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Framing the 2003 Iraq War: Propaganda, Media and the American Public

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I. Introduction

The 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath have raised questions on the trustworthiness of government sources and the media's compliance. In a 2003 speech at the United Nations Security Council, a month prior George W. Bush's announcement of the invasion of Iraq, Colin Powell stated "My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources — solid sources"(Mitchell). During that speech, the former US Secretary of State argued that the US intelligence had strong evidence that Saddam Hussein presented a threat as he was accused of being allegedly in possession of weapons of mass destruction. With the previous shocking events and the context during which the 2003 Iraq War was prepared, the George W. Bush administration used a rhetoric of fear to advance pre-existing goals. Indeed, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center deeply scarred the United States and became the trigger for this scare tactic. This event was used by the George W. Bush administration, then relayed by media as one of the main justifications for the invasion of Iraq two years later. The main argument pushed by the government was that Saddam Hussein had connections to Al Qaeda, and that he had been preparing nuclear weapons, therefore meaning that Iraq would have been able to strike the US at any given time. However, at the beginning of military operation in Iraq, and as time passed and no evidence of either having ties to Al Qaeda, nor being in possession of WMDs was provided, it became clear that the government's claims were based on poor intelligence and deliberate disinformation.

During wartime, the media plays a crucial role in relaying information to the public, which means that it should maintain journalistic neutrality. In the context of the 2003 Iraq War, it is important to consider that traditional media outlets kept a dominant position, greatly influencing public opinion. While the internet was already accessible in

the early 2000s and offered a wide range of alternative sources of information, mainstream media, particularly television and major newspapers remained dominant in influencing public opinion. The pro-war rhetoric which had first emerged from the government then bled into most parts of both traditional and digital media spheres, which resulted in a high level of support for military actions.

At the heart of this study is the theme of a state sponsored propaganda that was amplified by diverse media outlets. The complacency and the interplay between official sources and media outlets contributed greatly to amplifying governmental interests while marginalizing dissenting voices. The central theme of this thesis is the way the George W. Bush administration shifted public opinion in favor of a war by making Iraq seem like an imminent threat. The role played by the media not as a neutral conveyor of information but also as a vehicle of the government's disinformation campaign must be examined. However, it is equally important to wonder about the involvement of the American public in responding to such alarming declaration, allowing us to question the individual's agency and the audience's capacity – or not – to break from such widely spread disinformation.

The aim of this dissertation will be to understand the strategies used by the Bush administration and question the relationship between government sources and media outlets. But it also seeks to reflect on the role of the public agency in the face of dominant narratives while considering the rise of digital platforms and its role in either resisting or amplifying established narratives.

For that reason, we may wonder: how did the George W. Bush administration succeed in influencing public opinion on the 2003 Iraq War despite providing no evidence-based arguments?

In order to approach this question, this thesis will be organized in three main parts. The first examines how George W. Bush's administration constructed the narratives that led to the war. As we shall see, a regime change in Iraq had been planned long before military operations had started, and the disinformation first came from within the Bush administration. It focuses on the mechanisms of war rhetoric, including strategic framing and the use of fear to legitimize the invasion. The second part explores the role of mainstream media in legitimizing the government's rhetoric, focusing on the effects of embedded journalism in amplifying the government's claims, and the media's failure of skepticism which led to a marginalization of dissenting voices. Finally, the third part will wonder about the agency of public opinion and the reluctance of questioning the government's authority. It discusses the evolving role of digital media within which patriotism, national identity and structural inequalities all continue to shape the audience's perception. This section of the thesis questions whether the internet and social media can offer an alternative to mainstream narratives, or if it simply reproduces a new form of propaganda by enhancing the echo chamber effect.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to explore the mechanisms of propaganda in the context of the 2003 Iraq War and the interplay that exists between institutional authority, media and public perception.

II. A State-Sponsored Propaganda

a. Framing the Narrative

During the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the George W. Bush administration presented its case to the public as an urgent response to the threat of alleged weapons of mass destruction as well as a possible allyship of Saddam Hussein with the terrorist organization Al Qaeda. A few years later, following the re-examination of policy documents and later declassified materials showed that the choice to invade Iraq was not an impulsive reaction but rather a strategically planned tactic. Following the Gulf war, a push to overthrow Saddam Hussein from power had already been in the work. When George W. Bush's father was president in 1992. This scheme continued with Bill Clinton, and, in 1998, the president launched a bombing campaign on Iraq called Operation Desert Fox which aimed at striking "military targets in Iraq that contributed to its ability to produce, store, maintain, and deliver weapons of mass destruction (WMD)." ("1998 - Operation Desert Fox") That same year, a letter authored by a group of Republican Conservatives (also known as PNAC) was sent to the president, explicitly asking for the ouster of Saddam Hussein as they wrote: "That strategy should aim, above all, at the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power." (*Letter to President Clinton on Iraq*). Several of these authors, notoriously Paul Wolfowitz, Donald H. Rumsfeld and even future UN ambassador John Bolton, later took an active and important role as key players in planning the 2003 Iraq invasion. This narrative was co-opted by the liberal media, and this group of influential figures from inside the government who are also known as Neoconservatives first pushed Republican opinion in favor of the invasion.

In his book *Dark Victory: America's Second War Against Iraq*, Jeffrey Record explains that the neoconservatives pushed their agenda of a regime change in Iraq long before the invasion, but especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This demonstrates how fear was used as a tactic of persuasion to wage a war despite evidence of any imminent attack. The influence of the neoconservatives also comes from the fact that they occupied many pivotal roles in the George W. Bush White House; “Indeed, the Bush administration is populated by prominent neoconservatives and other proponents of primacy, including the vice president and his staff, the secretary of defense, and the former head and still member of the Defense Policy Board.”(Record). According to the Neoconservatives, Saddam Hussein was an obstacle in maintaining US hegemonic ambition, and for that reason they also judged that a regime change was therefore necessary since it would also serve as a model for transforming the Middle East. This idea of a moral duty to spread democracy, and to unify the world is at the heart of their aspirations in the Neoconservative think tank Project for the New American Century. This group of policymakers was founded in 1997, and some of their central figures later advised George W. Bush during his campaign then went on to hold pivotal posts in the administration. We may as well hypothesize that their influence had already been so important that they helped pass through Congress the Iraqi Liberation Act in 1998, under Bill Clinton’s presidency. This act marked a shift in the US policy towards Iraq as their strategy went from containment to fully preparing for a regime change. Moreover, it laid foundation for the main George W. Bush administration policies after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the 2000 PNAC’s report titled *Rebuilding America’s Defenses* (Project for a New American Century), there is an emphasis on keeping US supremacy by extending military forces. Therefore, one of the main goals was to secure US power around the world. Iraq was also often mentioned when talking of regime change, and

what is especially of interest is that in this report, the Neoconservatives also called for a military occupancy in the Gulf as a way to maintain their interests before all. Once again, because this report was written prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks which later became one major argument for the necessity to invade, but also because some of its writers such as Vice-President Dick Cheney were part of the George W. Bush administration, we can affirm that the 2003 Iraq invasion was a result of an anticipated and carefully prepared strategy. In fact, ex-Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill even came forward in a 2004 interview with CBS News 60 minutes. In this interview, he admits that invading Iraq had been part of the US strategy for a long time: "O'Neill and other White House insiders gave him documents showing that in early 2001 the administration was already considering the use of force to oust Saddam, as well as planning for the aftermath." (*CNN.Com - O'Neill: Bush Planned Iraq Invasion before 9/11 - Jan. 14, 2004*)

In John Prados' book titled *Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold a War*, we are provided with the information that, as soon as George W. Bush took office in 2001, regime change for Iraq had started being introduced as early as February, which was merely a month after the president came into power; "The term 'regime change' got a boost in public discourse in February 6" (Prados). Moreover, in his book, Prados also presents us with insight on the US plan to secure oil reserves in Iraq already before the 9/11 attacks. This first reinforces the idea that a regime change in Iraq was not ideological, and was instead motivated by economic interests, but it also challenges the narrative of the 2003 Iraq War as a legitimate response to the shock of the 9/11 tragedy. It rather reveals that plans of invading Iraq had been on the US agenda for years, but also that 9/11 became an argument that supported already existing plans.

As we know, what followed that same year on September 11, were the unprecedented terrorist attacks that shook both the US and the world. Perhaps almost opportunely, this tragic event triggered the George W. Bush administration to begin with military actions, until the war announcement in 2003 as part of the “war on terror” rhetoric. Although there are little to no evidence that demonstrate Saddam Hussein’s possible implications in the terrorist attacks, it was only a few hours after the assault that Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld started connecting Iraq to the terrorist act. In a 2002 CBS News article, we are told that Osama Bin Laden was the prime suspect behind the strike, and yet, Donald H. Rumsfeld

Ordered the military to begin working on strike plans. And at 2:40 p.m., the notes quote Rumsfeld as saying he wanted ‘best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H.’ – meaning Saddam Hussein – ‘at same time. Not only UBL’ – the initials used to identify Osama bin Laden.(Roberts)

Through 9/11, the administration also started building a case for war by linking Saddam Hussein to Osama Bin Laden. Only a few days after the attack, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld started providing facts attempting to prove that Iraq was ready to strike the US with weapons of mass destruction, and therefore, that Iraqi’s leadership presented as a severe danger to the country. According to John Prados in his book *Hoodwinked*, Donald H. Rumsfeld’s arguments “intended to paint Baghdad as a major menace and ranged from charges that Iraq had praised the September 11 attacks, to ones that Saddam had repressed the Iraqi people ... ‘his regime is determined to acquire the means to strike the U.S., its friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction.’” (28). In this testimony, there is an emphasis on supposed intentions and capabilities of Iraq despite providing no clear evidence. Instead, it once again seems like Donald H. Rumsfeld exploited the events of the terrorist attacks to advance a pre-existing agenda.

From the September 11 terrorist attacks onward, a series of effort on the behalf of the George W. Bush administration started in order to lay groundwork and legitimize the war that will be announced two years later. The administration started preparing for a military attack already in February 2002 when Vice-President Cheney spoke at El Toro Marine in which he stated firmly that Iraq carried terrorist intentions towards the US. In this speech, he used the word “terror” a lot; he indirectly referred to their enemies, which includes Iraq, as “terror states”(Prados). On October 7 of 2002, the president addressed the nation in a speech in which, despite a lack of evidence to his claims, he argued: “We know that Iraq and al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade, some Al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq. ... We've learned that Iraq has trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gasses." (*President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat*). This speech was crucial in many ways as, a few days later, it enabled to pass the Iraq War Resolution of 2002, which authorized the use of military force in Iraq (Rep. Hastert).

All these strategies and military preparations for the war later proved efficient. As John Prados explained in *Hoodwinked*, military plans for a regime change in Iraq were prepared before the war was even announced in 2003. However, Prados also provided us with the information that the George W. Bush administration still lacked international support, notably from major allies such as France and Germany (Prados 12). For that reason, the next step was a matter of political communication to the American public; meaning that the administration now had to convince its citizens that Iraq was a major threat and could strike the US at any moment. In order to legitimize this argument, the George W. Bush administration used the context of 9/11 to push a rhetoric of fear.

b. Fear Rhetoric and Psychological Persuasion

The Neoconservatives' campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein during Bill Clinton's presidency was unsuccessful, but the September 11 terrorist attacks became a major tool of disinformation that helped push narratives of Iraq as a threat to immediately deal with. This event triggered what is known as the 'war on terror', which allowed the US to strike any nation they suspected to harbor terrorist threats. After 9/11, President George W. Bush openly shifted his attention from Afghanistan to Iraq, despite the fact that there were no links between Iraq and Afghanistan, nor between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. The goal was to create in people's mind the impression that a war against Iraq was absolutely necessary, and to do so, the administration mainly resorted to the threat of weapons of mass destruction, but also of terrorism. Although the making of WMDs by Iraq had first been deemed unlikely by Collin Powell in February 2001 when he argued that UN economic sanctions had worked, saying that Saddam "has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction." (Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information), the administration later shifted their argument and instead used this menace to push the narrative that Iraq was indeed a danger to suppress. What followed was a series of upsetting news delivered to the American public which aimed at ingraining fear, with the threat that Iraq had the capacities to strike the US with nuclear weapons at any given time, the end goal of this strategy was to legitimize the war to the public and gain the support of the international community.

According to Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner in *Shaping Public Opinion*, although the war would be costly and long, around 70% of American people (both Republicans and Democrats) still supported George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq, in fact, the support was still high regardless "whether or not weapons of mass

destructions (WMD) were found in Iraq.”(Gershkoff and Kushner 531) This statement highlights the effectiveness of fear rhetoric, but also how the public reacted more to emotional tactics rather than facts. The subsequent events after 9/11 consisted in linking Iraq to the terrorist attacks. One way to make sense of such strong support could be the idea that 9/11 was such a shocking event for the public, that they were now willing to believe anything. This is theorized by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber in *Weapons of Mass Deception*. In this book, they explain that perhaps this lack of critical thinking when it came to overwhelmingly support of the war stemmed from the shock of 9/11, shock that was exploited by the administration: "And fear can make people do things that they would not do if they were thinking rationally.”(Rampton and Stauber). This psychological aftershock was utilized by the George W. Bush administration as it also aligned with their broader and long-standing policy goal of a regime change in Iraq.

This shock after the terrorist attacks also supplements to the well-defined strategy of the administration which, in pursuit of exploiting this fear, associated terrorism with Iraq in their interviews and speeches. For the sake of understanding how this fear-based narrative worked, we must look at speeches and interviews that were given to the public after the emotional distress of September 11. As we discussed previously in this paper, there were early signs of this strategy of fear, especially when Vice President Cheney made a speech at El Toro Marine; the word “terror” was mostly used in his argument that Iraq was dangerous, he also indirectly referred to it as a terror state.

A year after 9/11, in September of 2002, it became clear that the administration was laying serious groundwork to prepare the public since what followed was a series of coordinated public statements and leaks concerning WMDs in Iraq. Intriguingly, in *Hoodwinked*, Prados talked of strategic leaks on September 6, with aluminum tubes. He explained in the book that Washington claimed Iraq had plans to buy thousands of

aluminum tubes for “gas centrifuges necessary to enrich uranium to the level of purity necessary to construct a nuclear weapon.” (25). Only two days later, on the 8th of September 2002, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had an interview with CNN in which she referred to these aluminum tubes, highlighting that their use could only be for terrorist purposes: “high-quality aluminum tools that are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs”, but it is also in this interview that she delivered the famous line “we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”(*CNN.Com - Transcripts*). The metaphor of the mushroom cloud referring to nuclear impact was likely deliberately chosen by Rice, as nuclear war is a deep fear of American people, and it holds historical weight. This line became one of the most memorable with its efficiency to evoke fear. After Rice's interview, that same weekend the president, but also other important figures such as Vice President Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld went on TV news programs to discuss Iraq and its alleged weapons of mass destruction. What is interesting is that all of them used emotionally charged language, they all evoked fear, but there is also the fact that they all associated 9/11 to Iraq. For instance, Dick Cheney in NBC News said, “We learned more and more that there was a relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda that stretched back through most of the decade of the '90s” (“Transcript for Sept. 14”), that same day, in CBS News Donald H. Rumsfeld emphasized the idea of “connecting the dots”, most likely implying Al Qaeda and Iraq (Cosgrove-Mather). What we could call a well-coordinated communication strategy heightens the idea that 9/11 became an opportunity for the George W. Bush administration to start their long-awaited plan of invading Iraq, and that their main goal was to sell it to the public.

On September 8, it seemed like the administration was preparing the American public, but four days later, a pivotal moment in the lead-up to the war was George W.

Bush's speech at the United Nations where the appeal was now for the international community. In this speech, the president described Iraq as such a dangerous threat that it was now a matter of international responsibility. According to Gershkoff and Kushner's analysis of this speech, the same pattern of indirectly linking the 9/11 attacks to Iraq can be found: "His remarks commenced with a remembrance of the September 11 attacks, continued with a discussion of the war in Afghanistan, and addressed [...] all before focusing especially on Iraq" (527). Moreover, in his speech he focused on the existence of weapons of mass destruction, arguing that Saddam Hussein had been making these for a long time. If we look closely at this section of his statement, although he did accuse the Iraqi regime of developing WMDs, we can see that he never openly affirmed that Iraq without a doubt was in possession of any. Instead, he argued that Iraq could produce nuclear weapons as they had the plans, and the infrastructures needed for its production which could allow Saddam Hussein to "build a nuclear weapon within a year". What is interesting is that, after indirectly linking Al Qaeda to Iraq, he put an emphasis on the idea of risk: "And this is a risk we must not take...The first time we may be completely certain he has a -- nuclear weapons is when, God forbids, he uses one." (*President's Remarks at the United Nations General Assembly*).

By using the 9/11 climate of fear, President George W. Bush alongside key figures of the administration presented these hypothetical risks as something certain. Through the speeches, we can see that on one hand, the administration used the fear of WMDs on the international community, and on the other hand, they used the threat of terrorism on the American public. This was observed in Gershkoff and Kushner's paper, as they explained "We do not see WMD as a prominent frame in Bush's rhetoric [...] they are a much smaller percentage than discussions of terrorism." (531). One way to understand the success of fear rhetoric is of course to acknowledge the severity of 9/11

for the American citizens. The attacks were so unexpected, and it marked the end of the US exceptionalism; this event demonstrated that the country was not as strong as it thought to have been for so long. In *Fear, Rhetoric and the "Other"*, Royal argued that the US had seen itself as untouchable, and that people could not imagine being targeted: "most Americans believed that we would not or could not be attacked (on a large scale) at home." (Royal, "Fear, Rhetoric, and the "Other""). For that reason, the September 11 attacks had therefore deeply scarred the country. Of course, this allowed the George W. Bush administration to capitalize on this fear of insecurity. When facing such a traumatic situation, people are desperate, which makes them willing to believe anything that could provide a solution. Through all the short-cuts that the administration made between Al Qaeda and Iraq, George W. Bush was able to create a binary vision of the world as explained in Royal's paper:

The narrative that developed in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks activated and relied upon the deeply entrenched good vs evil that so dominated World War II, the Cold War, and subsequent frictions (407).

Capitalizing on the public's fears and trauma proved to be efficient as the support for the war remained mostly high (Gershkoff and Kushner). While this rhetoric of fear with terrorism and WMDs was actively used, the alleged making of these nuclear weapons was never proven to the public. In fact, declassified documents of CIA White Paper Comments, informed that, although Iraq was in possession of aluminum tubes, they remained harmless: "The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) specifies the year 2007-09 for Iraqi acquisition of a nuclear weapon, a time frame that is far in the future, negating President Bush's contention that Iraq poses an urgent national security threat" (Prados 77).

c. Legitimizing Information: Government Sources

The year-long disinformation campaign concerning the existence of nuclear weapons had first emerged from the George W. Bush administration and was then relayed by mainstream media as what Prados called a “media feeding frenzy” (Prados). Much of the information reported by the press uncritically echoed statements that had been given directly by the George W. Bush administration. In some cases, it would reveal to be a deliberate support in favor of already existing power structures, but this lack of insight on behalf of these media platforms also supports the claim that media works mainly in the interests of the elite. When it comes to the 2003 Iraq War, we must remember the context during which the truth was concealed and distorted, that is to say, a post terrorist attacks US. For that reason, we may also hypothesize that at times of crises such as 9/11, it becomes more natural to adopt a patriotic stance, and therefore to seek answers from the government. In such case, whether it comes to media outlets or the public, patriotic unity heightens, which also explains that “the media also tend to rally around the flag in wartime.” (Gershkoff and Kushner 531). It is also important to remember that this rhetoric of linking Iraq and Al Qaeda kept emerging in political and media coverage, amplifying the already-existing feeling of insecurity.

The notion of media working in favor of the elite was theorized by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, book in which propaganda is described as a “guided market system”. This statement implies that the media is not free since it also operates in a market controlled by powerful institutions, such as the government. At the core of this theory, there is the concept of an invisible force that, with power and wealth, indirectly filters information for their own interests: “It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and

allow the government and dominant private interests to get their message across to the public.” (Herman and Chomsky). This argument heavily applies to the way the 2003 invasion of Iraq was sold. As we could see after 9/11, in many speeches made by members of the government, there was an overwhelming concentration of the fear-based rhetoric that bled across mainstream media. Some of the most influential media outlets became a vehicle for government messaging, Douglas Kellner exemplified this by saying that

corporate television and radio in the United States allowed right-winged zealots [...] featured logos such as ‘War on America’, ‘Attack on America’, ‘America under Attack’ and circulated discourses that assumed that the United States was at war and that only a military response was appropriate. (Kellner 625)

More importantly, Herman and Chomsky established the existence of five filters that operate on media, and the third filter is especially interesting as it describes “the reliance of the media on information provided by the government [...] approved by these primary sources and agents of power”. Concerning the 2003 Iraq War, we have an early example of media relying on government sources, notably with *The New York Times*. As early as three months after the 9/11 attacks, Judith Miller, who was a reporter for *The New York Times*, authored an article in which she quoted an Iraqi defector, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri (Miller). This expatriate provided her with alleged information on the making of WMDs in Iraq. In the article, Judith Miller emphasized the veracity of his statement by saying that “Government experts said yesterday that he had also been interviewed twice by American intelligence officials [...] The experts said his information seemed reliable and significant.”. However, we know that those claims were all entirely made up. In fact, *The New York Times* themselves acknowledged this mistake in an article three years later. Further reporting from *The Washington Post*

indicated that the article had been based on weak claims, but also that most of the information was provided by Ahmed Chalabi, founder of the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Judith Miller herself admitted that Chalabi “has provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD to our paper.” (Kurtz et al.). This statement questioned journalistic ethics since it shows that major and influential reporters such as Judith Miller validated pro-war narratives, but this also highlights the close relationship between media outlets and the government.

This information is significant as it suggests that the article had not been written impartially, the reason is that Chalabi was against Saddam’s regime, and he wished to take over his leadership. For that reason, we can imagine that by providing intelligence, Chalabi had ulterior motives, in fact, in 2003 the DIA conducted research on the intelligence he had provided, and they came to the conclusion that “most of the defector data had been of little or no value.” (Prados 284). In *The U.S. Invasion of Iraq*, Gompert, Binnendijk and Lin shared this perspective as they wrote “The Pentagon was receiving intelligence from Chalabi, the Iraqi opposition politician, who had an ulterior motive, and from sources such as the aptly named “Curveball.”” (Gompert et al.). Here, “Curveball” refers to a code name given to an Iraqi defector who also claimed that Saddam Hussein was in possession of WMDs. The role of Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi - his real name - was also highly influential because his faulty intelligence reports were even cited by Collin Powell in his famous speech to the UN in February 2003 (Pidd and Chulov). Through his dubious intelligence on Iraq’s alleged nuclear weapons, Chalabi was recognized as a key player in the disinformation campaign, but also in the long-lasting goal of a regime change in Iraq.

When it comes to reporting, we may hypothesize that the use of government sources by media outlets could have made the information seem more legitimate and

trustworthy, which most likely appealed to the public. However, as most know today, in the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion, “The I.N.C. has been without question the single most important source of intelligence about Saddam Hussein” (Shafer). This supports the argument that the elite filters information in order to only keep what is in their own interest. This selective use of intelligence also demonstrates that propaganda does not necessarily rely on blatant lies. Instead, as asserted *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitude*, Jacque Ellul explained that propaganda “must be based on some truth that can be said in few words and is able to linger in the collective consciousness.” (Ellul). In the case of George W. Bush's administration, the rhetoric was that of terrorism and WMDs, the government based most of their arguments on aluminum tubes, saying that their only use could be to make nuclear weapons, and at a rapid pace. Although, aluminum tubes had in fact been acquired by Iraq, contrarily to the claims that Iraq could have prepared WMDs in less than a year, it would have taken more than six years to make, which contradicts the idea that a threat was imminent (Prados). It was later proven that Iraq was not in possession of WMDs, and that the US had made a grave mistake in invading the country.

At the roots of this intelligence failure, there was the CIA and the NIE whose roles were major in claiming that Iraq had the capacity to strike the US at any given time. According to Hammond (*The Lies That Led to the Iraq War and the Myth of "Intelligence Failure"*), the problem lied in the fact that, although intelligence agencies expressed their suspicions about the possible making of nuclear weapons, the administration still decided to deliberately build their rhetoric around it, stating confidently that they had solid proof of Iraq's production of WMDs.

The priority of major media outlets was - and still is - to make profit, and the priority of the government was to sell the war. We can declare that both mainstream media and the

government were complicit in the disinformation campaign, each for their own interests. This raises questions about the media's participation in amplifying faulty intelligence, but also on their responsibility in shaping public opinion. More than simply relaying information, the media exploited the prevailing fear and sense of urgency that helped the government to justify the war, as Kellner described it, media therefore "became weapons of mass hysteria" (7).

III. Mainstream Media: Manufacturing a War

a. Embedded Journalism

In 2002, at the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Department of Defense announced a new way of reporting on the war in Iraq, which consisted in a more immersive approach of media coverage. At the beginning of the war, more than seven hundred (Margotin) American journalists were sent to live and travel alongside military units with the goal of reporting first-hand the unfolding events of the conflict. This way of reporting was presented as a means to provide raw and unfiltered information to the public with efficiency and rapidity despite the difficult conditions under which the reporters had to work. However, as discussed previously through the lens of the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky), one of the aspects of mainstream media is its lack of neutrality as it mostly works in favor of the elite that filters information given to the press, and ultimately, to the public. To illustrate this theory, Rampton and Stauber in *Weapons of Mass Deception* inform us that "the Pentagon stated that 'media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception'", this helps us understand the way information was framed for the public. Moreover, this is especially true during wartime when mainstream media becomes the main source of information: "under conditions of social change or conflict ... people tend to be more

dependent than ever upon mass media for information' (Moy *et al.*, 1994: 7).” (Margotin 31) As a result, the media can be said to amplify claims that are both provided and filtered by powerful structures. The government’s continued disinformation campaign was successful; Robert Jensen wrote in *The Progressive* that prior to Collin Powell’s determining speech to the UN in February 2003, there had been no debate on main news, and that this led to “pro-war opinions dominated--by a 3-to-1 ratio from December 1 through February 21” (Jensen). This imbalance reflects the administration’s success in framing the war as a legitimate response to a threat, but it also reflects the media’s compliance in adopting pro-war narratives without further investigation. For that reason, in the case of the 2003 Iraq War, embedded journalism cannot be assumed to have provided authentic narratives, instead, for the majority it delivered a unilateral way of reporting with the risk of reinforcing accounts shaped by the government’s established narratives: “the information embedded reporters were presented with during the Iraq War was more supportive of US government designed issue narrative of war” (Margotin 12).

The New York Times with Judith Miller at its head is a prime example of embedded reporting which lacked objectivity. In a 2003 article from *The Washington Post* (Kurtz et al.), it is stated that Miller was assigned to report alongside the unit “Met Alpha”. The main mission of the unit was to locate possible nuclear weapons in Iraq. However, according to military officers, she forcefully conducted many operations and would sometimes influence the unit’s movements towards sites she believed could have hidden WMDs. To do so, Miller used her close ties with the INC (Iraqi National Congress) leader Ahmed Chalabi, and, according to multiple military officers, she “acted as a middleman between the Army unit with which she was embedded and Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi”. This highlights an important aspect of the

relationship between the mainstream media and the government, in this instance, we are confronted with the media's willingness to adopt and amplify pro-war narratives.

Furthermore, as most people are now aware of, Chalabi is a controversial figure of the 2003 Iraq War as he notably provided unverified and therefore faulty intelligence on WMDs which raised major concerns on the government's intentions and reliability when it came to providing legitimate information. Aside from the military officers' accounts of Judith Miller's biases when reporting during the war, the sole fact of her close relationship with Ahmed Chalabi can lead anyone to the conclusion that their association most likely compromised the neutrality needed in reporting. Ahmed Chalabi's narrative on WMDs, which was shared with the administration's rhetoric for a regime change in Iraq, only heightens the theory that mainstream media, especially during the context of the George W. Bush Iraq War, does in fact work in favor of the elite's interests.

But Judith Miller was not the only journalist whose accounts of the war raised questions. Embedded journalism most often proved to be biased for many reasons, one being that the government did filter access to sensitive information. To understand how embedded journalism worked, we must note that before assigning reporters to military units, the Pentagon provided them with a guideline of the way to proceed once embedded, with rules concerning content restrictions, or even communication (“Ground Rules Outline Dos and Don'ts for Embeds”). In many ways, although we could not directly state that the reporters faced overt censorship, those rules were often perceived as limiting in terms of the quality of reporting. For instance, their movements were controlled because they had to follow their units, but they also had to sign contracts with the military on subjects they could or could not tackle. Moreover, the Pentagon's guidelines also explicitly stated that “all interviews with service members will be on the

record”, all these constraints likely affected the journalists’ abilities to report freely even the most sensitive and deceiving information, but also information that would not have aligned with the government’s rhetoric. The press’ ability to independently report critical events can only lead us to question the trustworthiness of their reports. Margotin effectively captured all the devices that were at stake, arguing:

Consequently, by definition: (1) as they are part of a military unit and remain with this unit until they do not, embedded journalists rely on the military – and by extension the government for access to information; (2) the information embedded journalists are exposed to and may share with domestic audiences is relatively influenced by the military itself – and by extension the government (32).

In addition to the idea that this type of reporting still filtered information to fit the government’s interests, we can imagine that, as these journalists followed the military units they were assigned to, and as Al Jazeera argued in an article, it likely resulted in one-sided reporting whether it was intentional or not.

Another concern that’s aligned with embedded journalism is that journalists rely on the army they are embedded with ... this creates a personal connection between journalists and soldiers and can lead to either a conscious or unconscious imbalance in reporting”(*Embedded Journalism*).

This question of bias was raised by Lindner who demonstrated that reporters “tend to sympathize with the soldiers they cover and adopt a more supportive tone when describing the mission in Iraq.”(Lindner 6). This emotional closeness once again aligns with Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model. In this case with embedded journalism, it demonstrates the idea of the invisible force that indirectly influences the

way reporters frame reality. One of the ways in which this invisible force operates in the press is through fear of losing future reporting opportunities or even being blacklisted if they are perceived as being too critical of the government and its decisions. Once again, when taking into accounts the post 9/11 climate of the US, we can imagine that going opposite directions from the government at a time when patriotism was so important could have resulted in a lot of backlashes. In a 2003 interview, CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour who had been embedded with the military during the conflict openly admitted that reporting was neglected during the war, and that the reason according to her was that there was “a climate of fear and self-censorship”(Plunkett) In the exchange, she also mentioned the rigidity of the rules that the Pentagon had imposed upon them. What is interesting in the interview is that she stated that the lack of proper reporting was not the result of being prohibited to do so, but rather “a question of being rigorous”, particularly concerning the claim of WMDs which was later proven to be fabricated intelligence. Amanpour’s testimony exemplifies Herman and Chomsky’s theory on how propaganda is carried by mainstream media using official sources to shape public opinion, but also how this invisible force discourages critical reporting which ultimately leads to unilateral communication. This reporting, which was constrained by both political and on-site structures, shaped the narratives of the war towards promoting the conflict, making it appear legitimate and wise.

The climate of fear which intimidated certain reporters influenced both the tone of articles, but also the kind of journalism that was mostly prevalent, that is to say, embedded journalism. Lindner stated that during the war, there were both embedded and unilateral (meaning independent) reporters, but narratives carried out by embedded reporters were the most important in the US mainstream media. For that reason, the nature of the coverage was also highly different from other ways of reporting the

conflict. Because of the conditions under which these journalists had to work, their relationship with their military unit strengthened, which influenced even more the coverage of the war. In a graph presenting news coverage of the soldier's experience versus Iraqi civilian's experience, we can clearly see that embedded reporters relied mostly on American soldiers for information (Lindner 7). As a result, there was an unbalanced way of reporting that highlighted military success, and US soldiers' perspectives over experiences of Iraqi citizens (Lindner). This one-sided approach to journalistic coverage most likely emphasized American heroism and success rather than questioning the legitimacy of the war which relied on the existence of WMDs, as Amanpour claimed: "whoever - did not ask enough questions, for instance, about weapons of mass destruction. I mean, it looks like this was disinformation at the highest levels." (Plunkett). While embedded journalism provided with direct access to information, there was still an overwhelming bias towards narratives carried by the government, and by extension, to the press. Reporters were dependent on their military unit but were also embedded in a system that prioritized pro-war instead of nuanced narratives.

b. Failure of Skepticism

In the arguments which were pushed by the government and then led to the 2003 Iraq War, there were many contradictions and inconsistencies. Except from the most perplexing association between Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda, there was notably the fact that after the US military had started operations in Iraq, they surprisingly did nothing to protect nuclear and sensitive sites which were vandalized although the government had previously justified the invasion through the narrative of WMDs in Iraq, but also by saying there was a risk that members of the terrorist group Al Qaeda could have access to those sites (Mermin, "The Media's Independence Problem").

Despite those many inconsistencies within the government's narratives, a failure of skepticism on behalf of the media was still carried out. The failure of mainstream media in covering the lead-up to the war illustrates the media's reliance on government sources, highlighting media bias as one of the core mechanisms of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model. This resulted in uncritical reporting which was later even acknowledged by the press. For example, in 2004, a year after military operations in Iraq had started, *The New York Times* issued an article titled "From the Editors: The Times and Iraq" (May 26, 2004) in which they expressed their failure at accurately covering the war. More specifically, the editors mentioned how they were wrong concerning the reasons that led up to the war, that is to say, the government's rhetoric of alleged nuclear weapons which the Iraqi regime was accused of making. In the article, the editors admitted that information concerning WMDs was never verified, and they also described this flawed reporting by explaining that "In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged." (Cozens). This public acknowledgement was major since it revealed to the public how respected and traditional media outlets can fail to report critically, which, in this case, emphasizes the media's role in echoing the government's narratives, acting as a vehicle for disinformation.

This failure of criticism on behalf of the US media during the conflict is to be questioned, especially since it stands in contrast to the First Amendment (*U.S. Constitution - First Amendment | Resources | Constitution Annotated | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress*) which protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press as a foundation of American democracy. This means that the role of the press is to independently inform the public with verified information, however, in the case of the 2003 Iraq War, it became apparent that mainstream media primarily relied on official

government sources, which later proved to be mostly fabricated in order to advance specific political goals, notoriously with INC leader Ahmed Chalabi. Furthermore, as demonstrated previously, at the beginning of the conflict, reporters who had been affiliated with military units were not entirely free of pursuing stories independently, instead, they were under military oversight, but they were also under external pressures which greatly limited their coverage. Given this information, we can no longer assume that during the war the press was independent, which, according to Mermin, means that “American journalism has deviated from the First Amendment ideal of a press that is independent of the government” (Mermin 67). This closeness between the government and the media once again raises questions and worries about press independence, since as explained by Mermin, thanks to the First Amendment, journalists should have practiced the right to question and criticize the government’s policies, but then, why not do so? A complex interplay between the context of a post September 11 US which could have resulted in social pressure, but also economic interests may help make clearer the reasons behind this failure of skepticism, and therefore, help understand the reasons as to why lines were so blurred between government and mainstream media during this period. Nonetheless, although mistakes can often happen, the role of the press remains to be impartial and unbiased: “Given the fast nature of war, we should expect some inaccurate information, but we should also expect reporters to be skeptical.” (Jensen).

While mainstream media outlets echoed the government’s narratives to legitimize the war, dissenting voices in contrast to embedded journalists did exist, and their accounts of the war were different in the way that it was more nuanced than stories of those who had to work alongside US military units, which deeply limited the information they could then provide to the public. Independent reporters had the autonomy necessary to explore and investigate subjects of their own choice. Moreover,

because they were not assigned to a military unit which they would have to follow, they could instead move freely and therefore have access to information that was not necessarily related to the US military (Margotin). According to Lindner, this freedom they were able to exercise resulted in a more nuanced representation of the conflict, as it “produced the greatest balance between depicting the military and the Iraqi experience of the war.” (8). The issue with independent reporting is that their narratives were underrepresented in TV broadcasts since, according to a study, in late January and February, “anti-war sources accounted for less than one percent” (Jensen). To gain a better understanding of mainstream media’s dominance, one must consider its link to its commercial imperatives. The goal of major news outlets is first and foremost to get the audience’s attention, and to do so, they often resort to sensational headlines and simplified narratives rather than adopting a nuanced and critical stance on the matter, especially at times of major crises such as post September 11 attacks, and the war that ensued. That is why one of the many reasons we may imagine behind such a lack of support for independent reporting once again lies in the context during which the conflict started. The terrorist attacks of September 11 were a driving force for the government’s rhetoric of fear on American citizens. And as said previously in this paper, at times of conflict, people, and the media, tend to be more patriotic, sometimes at the expense of objectivity. Although independent reporters did not have exclusive access to war development, they still challenged the assumption that they didn’t have access to frontline information on American soldiers, “In fact, independent reporters covered the ‘hard facts’ of the war (like combat and military movement) nearly as frequently as embedded reporters” (Lindner 7). Despite this more critical and thorough reporting on the conflict due to the fact that they retained greater control over what they wished to cover, they still lacked institutional support, meaning they received limited coverage. In

contrast, mainstream media, which relied mostly on a narrow range of official government sources could have appeared as more reliable and factual due to their institutional legitimacy, whereas independent media, or “Anti-elite sources, on the other hand, are regarded with utmost suspicion.” (Joseph).

What is reported or not can also rely on the notion of worthy and unworthy victims which was outlined by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* where they argued that the media will prioritize certain lives over others. As Joseph noted in *Mediating War and Peace*, when reporting casualties, there is this notion of worthy and unworthy victims that is at stake: “worthy victims will be reported prominently and dramatically... In contrast, unworthy victims will only get minor coverage with minimal humanization” (233). This statement implies that, depending on whether victims align with the government’s interests or not, their sufferings will either be largely exploited, or more often ignored. This implies that for the case of the 2003 Iraq War, there would likely exist a large range of articles, documentaries and even movies about American soldiers who suffered during the war, but few on Iraqi casualties. This imbalance in reporting is not simply a matter of editorial oversight, instead, it translates how the government’s shaped public opinion to the extent of dehumanizing the “enemy”.

According to Gershkoff and Kushner, one of the justifications for such strong support in favor of the war was the wish to “punish Muslims for 9/11”. Moreover, as observed by Gershkoff and Kushner, many political speeches referred to Iraq as a terror state, often using the term terrorism in order to draw a direct association between Al Qaeda and Iraq. This binary logic of good versus evil animated most political speeches and soon mirrored mainstream media coverage of the war. Interestingly, as it was highlighted in *Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying* (Kellner), in his first statement to the public after the terrorist attack of September 11, the President George W. Bush used

the word “evil” five times, almost as if he was laying groundwork by framing the US response as morally right. After the invasion had started, US defense secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld intensified this rhetoric by comparing Saddam Hussein to notorious dictators: “Saddam Hussein is now taking his rightful place alongside Hitler, Stalin, Lenin” (Rampton and Stauber). The language used to depict Iraq as a threat was not neutral, instead, it created a simple version of the events, with Iraq as an enemy that had to be dealt with. Following the events, media outlets echoed the same deceiving and aggressive terms, triggering the public’s fear with sensational headlines such as “‘War on America’, ‘Attack on America’, ‘America under Attack’, and circulated discourses that assumed that the United States was at war” (Kellner 625). Even after military actions had started in Iraq, this way of reporting which favored government’s narratives discouraged and overshadowed dissenting voices which ultimately led to a strong public support.

Once a narrative is embedded, it becomes very difficult to undo, “the initial lie usually travels further and with more effect on the public memory than subsequent corrections” (Jensen). The government’s early claims of nuclear weapons in Iraq had kept escalating until it became a certainty in most people’s mind, which could explain such large support for military actions. These claims created a dominant narrative which stemmed from the administration, and then echoed across major media outlets, reinforcing themselves through repetitions.

c. Media Polarization and Dissenting Voices

The carefully crafted strategy of legitimization for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 had been repeated by notorious figures of the government and major media outlets which propagated misinformation through selective sourcing and emotional appeal in their rhetoric. We may theorize that this strategy of repetitions created an echo chamber,

meaning that, here with the 2003 Iraq war, similar narratives concerning Iraq's ties to terrorism, and nuclear weapons silenced dissenting viewpoints and reinforced their own discourse, which resulted in a unilateral way of understanding this conflict, with Iraq viewed by the mass as an antagonist. President George W. Bush's statement "Either with us or you are with the terrorists" (*President Declares "Freedom at War with Fear"*) following the 9/11 attacks encapsulates this binary aspect of the war, but it also demonstrates that from this point on, space for critical journalism was narrowed. This discourse charged with ethical values could have likely discouraged both media outlets, and the public to then critically question such dominant narratives.

As previously discussed, reporting before and during the war was proven to be flawed, *The New York Times* (Cozens) notably issued a public acknowledgment for its failure to efficiently convey information concerning weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Adding to the list of inconsistencies in the lead up to the invasion, the suspicions of Iraq in possession of nuclear weapons ended up being completely shut down by the Iraq Survey Group in 2004 when they submitted a report in which they proved that, through thorough investigation, they found no active WMD program. A CBS News (*Final Report*) article went over the report and explained that the ISC did assert that Iraq's capability to produce WMDs had deteriorated due to the many inspections and sanctions, and that Saddam Hussein had terminated Iraq's nuclear program in 1998 after inspectors had left. The issue was that there was a clear disinformation on behalf of the government as "the Bush administration did not argue that Iraq was on the verge of pursuing illegal weapons. Officials insisted he already had them." (CBS News). However, the damage had already been done, the Shock and Awe campaign in Iraq marked a long period of sufferings and insecurities for Iraqi citizens. In her article *Shock and Awe: Life in Iraq 20 years after the U.S-Led invasion* (DC), Asi

challenges the early celebratory media coverage of the invasion, stating that it has now changed as the war is nowadays mostly considered as destructive and pointless: “By 2019, 62 percent of American adults, including a majority of Iraq War veterans, felt that it had not been worth fighting after all.”. Corrections concerning nuclear weapons in Iraq were largely ignored by media outlets, and the public’s memory remained shaped by the original and sensational claims about Iraq’s nuclear weapons that dominated the media: “A poll released in 2004 revealed that 20 percent of Americans still believe that Iraq is responsible for 9/11” (Gershkoff and Kushner). When corrections were added, or when dissenting voices emerged, their coverage of the war remained limited and failed to undo the impact of such widespread misinformation. As we could see, this highlights a critical flaw in reporting; independent journalism which often provided a nuanced and critical account of events still lacked visibility and institutional help to rival mainstream media narratives. More than lacking visibility, we may argue that dissenting media outlets were also largely overshadowed by dominant mainstream and government narratives, resulting in an echo chamber which amplified this pro-war rhetoric.

To illustrate this, we may go back to the strategy used by the administration months after the September 11 attacks. Notably, in February 2002, when the Bush administration launched a coordinated media tactic during which notorious architects of the 2003 Iraq War, such as Cheney, Rice, and Rumsfeld all appeared across major television networks and talk shows to spread the misinformation concerning aluminums tubes being used to make WMDs in Iraq. This repetition of identical narratives in such a short period of time, especially coming from the government itself and then spreading through mainstream media, most likely created an echo chamber effect. Moreover, at the beginning of the invasion, real-time and immediate coverage of the war could have strongly influenced public opinion in viewing the war as indeed right. In *Clarifying the*

CNN Effect (Livingston), Steven Livingston discussed the cost of immediacy that media outlets allowed during the Iraq War, and he described this phenomenon of real time, 24 hours coverage of events by saying that “one of the potential effects of global, real-time media is the shortening of response time for decision making” (Livingstone 4). In other words, the continued flow of information, especially patriotic and pro-war, created an atmosphere which limited dissent. This gave rise to a form of never-ending cycle where media echoed the government’s narrative of the war, narrative that was reinforced by public support which was also shaped by both the government and mainstream media. As explained by Rampton and Stauber in *Weapons of Mass Deception*, even at the beginning of the invasion, there was an abundance of pro-war narratives which aimed at showing to the American public that soldiers were greeted as liberators to Iraqi people. Videos and photographs of the toppling of Saddam Husein’s statue were “continually replayed on cable news throughout the day, and newspapers carried front-page color photos.” (Rampton and Stauber). We may argue that this repetition functioned as a spectacle which most likely caught everyone’s attention given the gravity of the situation, but it also served as a strategic tool that reinforced the idea that this war was both morally right but also welcomed even by Iraqi people themselves. However, in their book, Rampton and Stauber, explain that this was a visual strategy that did not include the whole truth of events:

A BBC photo sequence of the statue’s toppling also showed a sparse crowd of approximately 200 people – much smaller than the demonstrations only nine days later, when thousands of Iraqis took the streets of Baghdad, calling for U.S.-led forces to leave the city.

This statement contrasts strongly with mainstream media which decided to select information that aligned with the government’s narratives of US as morally right, and as

liberators while minimalizing information that would suggest Iraqi dissent. This disconnection between lived experiences of Iraqi citizens and images relayed by US media only heightens the effective role of repeating a narrative so much so that, in the case of the war, became a reality which obscured the truth of the conflict.

Another factor that could have reinforced the echo chamber effect during the invasion was the limited visibility of events in Iraq that the American public were provided with at the beginning of the war. As we discussed previously, embedded journalism proved to be mostly biased towards government narratives, and it also mostly portrayed experiences of the US military instead of Iraqi citizens. Although dissenting voices did exist, they received limited coverage which could have been explained by many factors such as the national tension and climate of fear following 9/11, making criticism of the government's decisions more socially fraught. That is why this limited visibility of the actual consequences of the war may have created a distance between the violence of a war, and the human cost it creates. Rampton and Stauber highlighted this idea by explaining that "since much of modern warfare involves the use of air power or long-range artillery, the journalists embedded with troops witnessed weapons being fired but rarely saw what happened at the receiving end." By focusing predominantly on sensational military operations, and on the perspectives of US troops as it was highlighted by Lindner, mainstream coverage of the first military actions in Iraq overlooked Iraqi casualties and the sufferings of civilians, which may have contributed to a lack of emotional engagement. The absence of dissenting voices reduced the costs of the war and centered its narrative around the American action which had been portrayed as necessary, rather than also acknowledging that it resulted in a humanitarian crisis (DC). All these elements at play when it comes to the failure of skepticism which led to the echo chamber effect have to do with the phenomenon of

“groupthink”, a term first coined by Irving L. Janis, which refers to a situation in which a group is very united to the point that, instead than thinking critically, the group will rather try not to disrupt harmony. After 9/11, there was likely a need for cohesion, which led to the uncritical acceptance of the government’s argument of nuclear weapons in Iraq, this atmosphere created the ideal condition of the groupthink phenomenon to take place. The concept of “overthink” was used by Dina Badie in *Groupthink, Iraq and the War on Terror* (2010) to provide insight into how the administration’s extended its narrative towards media outlets, marginalizing dissenting voices, and ultimately, creating an echo chamber effect. In her paper, Badie highlighted the idea that in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, groupthink occurred especially after the September 11 attacks as a “pressure toward conformity” (Badie 284). In the context of this invasion, groupthink worked in such a way that dissenting voices were marginalized and narratives which aligned with the government’s pro-war rhetoric were amplified. Instead, talking points of WMDs, terrorism, and Al Qaeda were reinforced across both political speeches, and then media headlines, which limited public understanding of the conflict.

For these reasons, we may say that the media functions as an important mechanism of this echo chamber effect since it reinforced pro-war narratives while suppressing alternative views that would have nuanced this simplistic and binary framing of the invasion. This viewpoint on the war, and its legitimacy, was promoted by officials and then echoed by mainstream media in their coverage of the conflict. The echo chamber effect was a result of many factors, notoriously the 9/11 terrorist attacks which created national trauma, and the psychological mechanisms of the groupthink that ensued. As theorized by Herman and Chomsky, mainstream media did function in favor of the elite by uncritically promoting the government’s misinformation, however, we must also

examine and question the public's agency in supporting or challenging dominant narratives surrounding the war.

IV. Audiences and Accountability

a. The Role of National Trauma

While earlier sections consisted in examining the way patriotism and fear rhetoric were tools instrumentalized by both political and mainstream media institutions, we shall now analyze how such discourses resonated in the public's mind. The psychological impact of the September 11 terrorist attacks must be considered in order to understand the public's broad acceptance of the Iraq War rhetoric. Previously, we could understand how the US government, with the help of mainstream media, was able to shape public opinion by constructing a simplified binary narrative of good versus evil based on the government's misinformation concerning nuclear weapons. The administration's rhetoric of nuclear weapons and Iraq's ties to terrorism was grounded in fear and insecurity in the aftermath of 9/11, which ultimately led to the need of national unity and major support of the government's decisions. In the face of such traumatic events, we must consider that patriotism became essential and turned into a sense of security, but it also created an environment which promoted a collective mindset and discouraged skepticism of established narratives.

With a one-sided narrative and narrow coverage of the war, the mainstream media shaped public opinion towards believing that the war was both an urgent and legitimate solution to the alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction. The construction of the government's rhetoric was emphasized through the use of repetitions, but it was also embedded with the emotional aftermath of the terrorist attacks prior to the invasion. During periods of intense fear such as after 9/11, the general public tend to "rally

around the flag”(Gershkoff and Kushner 528), meaning that even individuals who strongly value democratic ideals are prone to accept the authority of a leader without necessarily questioning the legitimacy of the claims, such as nuclear weapons and terrorism. Within the government, there was a “pressure toward conformity” (Badie 284) after 9/11, and although this statement refers to the Bush administration, this pressure extended to the media, and ultimately to the public. For that reason, the effect of mass media on public opinion can be qualified as an echo chamber, or a feedback loop, especially in times of crises. According to Gadarian, “People who feel threatened by terrorism might watch more TV news to cope with their anxiety about terrorism, but that information might increase threat perception, leading to more TV news watching, in a mutually reinforcing cycle”(Gadarian 472). This quote illustrates the idea that when people feel threatened, they might turn to the news in search for explanation and reassurance. However, as we know, during the lead-up to the war, the media was unreliable, and it promoted pro-war rhetoric without critical scrutiny, as it provided information coming from official sources, making it more difficult for the public to question. Moreover, there was a strategy of repetition on behalf of the media which had an important role in reinforcing the feeling of anxiety after the terrorist attacks. This strategy by the media was likely motivated by financial gains and was provided through sensational headlines, but the effect it had, whether voluntary or not, was that it only enhanced the feeling of insecurity in people’s minds. In *Weapons of Mass Deception*, there is a description of how symbolic images such as Saddam Hussein’s statue being toppled, played a strategic role in making the war seem morally right (Rampton and Stauber). The graphic portrayal of 9/11 images across television networks also shaped the emotional atmosphere towards a national psychological unease, in fact, it was also the most televised event in the past half century: “indeed, a survey conducted in 2012 found 9/11

to be the most impactful event to be experienced by television viewers over the past 50 years” (Silver et al. 162). The findings of Silver et al. reveal that visual media was a vehicle for trauma, and that it also had a great effect on people’s psychological well-being, demonstrating that the widespread images of the attacks heightened the level of stress and anxiety. Later, the volume of war-related information in media exposure during the early stages of the war also played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards the invasion. As Silver et al. proved in their report, there was an intense war coverage which created an environment where the public was not simply informed, but was also emotionally conditioned by this atmosphere since the terrorist attacks (162). What is interesting is that the government seemed to have deliberately capitalized on this national anxiety in order to push their narrative of Iraq as a threat to the US. For instance, a year after the attacks, the President Bush spoke at the United Nations and “without mentioning Al Qaeda, Bush then cut straight to Iraq” (Prados 26). We may hypothesize that this subtle tactic to evoke terrorism on the anniversary of the attacks was a deliberate attempt to tap into the unresolved fear that was still present. Herman and Chomsky also highlighted this systemic reinforcement of established narratives as a strategy that promotes the elite’s interests, which once again shows that fear rhetoric was likely part of a broader strategy to legitimize the invasion, a strategy that was used by the government knowing that it would prove efficient on the public.

In *Fear, Rhetoric and the “Other”* (Royal, “Fear, Rhetoric, and the ““Other””), we understand that more than just a shock, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked the collapse of America’s illusion of invincibility. It exposed the country to the realization that indeed, they were not immune to outside attacks as “the chaos and danger that had been an ocean away were now all around us—it was here and no longer just over there” (406). The rupture of this image that American people had created of their country

created a psychological need to act quickly, and perhaps this is what led to an idea of vengeance, which was heightened by the government's narratives concerning the necessity to act against the enemy. This binary notion of enemy, of good versus evil must be studied in the broader context of the US stereotypes against Arabs and Muslims. As mentioned previously in this paper, the word "enemy" became a rhetoric tool often used in the president's rhetoric (*President Declares "Freedom at War with Fear"*), but without explicitly identifying who he was referring to, it was clear that the link between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime became blurred. This speech delivered a few days after the attacks was a pivotal moment in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and as Royal pointed out in the way fear works on public thinking "in times of heightened fear and anxiety, stereotypes are acerbated" (408). It is especially in this atmosphere of fear and anxiety that the Bush administration's framing of the terrorist attacks created a dichotomy and shaped the enemy not as a terrorist group, but more like an abstract entity that could be everywhere, including in Iraq. According to studies on Arabs and Muslim stereotypes, "those with a negative overall view of Muslims should be more likely to support the War on Terror" (Sides and Gross). For that reason, we may argue that the War on Terror goes beyond political necessities, and is deeply rooted in assumptions which also contributed to diminishing dissenting voices and Iraqi sufferings at the beginning of US operations in Iraq.

This phenomenon is tied to the notion of "worthy and unworthy victims" (Herman and Chomsky), where the value assigned to a human life is shaped by political interests. In the context of the invasion, this phenomenon created a moral hierarchy in public perception of the war, which was viewed as morally right and legitimate, with at its core, the idea of fighting for a noble cause: terrorism. At the beginning of the invasion, this concept operated in such a way that mass media presented a one-sided narrative in

news outlets, promoting US victory against civilian deaths (Lindner). According to Royal, this dehumanization process underpinned the public's acceptance of the War on Terror which was built upon a long cultural representation of Arabs and Muslims in American media. Because of these oversimplified narratives, discourses lacked complexity and made it "impossible for people to hear and understand the nuance" (Royal, "Fear, Rhetoric, and the "Other"" 408). In *Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror*, a survey showed that in general, most Americans associated Muslims to violence as "forty-five percent of respondents placed Muslim-Americans on the 'violent' side of the spectrum, and 51% placed Muslims on this side of the scale.", meaning 51% of people believed that Muslims as a whole were dangerous (Sides and Gross). This study also revealed that those perceptions of Muslims amplified the government and the media's rhetoric which contributed for a high support of the government's decisions. Because of this interplay between stereotypical representations and narratives concerning terrorism, the response to the alleged threat coming from Iraq in the form of the 2003 Iraq War was made easier for the government to gain an important amount of public support (Gershkoff and Kushner).

Following the 9/11 attacks "millions of Americans turned on televisions in their homes... it focused on threatening, emotionally laden images of terror" (Gadarian 481), this relentless focus on fear, as well as the repetitions of established narratives concerning WMDs and terrorism only heightened public anxiety, which helped create the psychological conditions for widespread legitimization of the Iraq War two years later. These emotions which were amplified by the media and the government's messaging concerning terrorism and its blurred line with Iraq, created an atmosphere in which critical thinking was overshadowed by the need for security and retribution. The way the George W. Bush administration framed the conflict in binary terms of good

versus evil was a way to exploit psychological vulnerability in order to advance specific political goals. This framing which proved efficient considering the amount of public support for the war (Gershkoff and Kushner), exemplifies a form of state-sponsored propaganda on which mainstream media echoed the established narratives. This is especially true when considering that the interests of the US, did not completely rest on the idea of fighting against an imminent danger, but was instead motivated by strategic political goals, such as control over oil resources as we know that for instance, “a document listing foreign oil projects in the country, implying some US interest in Iraqi oil” (Prados 9).

Trauma in the wake of 9/11 was exploited by both the government and mainstream media to shape public opinion, and this proved to be efficient as most American people supported the invasion as a morally right action. Yet, this alone does not fully explain the major failure of skepticism on behalf of the population. To address why the American public widely supported and embraced the war narrative, we must turn to Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, and whether it can be applied to the post 9/11 context and the lead-up to the war.

b. Propaganda and the Illusion of Choice

We were able to examine that, in the aftermath of 9/11, the US media landscape became a vehicle for the government’s disinformation campaign concerning Iraq, terrorism, and nuclear weapons. This failure of criticism on behalf of mainstream media mostly comes from its reliance on official government sources, which proved to be either manipulated or fabricated. The profound sense of vulnerability felt after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the continued rhetoric of fear that followed significantly contributed to the “rally-around the flag effect” (Gershkoff and Kushner). However, beyond media failures at conveying critical reporting, and although it played a major

role of influencing public opinion, it is crucial to interrogate the role of propaganda in shaping the public's perception of the war.

That is why, when dealing with the 2003 Iraq War, we may talk of propaganda as it “may be thought of as persuasion used for political purposes” (Wood 383), and as we could observe, the administration's rhetoric of fear was exploited to gain public consent, making the use of the word “propaganda” all the more legitimate. This notion also aligns with Rampton and Stauber's ideas who, in *Weapons of Mass Destruction* provided a definition of persuasion, within which propaganda occurs when the propagandist does not care for the wellbeing of his audience and instead functions according to his own agenda. This understanding of propaganda as a one-sided communication that disregards neutrality in favor of the propagandist's agenda lays the groundwork for a broader understanding of propaganda, and the way it operated in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War. The different strategies of propaganda used by the government shaped public perception of the war, and neutralized dissenting voices. For that reason, in order to better understand how propaganda justified the war, we must examine theoretical approaches. In their book, Rampton and Stauber also provided a definition of propaganda which asserts that “what mass media, public relations, advertising and terrorism all have in common is a one-sided approach to communications that can best be thought of as a ‘propaganda model’”. If this definition of propaganda is not only about deception, but also in the first place about manipulation through structural channels such as mass media, Marlin's definition of propaganda becomes highly relevant. According to him, the 2003 Iraq War was mainly based on the manipulation of fear through narratives of WMDs and terrorism “all you have to do is tell them you are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger” (Marlin). The effectiveness of this strategy relied on its

simplicity, and as it was theorized in *Weapons of Mass Deception*, propaganda can be based on emotional symbolisms to be efficient because “it frequently seeks to bypass the rational brain altogether and manipulate us on a more primitive level” (Rampton and Stauber). Through the use of fear rhetoric, political goals were reduced to binaries of good versus evil, and of ally versus enemy, as the president stated himself “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorist” (*President Declares “Freedom at War with Fear”*). This simplistic aspect of the rhetoric used by the government and then relayed by mass media made stronger the trust that the American public had already put on the president after the terrorist attacks.

Although Marlin interestingly highlights the public’s responsibility, by suggesting that resisting propaganda must be an active engagement “the price of freedom, it has been well said, is eternal vigilance”, Jacques Ellul in contrast offers a perspective that deepens this understanding of the government’s capitalization of the post 9/11 climate of anxiety. Ellul argued that contrary to what people might imagine, propaganda can and often relies on facts that are then distorted or exaggerated, which makes it more difficult to oppose. This is also linked to his idea that propaganda works through the use of cryptic meaning and a lack of coherence, which would make it harder for the average person to decode “the fact is presented in such a fashion that the listener or reader cannot really understand it or draw any conclusion from it” (Ellul). In the case of the 2003 Iraq War, the administration relied on facts of aluminum tubes as supposed evidence of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program. And although Iraq did acquire those aluminum tubes, contrary to the government’s assertion that Iraq would then be able to fabricate WMDs in less than a year, the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) asserted that this time frame given by the administration was wrong, as it was instead considered to be possible only “far in the future” (Prados 77). Still, the rhetoric of Iraq as a threat to

national security prevailed, and the government never provided the full technical context which is a claim that those experts within the intelligence community themselves disputed. Therefore, the use of real, but distorted information, as argued by Jacques Ellul was used to generate more fear and confusion. Ellul also stressed the idea that propaganda saturates the emotional environment, which makes alternative viewpoints appear as not only wrong, but also dangerous.

This is when structural forces operate in order to shape ideas in a way that aligns with elite interests. In the post 9/11 context, this structural force took the form of coordinated messaging campaign by powerful members of the George W. Bush administration. During this campaign there was a repetition of the same narratives concerning nuclear weapons and terrorism which were constantly asserted and echoed across mainstream media (Livingston). Interestingly, without directly pointing at Iraq, a parallel between Saddam Hussein's regime and terrorism was made. This deliberate ambiguity that ran across many of the president's speeches served as a strategic function which prevented the audience from drawing independent conclusions. This is a messaging which relied on repeated blurry associations, and this mechanism echoed in cognitive research, which demonstrated that "when approached with new information, our brains take shortcuts – often subconsciously – to begin determining what someone is saying" (Royal, "Fear, Rhetoric, and the "Other"" 407). Royal also considered the whole sociocultural context of the US, taking into consideration the fact that stereotypes against Arabs and Muslims likely played an important role in the support for the War on Terror as it exacerbated the idea of a binary world in which the enemy must be dealt with. But within this idea, we may also argue that the government took advantage of the way familiar analogies when portraying Iraq as an enemy state, worked in favor of the war rhetoric. As we could observe in this paper, the administration often indirectly

referred to Iraq as an “enemy” (Gershkoff and Kushner), and according to Royal, this is an analogy which makes the public’s interpretation of a threat more personal. Moreover, this analogy was framed within a discourse of moral justice, which makes clear that the only appropriate response to threat is to stand up as “it is a scenario in which your opponent does not follow rules and you, in fact, are hurt by following the rules, and where appeasing your enemy is dangerous and only invites more attacks” (Royal, “Fear, Rhetoric, and the “Other”” 409).

While the public resonated with such analogies, the broader structural machinery of propaganda is at the roots of the effectiveness of such narratives. According to Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, mass media works as a mechanism in favor of the elite, when it should instead function as “the people’s ‘watchdog’” (Mermin, “The Media’s Independence Problem” 67). The media’s failure to apply nuance to their report challenges the very foundation of the US democratic system. For instance, in the US, the First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech and therefore of the press. However, as we could observe, the media, which is expected to serve as a critical institution ended up echoing the government’s narratives, notably through the use of official sources (Cozens). This widespread acceptance of the administration’s disinformation, especially the parallel made between Iraq and Al Qaeda, reflects how deeply rooted stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims could have played a major role in the way public opinion was easily shaped by the elite. By simplifying political issues, the media was able to reinforce this binary vision of the world established by the government.

The government manufactured consent to sell the war, but still, this consent was enabled by the American public. We were able to understand that US citizens were under a lot of psychological stress especially after 9/11, and this led to a rise for nationalism which narrowed down critical thinking. Mainstream media played a critical

role in shaping public opinion, and although there was a wide range of news outlets, the ones which circulated the most distorted information and were also the most relied on by the public; a poll stated that when asked about which outlets did people get their news from, most answered CBS or Fox News, which had the highest level of misinformation (Kull et al.). The early 2000s was not devoid of dissenting voices, and through internet, the average person could have easy access to critical perspectives and counter narratives. At a time when dissenting viewpoints were within reach, many still chose to align themselves with the dominant narrative. This means that access to information does not equal critical engagement and questioning of the sources.

Although we could understand the different ways propaganda operated in the lead-up to the war, such as using innuendos (Ellul), or powerful institutions like mainstream media (Herman and Chomsky), the widespread support for the war reveals that disinformation is also shaped by the receiver, often leading to echo chamber effect. Simultaneously, the internet offered a new space for democratic expressions and access to a wider range of information. Yet, support for the invasion was still high (Gershkoff and Kushner), which raises a critical question: does increased access to information through the internet lead to nuanced viewpoints? Or does it replicate patterns of ideological conformity, reinforcing echo chamber effect?

c. Social Media: Hope or Illusion?

Trust is central, especially during times of crises and insecurities. In the lead up to the war, the public's trust in mainstream media played a pivotal role in accepting and legitimizing military operations in Iraq. More than the psychological stress that influenced this trust, the media's reliance on official government sources heightened the public's trust in the information they received, as the said sources were likely positioned as credible. We may for instance remember that *The New York Times* notably used INC

leader Ahmed Chalabi's intelligence as a frequent source of information despite his clear bias towards an invasion. With the importance of the internet as a new source of information, we must consider how digital media structures can influence the public, and whether it allows access to diverse narratives.

Unlike TV programs that use advertisers which are can often be "culturally and politically conservative" (Herman and Chomsky), social media can allow to bypass traditional media outlets and offer opportunities for different voices and counter-narratives.

In newspapers, they target the typical reading audience. On social media, multiple audiences can be targeted at once because there are micro and niche publics. This makes the logic of advertising different on social media than in traditional media (Fuchs).

While we may still argue that social media platforms are not free from economic and sociocultural pressures, they at least allow space for independent news outlets. As Beers defined it, "independent news media as news media not subjected to the most common pressures associated with the dominant, corporate form of ownership" (Beers). In theory, this pluralism can compromise the filter mechanisms identified in Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, particularly the filter of ownership, since in the case of digital media, anyone can contribute to a discussion.

Accordingly, what makes the internet detached from traditional journalism, and instead makes it function as a "gate-opener" for information lies in its interactive aspect where users can share, create, comment in real time, and therefor adopt an active role in shaping the information: "a high level of public participation exists when users can directly change the journalistic content: a situation that does not exist in most

mainstream news sites” (Ginosar and Konovalov). This emergence of what is called “open publishing” (Beers) or “citizen journalism” (Barnes) are alternative models which aim at re-centering public agency. Both concepts, that emerged in the late 90s (Beers) allow independent publishing which enables individuals outside of traditional media outlets to contribute by sharing alternative perspectives and opening discussions, as Barnes best defined it: “people without professional or formal training have an opportunity to... create content that would otherwise not be revealed” (16). This type of reporting is crucial as it diversifies and pluralizes the flow of information that would otherwise be narrowed down according to governmental interests. For that reason, this form of journalism aligns with democratic principles, as opposed to the failure of skepticism on behalf of mainstream media during the lead up, and the beginning of the 2003 Iraq War.

However, while the internet and social media may democratize the audience’s access to diverse information, algorithms still tend to prioritize engagement over clarity and accuracy, which often amplifies polarized rhetoric. This already means that, often, sensational headlines of fear, outrage, and confirmation bias are more likely to be amplified. Fuchs invites us to look at the economic structures that governs digital media through a more critical lens; much like filters, digital platforms also operate under that same logic of a “guided market system” (Herman and Chomsky) as “On social media, users’ digital labor produces a data commodity and is exploited by the platforms for selling targeted ad spaces” (Fuchs 77). For that reason, information found on the internet and social media might in fact replicate or even intensify certain narratives the same way that mainstream media does. Therefore, while digital media facilitates a diverse range of information, its impact still relies on the audience’s capacity to engage with it. Digital media also has its limits, and for instance, “not everyone can afford to

make full use of the resources offered by the Internet” (Marlin). This idea underscores the fact that disparities still exist despite the accessible and diverse nature of digital media. We may connect the notion of an illusory opposition to this argument, because, as asserted by Fuchs, mainstream platforms prevail even in the digital sphere.

In November 2016, the most popular online news site was CNN.com. While CNN was on 11 November, 2016, the 72nd most accessed website in the world, the independent news sites alternet.org and democracynow.org were only ranked in positions 5,967 and 9,493 respectively on the list of the world’s most accessed websites (Fuchs).

Although this data is from 2016, we know that at the beginning of the 2003 Iraq War, dissenting voices were also the least important (Lindner). This data remains relevant in analyzing how imbalance in influence can also take place in the digital sphere. This demonstrates that, on the one hand, individuals who do not know how to navigate the internet may therefore heavily rely on mainstream media which often reinforces dominant narratives. But on the other hand, those who are skeptical of mainstream media and wish to have access to information may be exposed to unverified information, or they might be drawn by an algorithm which would reinforce their existing biases. In both cases, there is a significant risk of falling into echo chambers where information is constantly filtered and repeated. We may then argue that in theory, these platforms allow a break from elite-controlled information, but in practice, those same digital structures can result in even deeper ideological divides. Whether digital or traditional, limited media literacy shapes the way people engage with information, and as Merlin theorized, propaganda is inevitable as long as the audience is not constantly aware of its presence. This idea presumes that the average citizen has the time and the engagement necessary to verify information they are offered, however, we may imagine

that at times of shock and insecurities such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, people need a form of reassurance that they can find in information which best suits their established beliefs, such as stereotypes on Arabs and Muslims for instance (Sides and Gross).

Patriotism remains an influential aspect of reporting during the lead-up to the war, and that is also the case for digital media. Although this form of journalism engages feedback, it does not necessarily escape the ideological pressures that exist in mainstream media, for that reason, “patriotic behavior by journalists might be influenced by users' attitudes towards patriotism in journalistic work” (Ginosar and Konovalov 373).

While vigilance remains essential, there is a systematic aspect of propaganda which must be taken into consideration, and this also means that the wide range of information accessible to the public does not equal understanding or reflection. As Christian Fuchs emphasized, the individual’s awareness of their news consumption is also increasingly shaped by the logic of algorithms. At the core of the concept of algorithms, there is the notion that users can often be directed towards information that will heighten their existing beliefs. If we take the example of stereotypes against Muslims and Arabs, people who might have been influenced by those stereotypes and by the binary rhetoric of good versus evil used by the George W. Bush administration, might then continue to see narratives reinforcing those beliefs. This process is not unidirectional; this same mechanism could work in favor of dissenting narratives. We may theorize that in both ways, the content received by the user is also determined by the user’s standpoints. Generally speaking, “on social media, the situation is slightly different, but not necessarily better: on Facebook and Twitter, users can pay to promote postings” (Fuchs 76). Consequently, even the most vigilant user could end up trapped within a system that we may qualify as indirectly manipulating the flow of information.

While online journalism can promote independent reporting, it can also reveal a far more complex, and even paradoxical reality. The interactive nature that can be found on the internet does offer tools for pluralism of information, but it can also tend to reinforce pre-existing beliefs, resulting in echo chamber effect. Much like sensational headlines in TV news and journals, algorithms are designed, and even sometimes paid to capture the user's attention, amplifying established perspectives. In this digital environment, the audience is not passive anymore, and instead, through sharing and commenting, they can become direct agents of propaganda. This self-reinforcing cycle challenges the way we may perceive manipulation and participation. For that reason, the democratic aspect of the digital public sphere remains uncertain as it is often still manipulated by the very forces it aimed to overcome.

V. Conclusion

The invasion of Iraq by the George W. Bush administration offers a revealing case study for understanding the way propaganda operates through institutional authority, but also through sociocultural and technological levels within a democracy. As I was able to demonstrate through this thesis, in the lead-up to the war, the George W. Bush administration was successful in strategically framing Iraq as a threat that must be dealt with. Some of the strategies adopted by the administration included carefully chosen sources, but they also notably used the rhetoric of fear and subtle innuendos which framed Iraq as an enemy to the US. These narratives created links which successfully associated Saddam Hussein to terrorism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These efforts which first stemmed from within the administration were amplified by mainstream media that worked in greatly influencing public opinion by reinforcing disinformation and the logic of good versus evil. This failure of skepticism could be explained by an

interplay between the use of embedded journalism, a reliance of elite voices, and the context during which the war was planned; at times of crises, it is important to remember that patriotism becomes a priority, leaving little room for skepticism or dissent.

However, propaganda is not a process that goes only one way. The public's engagement, although shaped by national trauma and entrenched stereotypes also played a key role in supporting military operations in Iraq despite a lack of proofs that legitimized the war. Even with access to the internet and the existence of dissenting voices, the majority of US citizens still supported the government's decision to invade Iraq. For that reason, we may highlight this tension that exists in the fact that access to information does not necessarily translate to awareness or resistance. Interestingly, the case of the 2003 Iraq War notably reminds us that propaganda can also thrive in democratic societies within which freedom of speech and of the press is important (Wood). In this new digital era that provides wider access to information, the hope for more nuanced flow of information remains difficult because of the mechanisms of control that still exist. While independent media challenged traditional outlets, the influence of algorithms and established biases keep reinforcing echo chambers, which parallels the filtering process outlined by Herman and Chomsky. This underscores a central paradox in the relationship between media and public perception: while dissenting voices and the digital sphere can empower dissent and provide wider access to information, they also risk reinforcing ideological narratives, as the average person can become an agent of propaganda.

In response to the central question of the way the George W. Bush administration managed to sell the invasion to the public lies in a complex interplay between the government's authority, media complicity and public attitudes in moments of societal

distress. The administration relied on a carefully crafted narrative rooted in fear and moral binaries that blurred the lines between facts and evidence. Through the repeated innuendoes which framed Iraq as a “terror state”, and the strategic use of patriotism, the government was able to effectively portray the war as a necessity, but also as morally right. These narratives were enhanced and legitimized by mainstream media which failed to apply critical scrutiny over the facts that were provided by the administration.

Ultimately, the Geroge W. Bush administration never provided solid facts concerning the necessity to invade Iraq. Instead, it simply needed to manipulate the way the public interpreted reality. The success of these strategies employed by the administration illustrate the way propaganda mostly functioned through subtle strategies of state messaging, and media framing which transformed this lack of clarity into justifications for a war.

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