush and his collaborators created a general climate of fear in which political dissent was considered subversive. Similarly, Kellner outlines how the administration, aided by corporate media, framed 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror in terms of Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis. He highlights how it is in mainstream media's best interest to adopt the Bush administration's frame of fear in order to keep Americans in a 'constant state of alert, with their eyes fixed on media screens, thus increasing corporate profits' (2005, p. 37).

A Pew (2003a) study conducted in September 2003 demonstrates the elevated levels of fear and anxiety that predominated following the 9/11 attacks. The percentage of respondents considering the world to be a more dangerous place when compared with 10 years ago increased from 53 percent immediately before 9/11 to 75 percent in August 2003; and 64 percent considered terrorist attacks to be much more likely than 10 years ago, up from 51 percent in early September 2001. As Section 4 will illustrate, when people experience heightened levels of fear they are more receptive to political language that identifies a concrete source of fear and most importantly implies that the threat can be removed through concrete actions such as war (Lakoff 2005).

### **3. Political agency – agenda setting → media organizations**

By agenda-setting we mean the capacity of a political agency to define and provide essential content for the issues broadcast and discussed within the mediated public sphere. We argue on the basis of a growing body of evidence that the Bush Administration intended to go to war with Iraq, and to oust Sadaam Hussein from power, regardless of his role in the terrorist attack on the United States.<sup>3</sup> We posit that Americans were more willing to believe that Saddam possessed WMDs and that a connection existed between Saddam and 9/11 and Saddam and Al Qaeda partially because they suffered from heightened levels of anxiety and fear of terrorism in the period following 9/11. That the Bush administration propagated this false information is beyond question. However, whether the administration intentionally utilized misinformation to sway American public opinion in favor of its policy goals – although a fundamental problem for American democracy and for world affairs – is not our focus here. Rather, we want to unveil the process through which this decisive, misleading information became and continued to be the perceived reality for a substantial proportion of the American population. We now proceed to a step-by-step reconstruction of this process.

First, the Bush administration frequently and categorically released statements asserting that Iraq possessed WMDs, and insinuated that links existed between Iraq, 9/11 and Al Qaeda. The House Committee on Government Reform (2004) issued a report, popularly referred to as the Waxman Report, which details 237 misleading statements released by President George Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, now former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and now former National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice about Iraq and WMDs. According to the Waxman Report, these officials made 11 statements that claimed that Iraq posed an urgent threat; 81 statements that exaggerated Iraq's nuclear activities; 84 statements that overstated Iraq's chemical and biological weapons capabilities; and 61 statements that misrepresented Iraq's ties to al Qaeda – in 125 separate appearances, consisting of 40 speeches, 26 press conferences and briefings, 53 interviews, four written statements, and two congressional testimonies. Officials made the greatest number of misleading statements (64 statements in 16 public appearances) during the 30-day period leading up to the congressional vote on the Iraq War resolution on 10 and 11 October 2002. These officials also released 48 misleading statements in 26 public appearances between 19 January 2003 and the official launch of the Iraq War.

Kellner also provides an outline of the misinformation spread by the administration. For example, on 8 September 2002 at the Bush/Blair War Summit on Iraq in Washington, Bush held up photos of the supposed Iraqi nuclear arsenal claiming, 'I don't know what more evidence you need'. ABC, NBC and the *Washington Post* quickly reported that these photos and the story were fraudulent. However, in the weeks following the summit, the rest of the networks – Fox most prominently – rebroadcast the speech repeatedly and featured story after story on the impending Iraqi nuclear threat (Kellner 2005, p. 56).

A Time/CNN poll conducted on 13 September 2001 that found that 78 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was somehow involved in the 9/11 attacks, suggests that the administration's false statements played to a pre-existing bias in the American public. While the media provided the main channel through which the government informed or misinformed the American people about the Iraq War, to understand why some sectors of the public were more receptive to misleading information we need to introduce other elements in our analysis.

#### **4. Political agency → mental frames activated and not activated**

In *Moral Politics* (2002), Lakoff outlines a theory of cognitive framing. According to Lakoff, political speech is most effective when it evokes metaphors that

activate mental frames in the audience, encouraging the subscription to one policy choice over another. Looking specifically at the Iraq War, Lakoff (2003) theorizes that the frequent use by the government of the term ‘War on Terror’ was central to activating public support. He outlines how the Bush administration played on the nation-as-person metaphor by utilizing rhetoric that mirrored the traditional formula of effective storytelling: framing the United States as both a hero and a victim. According to this frame: in order to protect our interests and those of the world, America must heroically take on the burden of disciplining the Iraqi villains, stopping them from using WMDs, and rescue the Iraqi people from hardship. At the same time, by drawing links between 9/11 and the War in Iraq, the United States is pictured as the victim, acting in self-defense rather than imperial hubris.

As relevant as Lakoff’s hypotheses are, it is difficult to find direct evidence supporting his claims. However, there are a number of indications that would make these ideas compatible with observed political behavior. For example, in an analysis of the 2000 Presidential election, Baker (2005) found that value scales and moral visions (e.g. world views) correlated significantly with political behavior. Specifically, he found that ‘voters with traditional values and absolutist moral visions tended to vote for Bush and to identify as very or moderately conservative, controlling for the social structural bases of political behavior’ (2005, p. 14). While it would be helpful to have a similar study of the 2004 election, from Baker’s analysis we can surmise that those who supported Bush were more likely to embrace the absolutist hero–victim–villain framing technique that underscored the administration’s justifications for entering into a war against Iraq.

## **5. Mental frames activated → audience misperceptions**

Framing and priming research suggests that salient characteristics of media and political message frames serve as cues that activate individual cognitive mental frames (Price & Tewksberry 1997). In terms of accessibility, repetition and immediacy are important for activating mental frames. When an individual repeatedly consumes a salient news story frame, the likelihood increases that the respective mental frame will be activated again by subsequent messages. Conversely, subjects tend to discard or reject information that is incongruent with their mental frames. Thus, framing research suggests that after frequent exposure to pro-war coverage, subjects would be less likely to incorporate corrective information that threatened to disrupt the dominant news and political frame that the Iraq War was justified.



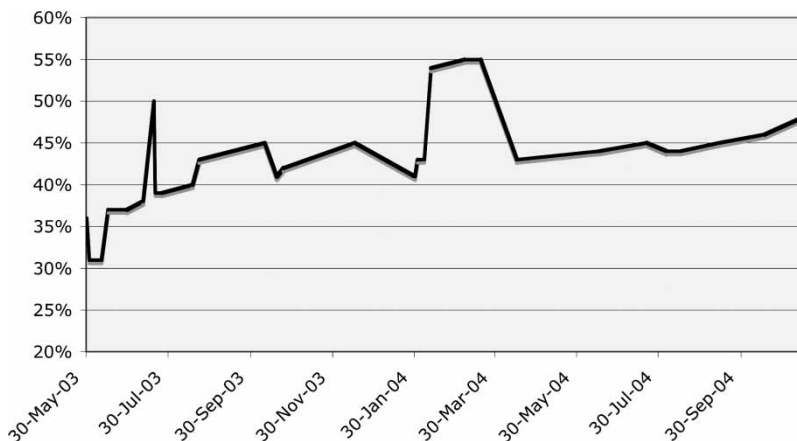
While they do not address the issue of framing *per se*, Lewandowsky *et al.* (2005) provide additional support for framing activation theory. In a cross-national study, they found that Americans were more likely than Germans or Australians to disregard corrections in information about the Iraq War. They theorize that this tendency may be explained partially by previous research, which has illustrated that subjects pay more attention to information corrections when they are suspicious about the motives behind its dissemination (e.g. Wilkes & Reynolds 1999; Seifert 2002). By extension, we may posit that liberals were more likely than conservatives to pay attention to corrective information that counteracted the misinformation released by the Bush administration.

Survey data confirm that Fox viewers tend to be more conservative than consumers of other networks. In 2003, 47 percent of respondents who listed Fox as their primary news source identified themselves as conservative and 74 percent approved of Bush. In contrast only 36 percent of CNN viewers defined themselves as conservative and 63 percent approved of Bush (Pew 2003b). Reinforcing these findings, a more recent survey (Pew 2004a) found that since 2000 FNC has increased its audience share primarily among those who identify themselves as conservatives and Republicans. More than half (52 percent) of Fox's regular viewers now describe themselves as conservative, up from 40 percent in 2000. Furthermore, market research has illustrated that FNC not only attracts 200,000 more viewers daily than its rival CNN, but that Fox viewers tend to tune in longer than consumers of other networks. This suggests that Fox news fosters a unique sense of loyalty among viewers that does not appear to exist for other networks (Iskandar 2005, p. 157). We posit that because FNC featured more government and pro-war commentators coupled with the fact that Fox viewers tend to be more conservative and express greater channel loyalty, FNC viewers were more likely to accept misinformation as presented by the administration and to reject corrective information.

## **6. Mental frames not activated → audience perception of misperceptions ← → societal political trust**

Figure 3 provides an overview of the results of all major American public opinion polls conducted before, during and after the Iraq War regarding beliefs that the administration deliberately misled the American public about the reasons for going to war (Everts & Isernia 2005).<sup>4</sup>

What is striking is that over an 18-month period despite the introduction of compelling evidence that prewar intelligence was falsified or exaggerated, the belief that the Bush administration presented faulty information fluctuated



**FIGURE 3** Belief that the Bush administration deliberately misled the public about reasons for going to war in Iraq.

Source: PSRA/Newsweek, Gallup, Harris, ABC/WP/TNS, and TIPP polls (aggregated by Everts & Isernia 2005, p. 282).

by only 12 points, rising from 36 percent in February 2003 to 48 percent in November 2004.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these polls suggest that skepticism regarding the existence of WMDs actually peaked in March 2004 (around 55 percent) and then decreased despite mounting evidence that no weapons existed.

In the face of stark contradictory evidence, why did so many Americans continue to believe that they were not being misled by the Bush administration? The following section examines the role that the overall psychological climate of public opinion played in reinforcing the credibility of the Bush administration, facilitating a rejection or avoidance of corrective information on the part of many in the American public.

## 7. Psychological climate → message sources → credibility → exposure

As illustrated in Section 1, the Bush Administration's agenda-setting power is dictated in part by power-brokering between the media and political establishments. However, while media organizations may adopt or transmit the administration agenda (exposure arrow), whether audiences trust the transmitting news organization and/or the official government source may influence their adoption or rejection of misinformation as transmitted by the media. Credibility and trust studies have illustrated that individual trust in media organizations and in the political establishment typically co-vary and

are often mutually constitutive. For example, General Social Survey data for 1973–1996 identify similar declines in trust in political institutions and the media as an institution (Bennett *et al.* 1999).

In January 2003, political trust leveled off to pre-9/11 levels (30 percent) (Hetherington 2005, p. 34). However, Hetherington notes that political trust – which typically correlates with opinions regarding the state of the economy – was much higher than it should have been. For example, in 2000 political trust was measured at 30 percent while positive feelings about the economy were at 70 percent. In January 2003, political trust was again at 30 percent but positive feelings about the economy were measured at 24 percent. In other words, given the largely negative feelings about the state of the economy, political trust levels should have been markedly lower than 30 percent. A number of studies have documented that the media may be the most important factor in influencing political trust (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson 1997). Because the media play an important role in shaping political trust, we must also examine what media sources are viewed as credible and by whom.

Recent studies confirm the long-term trend that while trust in the media has declined television remains the most credible medium, particularly during times of war and crisis. Moreover, if television coverage conflicts with newspaper coverage, subjects tend to accept the television depiction. One study has also documented a newer trend – that cable news outlets are surpassing local and network television in terms of credibility (Ibelema & Powell 2001). Looking specifically at Iraq War news, a *Los Angeles Times* poll found that more than 70 percent of Americans relied on cable news as their primary source of war information; and Nielsen data documented a 300 percent increase in viewership for MSNBC and CNN and a 288 percent increase for FNC (Ayeni 2004, p. 9).

Still audiences have been documented to watch news sources that they do not necessarily trust. However, looking specifically at FNC credibility, Pew (2004a) found that while overall trust in media declined in the post 9/11 era, FNC credibility has remained relatively constant. Moreover, the credibility ratings do not adequately convey the deeply partisan and ideological connection between FNC and audience trust. Approximately the same percentage of Republicans and Democrats view Fox as a credible source of news (25 percent). However, FNC now ranks as the *most* trusted news source for Republicans (29 percent ranked FNC as the most believable source) and the *least* trusted news source by Democrats (Pew 2004a, p. 2).

Thus to some extent, distrust in political institutions is compensated by trust in the media, as long as the messages transmitted by media support rather than undermine the agenda-setting strategies of political actors. In contradiction to the belief among the political establishment that the media are responsible for declines in political trust, the media are actually the last line of

defense against a widespread crisis of legitimacy. If anything, more often than not, the media establishment helps to buoy a sinking political system, in spite of occasional criticisms of the blatant wrongdoings of political leaders.

## 8. Media organizations (news conveyors/filters) → information/misinformation

In establishing the relationship between news source and the production of misinformation we differentiate between news platforms that largely serve as *conveyors* and platforms that critically *filter* and analyze administration policy and agenda-setting strategies regarding the Iraq War. While news conveyors typically reproduce and convey information from other political sources, filters add their own judgment, not only in news presentation, but also in editing, formatting, and selecting news stories. Of course, the differentiation between filters and conveyors is not binary. There is no such thing as a 'neutral' conveyor or an impartial filter, but we believe it is important to distinguish between different levels of news and information gate keeping and dissemination.

Let us examine the position of different channels of news in relationship to the Iraq War. In an analysis of news coverage in the three weeks leading up to the War in Iraq, Rendall and Broughel (2003) found that 81 percent of FNC's sources were pro-war, the highest of any network. Moreover, they identified a general editorial trend in all Fox coverage (particularly in Brit Hume's nightly news brief) that strongly favored the administration agenda. They also found that Fox stories prominently featured official government official sources 70 percent of the time. Ayeni documented similar trends, finding that between October 2002 and March 2004, 58 percent of FNC sources featured in Iraq War coverage worked for the Pentagon, the White House, or the State Department (2004, p. 12). In contrast, other networks featured a more politically balanced array of sources (CBS, 30 percent; CNN, 21 percent; and NBC, 22 percent). When considered in conjunction with the Waxman report, which underscores the number of misleading statements released by the administration, the proportion of government officials featured on each news platform takes on critical importance.

Not surprisingly considering the number of administration officials featured in Fox war coverage, Aday *et al.* (2005) found that out of the five major news networks, FNC coverage was by far the most supportive of the Iraq War in the overall tone in its coverage between 20 March and 20 April 2003 (see Table 1).

Examining approximately the same period, Media Monitor (2003) measured the number of pro-war opinions expressed in each major news platform's evening broadcast. It found that between 19 March 2003 and the fall of Tikrit on 14 April 2003, CBS (95 percent) rather than Fox (61 percent)

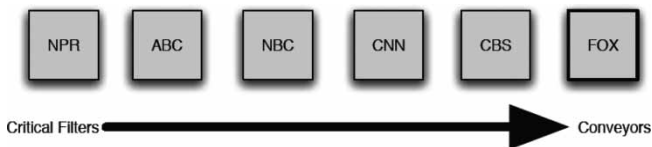
**TABLE 1** Tone of Iraq War coverage by network (20 March–20 April 2003). *Source:* Aday *et al.* (2005, p. 14)

| <i>source (N = 1820)</i> | <i>% supportive in tone</i> | <i>% critical in tone</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Fox                      | 37.9                        | –                         |
| CNN 6–6.30               | 7.2                         | –                         |
| NBC                      | 4.6                         | 1                         |
| CBS                      | 4.5                         | –                         |
| CNN 5–5.30               | 4.5                         | 3.9                       |
| ABC                      | 2.2                         | 2.2                       |

featured the greatest proportion of pro-war sentiments, while ABC featured the lowest (20 percent) followed by NBC (46 percent). However, because FNC dedicated a significantly larger percentage of its broadcast time to war coverage during the period under analysis, Fox viewers consumed three times more pro-war statements than those of any other network. While establishing causality is difficult if not impossible, it is not surprising that a 2003 Pew survey found that FNC viewers exhibited a markedly more optimistic view about the Iraq War. Fifty-five percent of Fox viewers believed that news reports actually exaggerated the problems in Iraq as compared with 32% of CNN viewers (Pew 2003b, p. 13).

On the basis of this scattered evidence we offer a scale of attitudes toward the war by different media, based on whether they acted largely as a filter or a conveyor of administration framing and agenda-setting strategies regarding the Iraq War. National Public Radio (NPR) seems to be the national medium with the most independent attitude vis-à-vis agenda setting from the administration. Among television channels, CBS and Fox appear to favor pro-war opinions and information, NBC and CNN appear to be more moderate but still in favor of the Bush administration views, while ABC offers a more balanced perspective.

Although this scale is admittedly tentative, we may use it to observe the differential perception of the audience in relationship to the information provided by the administration and conveyed by the media. Yet, here as throughout this model, establishing direct causality between news source and these tendencies is difficult. Other elements must be introduced in our analysis.



**FIGURE 4** Media organization positioning scale.

**TABLE 2** Frequency of misperceptions per respondent by news source. *Source: Kull et al. (2003–2004, p. 582)*

| <i>misperceptions per respondent</i> | <i>Fox</i> | <i>CBS</i> | <i>ABC</i> | <i>CNN</i> | <i>print media</i> | <i>NPR/PBS</i> |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------------|----------------|
| none of the three                    | 20         | 30         | 39         | 45         | 53                 | 77             |
| one or more misperceptions           | 80         | 71         | 61         | 55         | 47                 | 23             |

## 9. Exposure → misperceptions

Drawing on a series of PIPA polls gathered during 2003, Kull *et al.* (2003–2004) explored the connections between an individual's misperceptions about the Iraq War and his/her primary news source. They found that Fox viewers exhibited the highest average rate of misperceptions (45 percent) when compared with other networks. Table 2 summarizes the number of misperceptions held by respondents.

They also found that news source ranked as the second most significant predictor of misperceptions about the Iraq War (intention to vote for Bush was first). Correlations between reported level of attention to news about the war and misperceptions varied considerably according to source. Moreover, only Fox viewers exhibited a significant correlation between their level of attention to war coverage and the number of misperceptions held. Eighty percent of Fox viewers who reported that they followed news about Iraq very closely believed that a strong link existed between al Qaeda and Iraq.

Therefore, we do find a relationship between the actual level of misperception and the different treatment of misinformation by various media sources. The closer the media institution's coverage corresponded to the administration's agenda-setting strategy, the greater the number of misperceptions held by that platform's audience. However, the media's role in the production of misperceptions, while central, is also reflective and constitutive of other important factors such as the general psychological climate present in American society after 9/11.

## 10. Psychological climate (level of fear) → misperceptions

Although we are not aware of scholarly studies that directly test the relationship between an individual's level of social and political fear after 9/11 and misperceptions regarding the Iraq War, psychologists and political scientists have documented the effects of threat on cognitive processing, behavior and attitudes. Threat has been documented to induce xenophobia, willingness to

curtail civil liberties and the willingness to reject challenging beliefs (Huddy *et al.* 2003, p. 486).

Moreover, general studies concerning the relationship between fear of 9/11 and voting behavior may prove instructive. Using survey data from two national random-digit dialing (RDD) surveys and 11 State of Michigan RDD surveys, Davis *et al.* (2004) illustrate that connections between fear of terrorism and presidential approval are not straightforward. According to their findings, presidential approval ratings only increase in periods when the threat of terrorism is well defined (e.g. 9/11, the immediate pre-Iraq War period, and the Bali bombings). Terror threats and more vague warnings of impending danger had no effect. Significantly, they found that since 9/11 only the Iraq War has significantly correlated with longer-term increases in presidential approval ratings. As the following section will illustrate, this climate of fear was also crucial in amplifying political trust, which also played a crucial role in the widespread acceptance of misinformation about the Iraq War.

### **11. Psychological climate: level of fear ← → societal political trust and culture → misperceptions**

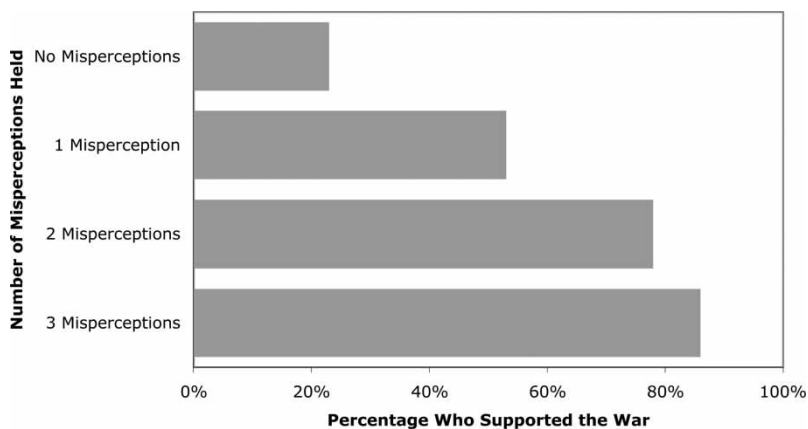
A range of sources have identified a ‘rally round the flag’ pattern in American culture. When the country is perceived to be in deep crisis or under attack, these studies consistently find a spike in governmental approval ratings and overall level of political trust (e.g. Edwards 1997; Brewer *et al.* 2003; Hetherington & Nelson 2003). Hetherington (2005) notes that in the wake of 9/11 this spike lasted much longer and was more pronounced than would be predicted by previous studies. Bush’s approval ratings jumped from 51 percent immediately preceding the attacks to a record high of 94 percent on 22 September 2001. Moreover, the number of people reporting positive trust in government skyrocketed from 30 percent in the last survey taken before the attacks to 64 percent immediately following the attacks (2005, p. 30). He also identifies a correlation between trust in government and belief that foreign affairs and national security are the most pressing issues (76 percent). Hetherington also notes that while general trust in the military has risen following the Vietnam War, trust in the military reached record levels in 2002. In 2002, 79 percent of Americans expressed ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the military (2005, p. 34). We may surmise that this heightened trust in the military may also have translated into greater willingness to believe misinformation delivered via press military sources. Moreover, this heightened trust may have amplified willingness to believe administration insinuations that War detractors (i.e. those that claimed that America was waging war under false pretenses) exhibited a

lack of support for American troops, particularly once American forces had already been deployed.

Gross *et al.* (2004) found that those who consumed more television in the period following 9/11 exhibited greater levels of trust in the government. This trend was particularly pronounced among those who identified themselves as Republicans. This suggests that, while television coverage that promoted the Bush agenda may not have changed people's opinions in favor of the war, by presenting misinformation without an adequately critical filter television coverage reinforced trust in the government, which translated into support of the war. Moreover, we can surmise that this trend was more pronounced for FNC viewers who viewed significantly more pro-governmental and pro-war coverage than consumers of other networks.

## 12. Misperceptions → pro-war opinions

Not surprisingly, Kull *et al.* (2003–2004) found that the more misperceptions a respondent expressed, the more likely they were to support the Iraq War. Figure 5 illustrates the cumulative effects of having misperceptions on an individual's support for the war as collected by a composite of PIPA polls between June and September 2003. The misperceptions measured in the poll included: (1) the belief that clear links between Iraq and al Qaeda had been found, (2) that WMDs had been located in Iraq and (3) that international public opinion favored the American-led Iraq War.



**FIGURE 5** Cumulative effect of misperceptions on Iraq War support.

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks Poll October 2003 (Kull *et al.* 2003–2004, p. 580).

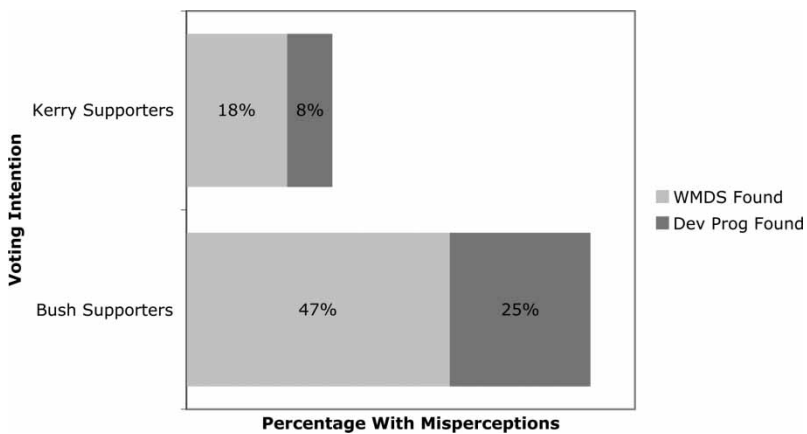


The statistics presented in Figure 5 provide compelling evidence that misperceptions translated into support for the war. Eighty-six percent of those with three misperceptions expressed support for the war while only 26 percent of respondents with accurate war information expressed their support. Moreover, as the following section will illustrate, war support was critical for George W. Bush's re-election, suggesting that the dissemination of misinformation had deeper political ramifications than gearing the nation for war in Iraq.

### 13. Pro-war opinions → vote → political agency

A Pew survey (2004b) conducted immediately before the 2004 election showed that voter preferences correlated most strongly with opinions on the War on Terror and the Iraq War. Eighty-three percent of voters who supported military intervention and 79 percent of voters who believed that the US was winning the War on Terror expressed their intention to vote for Bush. Moreover, in an exit poll conducted by Pew (2004c) immediately after the election they found that 25 percent of those surveyed cited the Iraq War and 9 percent noted Terrorism as the most important factor influencing their vote.

A PIPA poll (2004b) conducted in October 2004 provides even more compelling evidence of the connection between the dissemination of misperception and Bush's re-election. As Figure 6 illustrates, in the month before the 2004 presidential election, 76 percent of Bush supporters held misperceptions regarding the Iraq War compared with only 26 percent of



**FIGURE 6** Misperceptions held and voting intention.

Source: PIPA/KN poll conducted October 2004 (PIPA 2004b, p. 3).

Kerry supporters. This connection between misperceptions, war support and voting underscores the cyclical nature of the production of misperceptions. The Bush administration was in a privileged position to release misinformation, which, when delivered via the press, translated into support for their policies and ultimately their re-election, thus increasing their credibility, allowing them to disseminate further disinformation.

### **Conclusion: the social production of misinformation**

Misperceptions about the Iraq War were socially produced. This is hardly an original thought, but it goes against the common wisdom in the media world. In this article we have specified the mechanism of this social production and attempted, within the limits of our access to public information, to document the process we have identified. At the heart of this process of inducing misperceptions is the interplay between the political and communication establishments – in this particular case, between the Bush Administration and the mainstream media. Yet, our argument is not simply about media collusion with conservative politics. The brokering process between political parties and media is largely undetermined in terms of its political and ideological outcomes, within the confines of politics as usual. What seems to be decisive is the interplay between the agenda-setting capacity of the administration and the structure and logic of the media.<sup>6</sup>

Mainstream media are plural in their approach to information, but this plurality follows a business logic rather than an ideological logic. What matters for media is their business success, measured by their share of the audience and their ability to command advertising revenue. Thus, there is evidence that FNC presented the most pro-war coverage (81 percent) in the period surrounding the beginning of the Iraq War. Fox also featured the second highest percentage of government officials (70 percent). As the Waxman report illustrates, government officials made frequent statements containing misleading or inaccurate information about WMDs and the connections between Iraq and Al Qaeda and Iraq and 9/11. Given the high percentage of government officials and pro-war guests featured on FNC we may assume that coverage included high numbers of inaccurate or misleading statements about Iraq. However, this reflects a market strategy by Fox rather than an ideological preference from Mr Murdoch, albeit there is little doubt where his personal preferences lie (Arsenault 2005).

Indeed, Fox increased its share of audience, showing that it was able to attract a significant market niche by espousing administration policies. In this sense, the general psychological climate of fear is also a contributing factor. Media both convey and filter the messages of the agenda-setting

political agency, while keeping in mind the mood of the audience. The more these media channels conveyed rather than filtered information released by the administration, the more misinformation was channeled to the audience, thereby increasing the extent of the misperceptions held by audience members.

On the other hand, different media adopted different mechanisms to filter and/or contextualize administration messages. Specifically, they may choose to feature facts or opinions, to use a diversity of experts or rely on government officials, and to focus on accuracy in reporting, and/or whether news stories conform to the perceived market demands of the audience. Although our evidence is limited, we hypothesize a relationship between levels of filtering and the production of misperception. Moreover, these differences in the levels of filtering relate to different market strategies according to the targeted audience. Thus, if television networks feature more pro-administration views than the print media or NPR, it is because the move towards corporatization dictates that they seek the broadest possible market share – which in this case included a large proportion of the population ready to rally behind the president and embrace the rhetoric if not the reality that progress was being made in the War on Terror via war on Iraq.

On the contrary, NPR's audience is less misinformed because, unlike a large proportion of radio networks dominated by conservative talk shows, NPR's market aims at a liberal segment of the public, usually better educated than the public at large. The same argument applies to the differences between television networks, and between television and print outlets. In all cases, the key issue for the media is to preserve credibility while applying different levels of filtering to the information or misinformation received from the administration according to their specific market strategy. Professional journalists are equally professional in all mainstream media stations. But they work under different parameters established by the news program editors and producers for whom they work. These parameters set the selection of news, reports, experts and commentators according to the structure of the media, in interaction with the strategic choices made by the decision-makers in each media corporation.

In other words, without administration agenda-setting based on misleading information about Iraq, there would not have been misinformation in the media. But once misinformation is produced, media have to deal with it, given the source of the message. And the way they manage it derives from the interaction between media strategy *vis-à-vis* the audience, the climate in public opinion, and the overall range of methods of agenda-setting by the political agency (e.g. raising the level of terror alert, concealing information or defining other issues indirectly associated with a strong government).<sup>7</sup>

Under such conditions it seems difficult to imagine how misperception on a large scale could be avoided. Our purpose here is analytical, not

prescriptive, so we will not engage in the debate on the ethical or political implications of our study. Let us simply say that the traditional claim that the antidote to manipulation resides in the independence and professionalism of the media does not seem to hold any longer. The media remain professional and independent by and large, yet they are used as conveyors of misinformation leading to misperception, albeit in different degrees. A different informative outcome would require two simultaneous transformations: the rise of a concerned citizenry more involved in public affairs, and the development of alternative, horizontal networks of communication that bypass business media while keeping an appropriate level of accuracy and credibility in the content of their messages. Under these challenges, mainstream media may strive to regain their credibility again, thus reversing the process of misinformation.

For the time being, however, for the new horizontal networks of communication, such as the Internet, to have a significant impact on the majority of the population they need to be relayed by the mass media, as was the case in the diffusion of the pictures of torture in Abu Ghraib. Citizen involvement, during the period covered by our study, seemed to be subdued precisely because of the overall sociopolitical conditions present in American society, facilitated, among other factors, by the social process of misinformation production mapped out in this article.

Thus, we are still deeply entrenched in the Iraq War.

## Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Benjamin Barber, Thomas Hollihan, and the anonymous *iCS* reviewers for their constructive and helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.
- 2 All data used in our analysis are restricted to the period between September 2002 and November 2004. While the general evolution of public opinion concerning the war is an interesting topic of study, this article is limited to the study of how misperceptions about the war were produced and maintained in the 18-month period following the official conclusion of the war.
- 3 See, for instance: Clarke (2004) and Woodward (2004).
- 4 The polls contained slightly different wording. See Everts and Isernia (2005, p. 282) for the precise wording of each individual poll.
- 5 This percentage change closely mirrors overall increases in the percentage of the population who disapproved of George Bush's job performance. See <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob1.htm> for an aggregation of Bush job approval polls.
- 6 The proliferation of misinformation about the Iraq War has been counteracted to some extent by the use of new media, particularly Internet and community-based media, a subject that remains beyond the scope of our analysis. We have not included new media in our model because we find

no evidence that they have altered the logic of public opinion formation, including the adoption of misperceptions, in the absence of the diffusion of their messages in the mainstream media.

- 7 We do not pretend to identify all potential sources of Bush Administration support in the aftermath of 9/11. It may well be, for instance, that patriotic feelings fueled a strong reaction to the attacks, which favored the president at a critical moment. We include this, and other factors, in the general political climate in the US, but we do not analyze them because our investigation focuses on the relationship between the political system and mass media.

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