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# WAR OR PEACE? LEGITIMATION, DISSENT AND RHETORICAL CLOSURE IN PRESS COVERAGE OF THE IRAQ WAR BUILD-UP

NICK COULDRY AND JOHN DOWNEY

The global space within which much news and media comment are produced and circulate has never been clearer than in the contentious build-up to the recent UKUSA war in Iraq. As disputes within and between national governments over the very *definition* of the issues at stake intensified, the global circulation of critical perspectives on the expected war was striking, and cut across the divisions between official government positions. Whatever the local tendencies towards closure of the issues from a specific national perspective (and as the war began in the UK, those tendencies intensified), ~~it is essential~~, in order to understand the conflict fully, it is essential to comprehend the global character of dissent and opposition. The global nature of elite media and political discourse was matched by the globalisation of opposition to a UKUSA invasion of Iraq. On February 15 over 8 million people marched in five continents to express their dissent (although the large majority of them marched through the streets of major cities in Western and Southern Europe). The analysis of both media discourse and popular dissent as a consequence demands a cosmopolitan approach (Beck, 2000). In this chapter we will focus on press discourse in the UK but we see this very much as a contribution to a broader cosmopolitan project that does not, however, overlook national specificities.

There are good reasons to focus on the UK beyond the limitations of the authors and their circumstances. Not only was the UK America's closest ally, diplomatically and

militarily, but ~~also~~ the UK government was renowned for its public relations, having won two landslide elections in 1997 and 2001 with apparent ease, leaving the major opposition party in disarray. Moreover, it was unusual that a supposedly left-of-centre government, unlike other European social democratic parties, should support a neo-conservative US Republican executive and that consequently the two major UK political parties were united in their support for the USA. Despite this, only 38 per cent of the British population surveyed in an opinion poll supported a ‘unilateral’ war (a war without UN sanction) against Iraq immediately before the outbreak of war. (After the advent of war there was a dramatic shift in favour of military action.) The low point in terms of support for the war was between mid-January and mid-February 2003 when opinion polls revealed that only 30 per cent and 29 per cent of representative samples of the British population supported war (Guardian, ICM). On 15 February an unprecedented one and a half million people marched through the streets of London to voice their dissent. The numbers took most people by surprise. Only a few days before the march newspapers were predicting 500,000 demonstrators but it was clear that a momentum was developing. A march organiser commented that week: ‘it’s a new movement, out of anyone’s control. It’s like a tidal wave. The people organising it are not in control. It has its own momentum’ (Burgin, *Guardian* 12/2/03 p.6).

We will analyse the reporting of the conflict by seven national newspapers during a key week of this low point in support for war. The first day of analysis coincides with the publication of the Blix Report on 27 January. George Bush delivered his second State of the Union speech to congress on 28 January . Tony Blair travelled to Camp David for ‘a council of war’ at the end of the week (at which time journalists were

presented with copies of a new intelligence dossier quickly dubbed the ‘dodgy dossier’ by most of the British media because of its extensive plagiarism of dated academic work downloaded from the Internet and passed off as based on new intelligence sources). It was thus a key week for newspapers to take their position with regard to the possibility of war.

The degree of dissent from the pro-war position of the UK government and official opposition poses an interesting but welcome problem for critical media researchers. It has become the received wisdom amongst critical media scholars that the mainstream media generally act as handmaidens to the public relations state in the manufacture of consent. Whether or not this describes accurately the normal relationship of media and state, it is clear that, during the early months of 2003 at a time of geopolitical crisis, relations between some sections of the mass media and state were and (indeed remain) severely strained. The degree of media dissent may have also helped to legitimate and ~~to~~ mobilise popular dissent, although we also argue that the narrow terms on which some of that dissent was drawn may, in the longer-term, have contributed to the fragility of the anti-war majority. The relationship between media dissent and popular dissent is, of course, complex and multi-causal, and requires, ideally, an holistic approach, both to media (texts, production and consumption) and to broader social and cultural change, beyond that which we can attempt here.

### ***Theoretical and Methodological Background***

Jurgen Habermas (1996) sets himself a similar problem to the one we address: to explain how in certain crisis situations, generally neglected actors in civil society can

assume 'a surprisingly active and momentous role' (1996: 380). What interests Habermas is how poorly-resourced and institutionally powerless groups and movements can throw a spanner into the workings of the public sphere dominated normally by the interests of the economically and politically powerful. This is a key question for understanding how social change occurs in complex, mediated societies and essential for assessing the prospects of democratisation. Echoing the work of Alberto Melucci (1996) and others, Habermas argues that the great issues of the last decades - feminism, ecology, nuclear disarmament, global poverty - have all been raised initially by new social movements and subcultures who through effective dramatisation (for example, by non-violent symbolic acts of civil disobedience) of their concerns have persuaded the mass media to place the issues on the 'public agenda'. Of course, while opposition to the war was surprising and momentous, it prevented neither the UK's participation in the war nor a sudden shift in public opinion in favour of war in March and April 2003.

While Habermas' account possesses a certain plausibility, it needs to be supplemented by considering how these groups may penetrate the confines of the public sphere. Habermas seeks to explain this largely in terms of the mass media's self-understanding in liberal democratic societies (rightly or wrongly) as objective observers of society. However, the ability of counter-publicity groups to make their voices heard in the mass media depends not only on this self-understanding but also on the existence of crisis in the public sphere, manifested through mediated disagreement and controversy within economic, political and cultural elites. The destabilisation of the public sphere is both a top-down (centre-periphery) and a bottom-up (periphery-centre) process whose dimensions may be mutually reinforcing. It

follows that, to understand both the generation and outcomes of crisis, one must grasp the dynamic relationship within and between elite and popular discourses, and between actors in the mass media public sphere and in the counter-public sphere (Downey & Fenton 2003a). Indeed, this is an essential and overlooked task if we wish to understand social change in global modernity (Fenton & Downey 2003b).

We are interested primarily in three broad processes: the construction of consensus (and dissent), the construction of authority (specifically authority to represent the reality of what is happening in the world), and the naturalisation of facts or frameworks of interpretation (Potter, 1996).

Taking these in turn, the build-up to a major international war is, obviously, a time when many actors are intensely concerned with the representation, or construction, of consensus around that war; what was immediately striking, however, from the early days of the Iraq war build-up, was the degree to which consensus against the war was also being constructed not just by media, but also by elements within the military, diplomatic, political and cultural elites. This was why we chose the representation of consensus and dissent as our principal focus from the outset. Consensus is however never just consensus; it is used, rhetorically, as a warrant of truth (Potter, 1996: 117). Hence the importance of the second theme: the construction of particular actors as ‘entitled to know particular sorts of things [so that] . . . their reports or descriptions may thus be given special credence’ (Potter, 1996: 114), against which there is the equally important construction of other actors as having a ‘stake’ in this or that statement which disqualifies them as credible sources (Potter, 1996: 124-5). The construction of consensus and authority occur within a third and wider construction,

more difficult to detect: what Potter calls ‘constructing out-thereeness’, that is, the construction of certain claims ‘as not being constructed’ (Potter, 1996: 151, added emphasis). This is a complex process: certain major explicit claims are presented as simply factual (and therefore beyond contestation) on the basis of other claims that are left implicit (but whose obviousness is assumed). The selection of background and foreground ‘facts’ is obviously crucial to what forms part of the apparently natural ‘surface’ of events and what does not. During the Iraq war build-up the relative exclusion of certain issues from the frame of possible discussion (for example, perspectives which challenged the relevance and justification of the US timetable towards war) was important if other claims and statements (specifically US and UK claims about what was happening) were to appear as ‘just’ facts. This complex process of light and shade is what Steve Woolgar has called ‘ontological gerrymandering’ (quoted Potter, 1996: 183-4). There was a lot of it around in the early months of 2003.<sup>i</sup>

Our analysis focuses on press articles from the six days beginning 27 January 2003.<sup>ii</sup> Seven newspapers were chosen (the four broadsheet dailies - *Daily Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian*, *The Independent* – and the top three tabloid dailies in terms of circulation - *Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*) to represent broadsheet and tabloid opinion in the UK. All war-related articles were analysed (the initial selection used the Lexis-Nexis database and contained 955 articles), from which articles (news items, but also editorial and ‘independent’ comment columns) were chosen for a more detailed discourse analysis on the basis of being broadly representative either of the discourse positions and/or rhetorical strategies of newspapers. A full list of the latter articles is contained in Appendix 1. Our analysis does not, therefore, pretend to be an exhaustive

study of the full range of comment present (or absent) during this period (this would have required a much more extensive study that would have also considered images as well as written texts), but rather an indicative analysis of certain key discourse positions that seem to us significant in the broader construction of the crisis. Different discourse positions could be found within the same newspaper during the Iraq crisis. This is indicative in itself of both crisis and flux in the mass media public sphere concerning the then impending invasion of Iraq.

### *The construction of consensus*

The most unambiguous support for the UKUSA position was granted by the *Times*. In contrast to other newspapers that backed the UKUSA position, the *Times* supported both policy and rhetoric, at times appearing to see itself as coach of a somewhat disorganised team. The editorial of 30 January assumes both the existence of weapons of mass destruction under the control of Saddam and an Iraq invasion's justification, with or without the support of the UN Security Council, as a means of protecting international security; there are no covert reasons for going to war (for example, to secure access to oil supplies). Indeed the editorial, published on the same day as a letter signed by [eight](#) European leaders in support of the US's stance, even holds out the prospect of constructing a united European-US position. The chief stumbling block to this, of course, was the Franco-German position that the UN inspectors should be given more time to complete their work and that war should be contemplated only as a last resort. The predicational strategy of the *Times* is illuminating. Jacques Chirac is accused of 'posturing'. This implies that his present opposition is not sincere, calculated in order to bring about certain effects that would



be to the advantage of France, and that France's opposition will be reversed once suitable accommodations can be found. Schroeder is accused of 'strategic pacifism'. Given that Germany under Schroeder took part in the Kosovo conflict (its first military engagement since the end of the Second World War), it is somewhat curious to accuse Schroeder of pacifism. Of course, the charge of pacifism means that one can both explain and dismiss Germany's opposition by reference to this principle without having to justify the present conflict by reference to the principle of a 'just war'. The *Times* not merely misrepresents the German position but also attempts to dispel pacifism's positive connotations by suggesting Schroeder's was not a principled pacifism but adopted for strategic reasons. Without claiming the Franco-German position was somehow interest-free, our point is the *Times*' contrast between the 'universal' interests represented by the UKUSA position (international security) and the 'particular' interests ascribed to the Franco-German position.

This editorial position had been developed in a comment article by Daniel Finkelstein on 28 January. Finkelstein supports war, with or without the UN's resolutions. Finkelstein adopts a Kantian sounding moral vocabulary that gives the impression of possessing some intellectual authority. We have, according to Finkelstein, a moral duty or obligation to maintain international security and this demands that we should support the invasion of Iraq whether it has the sanction of the UN or not. Whereas the UKUSA is presented as obeying a Kantian categorical imperative and as acting selflessly, the UN as an institution is brought into question: 'the Security Council is not a panel of disinterested philosophers. Its decisions all too often are based on national prejudice, imperial adventurism, the vanity of individuals, and the murderous impulses of dictators'. This juxtaposition of the UKUSA and the Security Council is

contradictory and rather ironic bearing in mind that the UK and USA are two of its five permanent members and thus are presumably as interested as other members. The article's clear strategy is to remove the argument from matters of fact (whether or not Iraq possesses WMD and poses an imminent threat to the world) and, assuming that 'fact' as widely recognised, to convert the argument to one about morality. The moral case for war is wrapped in a pseudo-Kantian vocabulary and presented as a contrast between the dutiful and selfless UKUSA (going to war to protect the universal good of international security) and the war's immoral opponents.

The editorial of the *Daily Telegraph* 'Why Britain should fight' on the day of the publication of the Blix Report (27/1 p.21) admitted that three quarters of the British public were opposed to war and argued this was because anti-war campaigners were presenting the better argument; Tony Blair by pursuing a 'narrow legal' case for war against Iraq (i.e. via UN resolutions) had left the majority of the public confused as to 'what they are fighting for'. The only way to overturn the anti-war consensus, the editorial argues, is to invoke the national interest irrespective of the reports of the UN inspectors; not only is the regime of Saddam a military threat to the UK but also 'let us not be shy of saying that it is in no one's interest for the (sic) some of the world's key oil supplies to be in the hands of an unstable dictator'. Ultimately, then, the war is about 'who is the boss'. An Anglo-American hegemony would also be good for Iraq, the region, and the world.

The *Daily Telegraph* is here arguing for a new era of imperialism based on liberal representative democracy and free trade under the auspices of the benign powers of UKUSA. The account that it provides is strikingly similar to the radical critique of the

war aims. Of course, what is different is the evaluation of the outcome. Prima facie, the *Daily Telegraph*'s assumption that, once anti-war campaigners' diagnosis of the war rationale is admitted, the majority of public opinion will switch from being anti to pro-war, is paradoxical; the paradox disappears, however, if ~~oneyou~~ assumes a natural consensus in favour of that rationale, once directly stated.

While the *Daily Telegraph*'s assessment may indeed have been close to the unofficial government reasons for going to war, the open espousal of such a position hardly helped Blair who at this stage was relying on winning UN Security Council support for a war to win over public opinion and, therefore, emphasising the supposed threat of Saddam rather than the benefits of 'regime change'. Not only therefore was there no consensus for war but also no consensus among the war's supporters about how to wage the rhetorical battle for public opinion. Indeed the clear anti-war consensus meant that assorted supporters of the UK government felt at liberty to advocate various rhetorical repair jobs, thus adding to the sense of confusion concerning the war's justification and the impression that the official justification was a screen to cover imperial ambitions. (In this context, the contradiction between the *Daily Telegraph*'s claim that the UN inspectors were irrelevant on 27 January and its editorial (28/1, p. 21) the day after the Blix report's publication stating the 'case for war [was] still strong' seems less surprising.)

The *Daily Telegraph*'s discourse position was consistently adopted across genres (news reports, comment columns, editorials). Even the devastating and surreal comment article by comedian Armando Iannucci, that offered an immanent critique of the UKUSA attitude towards the authority of the UN and the notion of a pre-emptive

self-defense, may be seen as consistent with the newspaper's stress on *realpolitik* (the overwhelming importance of projecting Anglo-American power in oil rich regions of the world).

Whereas the *Daily Telegraph* clearly supported a war against Iraq if not entirely for the reasons used by the UK Government, the *Daily Mail* came out against the war in editorials on 27 and 28 January (p.10 on both occasions), stating that the UK and USA had failed to provide evidence that Iraq was an 'imminent threat' and consequently the war was not justified. The *Daily Mail's* doubts went beyond the evidential, however. Rather than sharing the *Daily Telegraph's* judgment that a post-Saddam Anglo-American Empire would be good for UK and global interests, the *Daily Mail*, after noting the great likelihood of conflict, comments: 'at what cost to the Middle East, world oil supplies, the war against terrorism, the Western alliance and the public's trust in the prime minister remains to be seen' (27/1 p.10). It is not that the *Daily Mail* is against an Anglo-American Empire, just that it believes that this enterprise is likely to backfire. The *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* agree on the criteria by which the world should be judged but have radically different projections of the consequences of war.

Whereas the *Daily Telegraph* was consistent in its discourse position, the *Daily Mail* adopted a number of positions across different genres. Its columnists, for example, ranged from the sceptical (in line with the editor: for example Peter McKay 27/1 p.13, Keith Waterhouse 27/1, p.14) to that of Melanie Phillips (27/1 p.10) who bolted a 'clash of civilizations' thesis between the 'West' and Islam onto a 'decline of European civilisation' argument, reaching general conclusions about Islam from the

activities of neofundamentalist groups and distinguishing liberal Europe (unwilling to defend itself, therefore likely to be crushed by the 'Islamist tiger') from the USA (strongly nationalist, deeply religious and prepared to fight). The meaning of Phillips' argument is clear: Europe's survival is dependent upon becoming more like the USA and rejecting liberalism in all shapes and forms.

Despite an editorial line that was sceptical of the UKUSA position, *Daily Mail news* journalists accepted the UKUSA framing of the conflict. Thus coverage written by David Hughes of the Blix report claimed the report exposed Iraq's 'charade' (adopting uncritically the phrase of Jack Straw), so that 'the countdown to war quickened last night' (28/1 p.4-5). The illogical idea of a countdown quickening (rather than, say, being continued or interrupted) is a strategy of intensification taken from the UKUSA. The elision of the actors (the people setting up the 'countdown') serves to make conflict appear an unavoidable, natural process rather than a humanly constructed, and thus entirely mutable, series of events. The same journalist employs the same strategies a day later when writing of the 'looming conflict' (29/1 p15) as though the conflict had a life of its own, beyond human control.

*The Independent* adopted a consistently anti-war position across genres with Robert Fisk spearheading its coverage and analysis of the conflict. Fisk used the occasion of the day of the Blix Report to launch a broadside against UKUSA 'deceptions' (27/1 p.5). The first 'deception' is that Saddam is a dictator who poses an imminent threat to the region and the world in the manner of Hitler's Germany in the 1930s, making the anti-war position one of 'appeasement'. Not only was this Saddam/ Hitler elision intended to bring the conflict closer to home, thereby making the threat appear more

real, but also to borrow the Second World War's legitimacy for the present conflict while intimating a successful conclusion. This was a key strategy of UKUSA because it provided the moral justification for war and was an argument designed to appeal to liberals, leftists, and pacifists by questioning the morality of their moral opposition to the present conflict. The difficulty in disrupting this analogy lay, Fisk argued, in the obviously brutal character of Saddam's regime. The easier task was to disrupt the idea that Saddam posed the same threat to the world after a crushing military defeat in the 1991 Gulf War and 12 years of sanctions and containment as Hitler did in the 1930s after the German annexations and invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland. That is, of course, why the issue of 'weapons of mass destruction' was crucial. Fisk asks whether 'we are prepared to pay the price of so promiscuous a war' and points to the likelihood that thousands of Iraqis will die and that the UKUSA will be seen as an occupying power that will strengthen support for neofundamentalist groups. The second deception, Fisk argued, was that the war was not about oil. While the UKUSA insisted that the war was exclusively about WMD, the Iraqi regime and protesters insisted that the war was about the imperial control of Iraq's oil and that the issue of WMD was a rhetorical fig leaf to cover naked ambition and self-interest. This was the central argument of more radical anti-war protestors for whom the UN 'weapons inspections' were a public relations charade. This radical position seemed to win widespread support in everyday life in the weeks leading up to the war. Even many war supporters did not believe the UKUSA official version of the war.

Fisk presents the UKUSA as relatively isolated: 'The only other nation pushing for war – save for the ever-grateful Kuwait – is Israel'. This serves of course to emphasise the lack of consensus in favour of war internationally and to damn the

UKUSA through association with an already occupying power. Domestically the populations of UKUSA, despite 'being told to go to war by their newspapers and television stations and politicians', are becoming increasingly sceptical of the claims of their governments. Indeed, the 'popular' consensus in Britain is anti-war. What Fisk does not explain, however, is how this might be so: is this popular anti-war consensus generated from the periphery? does Fisk overstate the elite consensus? or do both play a role in the generation of popular dissent? In any case, it is this 'popular' consensus for which Fisk claimed to speak.

A striking feature of press coverage in this period, notwithstanding this significant dissent about the ends and means of war, was the *de facto* consensus constructed around the time-frame of the UKUSA war build-up. The dominant news-frame almost everywhere was the momentum building towards war around the UKUSA diplomatic agenda. Turning to the three remaining papers in our sample, this was virtually the only perspective referred to in the *Sun* and it also dominated the news coverage in the *Guardian*; only in the *Daily Mirror* did other perspectives contribute to news reports, and then always within a context determined by the UKUSA official agenda.

Since the *Sun* has historically been the most UK belligerent, its construction of national and international consensus for its position was hardly surprising. This was expressed not only in terms of UK 'hearts and minds' (30/1, p. 9) but also in terms of a broad coalition of 'the West v the Rest' (headline 30/1, p. 9) and even 'the world' being on course for war (28/1, p. 8). There were other more disturbing aspects to this construction of consensus: the denigration of Islam and asylum-seekers set up a situation where Muslims were seen as the 'enemy within'. Where dissent from this

'consensus' was mentioned, it was always in disparaging terms: unspecified 'anti-war campaigners' (28/1, p. 8), 'rebel lefties' and the 'loopy left' (30/1, p.9).

Since the *Guardian* was the newspaper whose editorial opposition to war was most predictable from its general discourse, its reproduction of the momentum for war in its lead news items is more surprising: for example, the suggestion of a diplomatic 'consensus' after the Blix report that Iraq was not cooperating (28/1, p. 1); in addition, the isolation of France implied by its comment (after the Blair/ Bush summit on 31 January) that, while the UK and US were seeking to convince 'the international community', Blair felt increasing 'frustration with the French' (who, however, would have 'the squeeze' put on them) (1/2, p.1).<sup>iii</sup> The significance of these suggestions in *Guardian* news reports emerges more clearly when we look later at their close reliance on UK and US diplomatic agendas; for now, we should just note that it was at odds with the *Guardian's* clear editorial position (28/1, 30/1) against the war.

In contrast, the *Mirror* followed its editorials' anti-war position into its news articles, interpreting diplomatic reactions after the Blix report as a consensus against war that left the US isolated (28/1, p.4) and mocking Blair's 29 January House of Commons performance as 'My War against the World' (headline, 30/1, p. 2). Here there was an overlap with the editorials, if not the news coverage, of the *Guardian* which argued (28/1, p. 21) that the UKUSA reaction to the Blix report 'will not be how most of the world views' that report and (30/1, p. 23) insisted that Blair should overturn his existing pro-war, pro-Bush policy and instead 'speak for this nation'. The idea that, far from war tapping into a national consensus, war went directly against the national consensus (noted already in Robert Fisk's writing for *The Independent*) was



developed later in the week by the *Daily Mirror* (31/1, p. 6), reporting its commissioned YouGov poll that showed 75% currently against the war and, more strikingly, only 2% believing that the war would make them safer from terrorist attack. The resulting image of Blair as the isolated leader battling against the tides of popular opinion remained, however, ambiguous, as we note below.

To sum up, the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Sun* (the two biggest circulation broadsheet papers and the biggest tabloid) supported the UKUSA war at this stage but the last two used arguments for war (for example, control over oil, the West versus the Rest) that were antithetical to the official UKUSA position. These arguments presumably only helped to confirm popular doubts about the truthfulness of the official line. Only the *Sun* claimed an international and domestic consensus existed in favour of war. The other newspapers clearly recognised and commented upon both the international and domestic absence of such a consensus, even if in more subtle ways they generally reinforced, rather than challenged, the event-frame assumed by the UKUSA position. The four newspapers that took anti-war editorial stances did so for contrasting reasons. While the *Daily Mail* was simply concerned about whether the national interest would be served by war, the *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* raised moral objections concerning the consequences of war.

Media elites, then, were split not only in terms of which action would further national interests but also which actions were moral. The confusion between the two in anti-war positions is one explanation why, once the war started, some newspapers and some of the public swung in behind the UKUSA position. It was not that they supported the war but that once the war and appeared irreversible had started,

apparently consensual appeals to ‘the nation’ (for example, the call to support ‘our’ armed forces) trumped prior doubts concerning whether the war was, in fact, in the national interest.<sup>iv</sup>

### *The Uses of Authority*

Max Weber (1968) argued that modern societies have developed three types of authority: rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. Rational-legal authority is developed from impersonal ruled based institutions and practices, traditional authority from historical continuities of institutions and practices, and charismatic authority rests on the force of personality of protagonists.

During the period of our analysis the UKUSA were attempting to develop an international rational-legal justification for war through the United Nations Security Council. As the possibility of this receded in February and March, there was a concerted attempt to question both the authority of the UN and that of the governments of anti-war states (most notably, the French President, Jacques Chirac). The failure to win international rational-legal authority meant that such a justification had to be produced nationally (via a vote in the House of Commons and the Attorney-General’s opinion on the legal basis for war) but such an enterprise was hindered by the obvious failure to secure an international agreement. In such circumstances, the attempt to build support for war drew increasingly heavily upon the charismatic authority of Tony Blair.

A striking feature of the early articles we analysed was the limited range of interpretative sources that were treated as credible. All newspapers reproduced extensive quotations from official speeches by US and UK politicians, the obvious 'primary definers' in the build-up to war (Hall et al., 1978). Also universally cited was Hans Blix himself, as the UN weapons inspector more inclined towards the UKUSA position (note that the *Sun* never referred at all to Mohammed Al-Baradei, the Head of the Atomic Weapons Authority, who reported alongside Blix that the possibility of Iraq's nuclear weapons could be eliminated in months). More significant are differences in how other sources were treated. UK intelligence sources played a significant part in the week's events, with the announcement late on 26/1 (the day before the Blix report) that the UK government had handed a 'dossier' reporting Saddam's breaches of cooperation with the UN inspectors. The *Sun* reported these intelligence claims directly as fact ('Saddam is using guerrilla tactics to sabotage the hunt for his doomsday weapons, it emerged last night', 27/1, p.2); in the *Guardian* (27/1, p.1) the story was the fact of the intelligence briefing itself and its diplomatic significance, although there was little reference in its main news report to alternative interpretations of the claims in the briefing. Only in the *Mirror* was there substantial scepticism, with its sub-headline 'War in weeks as Blair gives "evidence" for attack' (27/1, p.4).

Similar differences were played out in news treatment of diplomatic sources. While the *Sun* presented UK and US diplomatic sources without any suggestion of distance from them, the *Guardian* on occasion indicated scepticism (for example in noting (28/1, p.1) the difference between the UK Foreign Secretary's 'bellicose' interpretation of the Blix report and the UK ambassador to the United Nations' more

cautious interpretation). On other occasions, however, it is striking how close the *Guardian's* news reports stayed to the interpretation that the UK and US administrations were encouraging; its front page 1 February report on the Blair/ Bush Washington summit read more like a Whitehall press release ('Mr Blair impressed on the Americans . . . Mr Blair secured support [from the US]', and so on). The implication - one that UK diplomats no doubt encouraged - was that the summit was about diplomacy (Blair restraining Bush from war) even though, as the same report made clear, Blair had already secured Bush's support on the need for a second UN resolution by phone on the evening before the summit. Why then the time and expense of Blair's transatlantic visit? The reason, already anticipated in media comment earlier that week, emerged clearly in the *Sun's* news report, but was fudged in the *Guardian*: 'The President and the PM thrashed out final details for an onslaught beginning in mid-March - as exclusively revealed in yesterday's *Sun*'. So much for diplomats' claim (reported by the *Guardian* without demur) that the summit was a 'council of diplomacy'! Only the *Mirror* kept a more consistent distance from official UKUSA sources.

A quite different issue of authority concerned Blair's own standing as Prime Minister. Some personalisation of the war build-up is hardly surprising. The personalisation, however, that really mattered for the British public's perception of the issues at stake concerned Blair himself. A theme, more dominant in press coverage nearer to the outbreak of war, was the presentation of Blair as the lone leader, bravely opposing the scepticism of his people at considerable personal cost. It is worth noting the assumptions about the credibility of Blair's self-representation as a man of 'ideals' upon which this depended. Possibly the strongest attack on Blair's policy during the

week we analysed came in a *Guardian* editorial (30/1, p. 23), which argued that his policy would have results directly at odds with his ideals (of ‘global justice’ and so on). Even this criticism already conceded that the Prime Minister was motivated by ‘ideals’, rather than, say, by a calculation of Britain’s strategic interests; yet this was a reading of Blair’s actions and motives on which he later played himself, when under maximum pressure just before war started. We see how, behind the surface of dissent from the British government’s position, there were significant limits to that dissent.

While pro-war reports tended to personalise the war by focussing on Saddam - contrasting him with Bush and Blair, comparing him to Hitler - thereby creating the impression that the war was not against Iraq but against Saddam, the *Daily Mirror* resolutely referred to the ‘war on Iraq’. The contrasting referential strategies are designed to connote different types of conflict – one limited and precise with few casualties, the other widespread with many casualties. This counter-personalisation strategy was accompanied by a re-personalisation strategy. January 31 was an excellent example. The *Mirror*’s front page carries the story of a Nelson Mandela speech in Johannesburg criticising the UKUSA position and ties this in to the anti-war petition organised by the newspaper. This is followed by a longer news story relating to the speech (pp. 4 and 5). Also on page 5 is an article relating to two popular Labour politicians’ (Claire Short and Tony Benn) criticism of the UKUSA position. This is followed on page 6 by an editorial supporting Mandela. On page 8 and 9 there is a list of celebrities, politicians, war heroes who have signed the paper’s anti-war petition. The global meaning of ‘Mandela’ is that of selfless, and ultimately victorious, struggle against oppression. The *Daily Mirror* (31/1, p. 6) editorial asks Blair (and by extension the British people) to choose between Mandela, ‘symbol of

honour, principle and commitment to justice’ and Bush, ‘the warmongering president’.

The reliance on charismatic authority, rather than legal-rational and traditional authority, to legitimate dissent at this time needs to be understood both in terms of the discourse strategies and the character of British society. The UN’s rational-legal authority, for example, was ambiguous from the point of view of the anti-war movement, since accepting the UN’s authority could have undermined the anti-war movement if the UKUSA had in fact persuaded the Security Council to back war. Traditional authority figures were also rarely used to legitimate dissent. Anti-war religious leaders, for example, were given a much lower profile in the UK than in Germany and Italy. The Daily Mirror clearly judged that the oppositional opinion of pop stars would do more for the anti-war cause than that of the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury or leading British Muslim clerics.

### *Closing Down/Opening Up the Argument*

We now look more specifically at how press coverage naturalised certain frameworks of interpretation of great relevance to the official UKUSA position on events. We have already seen how the UK press gave credence to UKUSA intelligence and diplomatic sources in ways that were at least open to question. The broad UKUSA policy framework (that the war was ‘to disarm’ Iraq) and its inherent military momentum (in relation to which the UN inspections were merely a ‘delay’) was naturalised right across the British press. It was uncommon to find dissenting opinion reflected, or even acknowledged, in the news articles we analysed; even in the

comment columns, dissenting opinion was often surprisingly uncritical on this crucial point with the exception of some columnists writing for the *Daily Mirror*, *Independent*, and *Guardian* who directly raised oil resources as a key reason lying behind the UKUSA drive to war.

The naturalisation of the UKUSA perspective took the form, first, of constant references to ‘time running out’ for peace. This was, of course, the stated UKUSA position, but it became naturalised when, for example, UN inspectors were described as having ‘earned themselves’ a few further weeks, whereas the UK had ‘nudge[d] back Bush’s decision to go to war’ (*Guardian* 28/1, p.1); or when the UK’s release of ‘intelligence’ information just before Blix’s report was described as if it were a disinterested speeding-up of the weapons inspections: ‘Britain is aiming to prevent the process from dragging on indefinitely, by handing over and publicising sensitive intelligence which allegedly shows that Iraq is flouting the UN’ (27/1, p.1). The word ‘allegedly’ hardly counters the naturalising force of that apparently neutral phrase ‘the process’. ‘The process’ is not the UN inspections as such, but those inspections as interpreted by the US and UK (as ‘delay’ to their underlying war timetable; otherwise how could a few months’ inspections be seen as ‘dragging on indefinitely’?). The *Guardian*’s editorial (28/1, p. 23) made a concerted effort to dislodge this naturalisation, by arguing that it was the inspections process that was ‘natural’ and should be left undisturbed: ‘if the Bush administration and its admirers wish to curtail or cancel this UN process, after a mere two months or so, it is up to them to explain why. They have not done so to date. . . .’. Yet this fundamental point failed to influence the *Guardian*’s own news reports later in the week, most importantly in its reports of the Blair/ Bush summit (see above).

It is worth noting what metaphors came to dominate in newspapers' coverage of the war build-up. We might have expected the metaphor of war as something to fear (*Mirror* 27/1), although in fact it was surprisingly rare; we might also have expected the *Sun*'s celebration of Blair confronting his critics in the House of Commons on 29 January as a man of action: 'the Prime Minister raised the stakes . . . [he] was stung into action . . . under fire from all sides . . . it was the first time he had lined up Stalinist tyrant Kim Jong II for a possible military strike'. With an image of a watchful rifle-carrying UK soldier above the article, and a comic-book picture of the globe with members of the 'axis of evil' named within jagged balloons (like mini-explosions), it was almost as if the war had begun (*Sun* 30/1, p. 8). Less expected, however, was the way that this 'Boy's Own' picture of Blair - as the isolated, embattled, but brave quasi-military leader - circulated beyond the pages of the *Sun* and into articles elsewhere that *prima facie* were strongly critical of the Prime Minister (for example, the columnist Jackie Ashley's article: *Guardian* 30/1, p. 21).

Such an idea of Blair as the embattled leader was however double-edged, as became clear in the article published in the *Mirror* the next day (31/1, p. 6) by Ashley's fellow *Guardian* columnist, Jonathan Freedland, headed 'A leader who has left behind his people'. This article analysed the devastating findings of that day's YouGov poll (referred to above) and concluded that Blair was isolated from his people as never before. However:

. . . that is not, by itself, a reason to condemn him. On the contrary, it can be a mark of greatness for a politician that he dares to lead, rather than follow his people. We



always say we want someone who is prepared to trust his own convictions rather than merely obey opinion polls. Well now we have one.

Not surprisingly, this was a line used to great effect by Blair's supporters (and even some of his formal Conservative opponents) later in the war build-up. The article concluded:

How will historians look back at this solo stance by Tony Blair? That depends on the outcome of the coming war. But they will either say this was his defining act of great statesmanship – or the decision that ultimately led to his downfall.

Naturalised here are a number of assumptions: first, that the war was inevitable (remember this 'critical' piece was written a full two weeks before the largest of the global anti-war protests on 15 February); second, that Blair's position was dictated solely by a sense of what is right (otherwise, how can the mere success of the war be grounds for attributing his stance to 'statesmanship', rather than, say, lucky miscalculation?); third, that Blair will survive, if he does, because his policy proves a success, rather than because his opponents fail to oppose him (much closer to the truth, as we write); and finally, and most obviously, that if the war is a 'success' on UKUSA terms, it will be impossible to interpret otherwise than to Blair's credit, which precisely reproduces the UKUSA framework for interpreting the build-up to war as 'inevitable'.

If the image of Blair, the isolated leader, rose to prominence, it is worth asking what other themes (less favourable to the UKUSA position) received less prominence in UK press coverage. A minimal list would be:

- the arguments behind the French, German, Russian or Chinese positions against the war, let alone those of Arab or Latin American countries, who faced acute risks in opposing the US;
- the range of dissent (both popular and elite) within the US (it was *Le Monde* which reported the *Washington Post* anti-war article by the US's Supreme commander in Gulf War I, Norman Schwarzkopf : *Le Monde*, 31/1, p. 15);
- underlying concerns whether a war was likely to increase Britain's risk of being a target for 'terrorist' attack (mentioned for example in Freedland's article, but rarely referred to in news coverage);
- the opinions on the war of Britain's ethnic minorities, especially its Muslim population (to its credit, the *Guardian* later began a comment column which tried to cover this, but this was the exception, not the rule).

Yet it must also be noted that, in contrast to this naturalisation of the UKUSA framework for interpreting the coming war, the *Mail*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, and *Mirror* began to give the anti-war movement greater prominence, especially in the period directly after our sample week. The *Mirror* was the most campaigning anti-war paper, urging its readers to sign a petition (by 15 February it claimed to have collected 195,000 signatures) and also sponsoring the Stop the War Coalition march on 15 February. On the morning of the march the *Mirror* headline read 'The World against the War' with the contents devoted to details of the globalisation of the anti-war protests and accounts of the preparations for the London demonstration. The

*Guardian* and *Independent* ran stories about first-time 'ordinary' protesters. The *Mail* provided a map for its readers wishing to join the march. The anti-war movement, if only for a while, cut across ethnic, class, religious, and political boundaries, as newspapers helped to construct as well as simply reflect the diverse character of the movement.

### ***Conclusion***

How are we to make overall sense of this complex picture? The fundamental point is that elite media and political discourse concerning the waging of a war against Iraq in the UK was deeply divided. Opinion was divided concerning whether war was in the national interest and/or right morally. Generally speaking right-wing papers (*Times*, *Telegraph*, *Sun*, *Mail*) either supported or opposed the war along lines of perceived national interest whereas liberal and left-of-centre newspapers (*Mirror*, *Independent*, *Guardian*) employed arguments questioning the morality of the UKUSA position. Divisions within elite media discourse and the consequent legitimisation of dissent helped to establish the preconditions for a successful mobilisation of one and a half million people on the streets of central London in winter. To understand this mobilisation fully, one must acknowledge not only the legitimacy crisis in the public sphere but also the creative disobedience of counter-public spheres and alternative media in encouraging such a display of public opposition.

Of course, public opposition to the war did not prevent it taking place (for reasons which we have also explored) and, when the war started, media representations and public opinion shifted to being pro-war. In the longer term, as the memory of

'liberation' fades in the face of the realities of occupation, critical media voices are returning and popular disaffection growing. In the post-war situation, there is no naturalised 'timetable' on which the UKUSA position can rely to close down popular dissent. On the contrary, the situation in Iraq, the UK and the US is open-ended and uncertain. It remains to be seen what consequences the long-term legacy of dissent from the war at all levels will have for national and international politics.

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## **APPENDIX ONE**

List of 2003 articles chosen for detailed analysis:

27/1 *Telegraph* editorial p.21

*Mail* editorial p.10

*Mail* Comment Peter McKay p.13,

*Mail* comment Keith Waterhouse p.14

*Mail* comment Melanie Phillips p.10

*Independent* comment Robert Fisk p.5

*Guardian* lead story (Wintour/ Watt/ Younge) p1

*Sun* lead story (Wooding) p2

*Mirror* Hardy article pp 4-5

28/1 *Telegraph* editorial p.21

*Mail* editorial p.10

- Mail* news David Hughes p.4-5
- Times* comment (Finkelstein)
- Guardian* lead story (Borger/ White/ Macaskill) p1
- Sun* Kavanagh/ Flinn article p8-9
- Mirror* Wallace article pp4-5
- Guardian* editorial p21
- Sun* editorial p8
- Mirror* editorial p6
- 29/1 *Mail* news David Hughes p.15
- 30/1 *Times* editorial
- Guardian* lead comment (Ashley) p21
- Sun* lead comment (Kavanagh) p9
- Mirror* lead story (Hardy) plus Routledge comment p2
- Guardian* editorial p23
- Sun* editorial p8
- 31/1 *Guardian* lead story (Wintour/ Campbell) p1
- Sun* lead story (Pascoe-Watson) p2
- Mirror* lead comment (Freedland) p6
- Mirror* p1-9
- 1<sup>st</sup> Feb *Guardian* lead story (Wintour/ Borger) p1
- Sun* lead story (Pascoe-Watson) p2
- Mirror* news article (Roberts) pp 4-5

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<sup>i</sup> Nor of course, in the UK, was it unique to this period: compare Fairclough's analysis of New Labour language in relation to 'the international community' during the Kosovo war (Fairclough, 2000: 152-3).

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<sup>ii</sup> Sunday papers were excluded since the principal war-related events (Blix report, State of Union address, Blair-Bush summit) all occurred during Monday to Friday.

<sup>iii</sup> The same article's sub-headline was 'Blair gains extra time to win over waverers'.

<sup>iv</sup> There were other reasons for this shift: the limitations inherent in the framework of mediated dissent (see next two sections) and probably a general fatalism (cf Croteau, 1995: 115).