AN AMERICAN APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL NEWS: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

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By

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis was to delve into the wide variety of circumstances and factors that determine the ways mainstream American media develops and produces news stories for print and broadcast mediums. The thesis focused on a central problem, namely the bias that is omnipresent in American media, especially when it comes to stories of an international nature. In order to expose this bias (which largely revolves around a tendency to report only news that directly impacts Americans) a framework was created.

Research for an available framework that met the needs of this goal was not found, so an original framework was created to expose underlying factors that go into story creation in American journalism. The framework was comprised of four categories, and the overarching theme of ethics was incorporated into each category. The four categories (story, staff, corporate ownership and logistics) were decided upon because of the huge impact they have on the process news stories go through in order to be included in a television broadcast or print publication.

Each of the next three chapters of the thesis focused on a specific set of stories. The first category was stories about the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the second category examined stories about the 2005 London transit bombings, and
the third category looked at stories comparing coverage of the 2004 tsunami to hurricane Katrina in 2005. In each chapter, the way stories were covered was examined, using the framework as a guide and as way to highlight different tactics and tools employed by members of American media.

The final chapters of the thesis looked at possible ethical solutions that could be incorporated into American journalism in an effort to keep journalists more honest. Specific cases of disgraced journalists were also discussed, as was the kind of treatment they received after it was discovered they had knowingly deceived readers of their work.

The thesis concluded with a look towards the future, utilizing examples from my own experiences working in national cable broadcast news outlets. The chapter concluded with ending thoughts on where emerging technology will take American journalism from here, as the capabilities of the internet and wireless communication continue to expand and greatly impact the way stories around the world are told.
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CHAPTER 1

COMPETING FACTORS IN AMERICAN JOURNALISM

The United States is viewed by itself and many countries as a world superpower, and as such, American citizens have long enjoyed the luxury of this perspective and all the benefits that go along with it. While much of the success of the United States is due to the innovative and hardworking nature of its citizens, many Americans truly believe the United States possesses characteristics that make it innately superior. While this line of thinking is beneficial to the pride of this country, it can also be detrimental because of its tendency to translate into people walking around with metaphoric blinders on, blinders that tell them the American way is the not the best way but the only way, and that challenges to it are a threat.

With this kind of thinking, its easy to see how Americans could be predisposed to seeing things as “good for the country” or “bad for the country”, with little gray area in between. We rely on journalists to tell us what is happening in our country and around the world, so we must recognize that American journalists share many of the same social and cultural beliefs as a majority of people living in the United States.

As such, its entirely possible that the bias Americans can have (either rightly or wrongly) is also present in aspects of news reporting. There is a pressing need to examine “the media” in America, especially because this area of study is so often overlooked in studies of ethics and journalism.
In his book *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, John P. Ferre describes the lack of attention given to journalistic ethics. Ferre says as follows:

…this paucity is sometimes due to the urgency in media ethics. There are so many pressing issues to cover and so little time to examine them—one ethics course in college, perhaps, or part of a reporting course, a professional seminar, maybe one book. The stakes are large and there are so many pitfalls that taking time to consider the history of media ethics can seem like an academic indulgence.¹

Bias and tainted worldviews can creep into everything from the way stories are told, to the kind of staff hired at news outlets, to the personal beliefs of employees. This is why it’s all the more important to examine the kinds of ethical standards journalists in the United States hold themselves to, and how this impacts the way news stories are molded.

The way the news is crafted and how American citizens receive it is important because of just that—it’s crafted. While the intent of a story can be molded for either admirable or questionable purposes, it’s left up to authors, editors, writers and reporters to determine how stories are told. These are all things to keep in mind when stepping off the subway to grab a coffee and the daily newspaper on the way to work.

I’d like to think I can speak with some degree of authority on the inner workings of mainstream American television news, given that I have worked for a national broadcast news outlet since 2005. I began working towards my degree in

Media Studies in 2001 while in college, and held several news internships before landing a final internship at CNN’s Washington, DC Bureau that I was able to parlay into a freelance job and eventually, a staff position. I worked at CNN’s DC Bureau for 3 and a half years before joining FOX News Channel in Washington, DC, where I’m currently an Associate Producer for a two hour news show, “America’s News Headquarters.”

While I very much enjoy working in broadcast journalism, I have both participated in and witnessed different types of reporting that I’ve taken issue with in some way. It is from these experiences that my desire to explore the mechanisms and factors that contribute to story configuration in mainstream American media was born.

In his book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Jerry Mander writes that, “virtually all experience is mediated in some way” and that “most Americans spend their lives within environments created by human beings.” ²

turn in news gathering, and a number of important factors behind the scenes that the
average consumer of news might never imagine.

This query into the validity of the news process is not intended to insult the
intelligence of Americans, but rather to point out that a myriad of circumstances
(perhaps most subtly yet potent among them being personal beliefs) determine the
thirty minute newscasts that beam into living rooms across America each night.

There is a need to examine the accountability of American news, and the
American journalists working in both television and print mediums. Its imperative to
know the crux of what drives a journalist, and the kinds of things a journalist or
organization might deem suitable or unfit for reporting in order to know how to
interpret what the news reports.

Clifford G. Christians makes this point in his book *Media Ethics: Cases and
Moral Reasoning*. Christians writes of the “institutional pressures” that can and often
do determine things that “make the news”. Christians talks about the “ominous
trend…toward concentrated ownership of media properties” and the “cost-conscious
publishers” that “threaten to overwhelm the press’s noble mission.”

In an effort to successfully analyze the layers that make a story
“newsworthy”, three contemporary news events of varied international nature and the

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2001), 35.
way they’ve been covered by the American media will be examined in this thesis. In addition to the description of events and how they’ve been covered by American journalists in the United States, an analytical framework will be used to expose and evaluate the wide range of processes that go into “making” the news.

In the absence of an available framework that meets the needs of this goal, I have created an analytical tool using themes from research and from personal experiences working in broadcast news. Ethical considerations are a critical part of all of the categories in the framework. Ethics will serve as the overarching theme throughout the analysis, because ethics are at the core of every decision a journalist makes in reporting a story.

**FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING SELECTED NEWS STORIES**

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<td>Ethical Implications</td>
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<tr>
<td>What happened/is happening</td>
<td>Personal Beliefs/Bias</td>
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<td>Facts of the story</td>
<td>Religious</td>
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<td>Players involved</td>
<td>Political</td>
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<td>Influence of ethics on decision making</td>
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<td>Ethical Implications</td>
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<td>Money</td>
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<td>From print advertisements</td>
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<td>From television commercials</td>
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<td>From internet advertisements</td>
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<td>Influence of ethics on decision making</td>
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The analytical tool is comprised of four quadrants, the first of which is “the story”. This part of the tool will be used to break down the facts of the story, including what happened, the people involved, the location in which the story unfolded and what makes it newsworthy. The ethical part of this quadrant will examine possible motivations for why the inclusion (or exclusion) of people in a story may or may not be included in the reporting of the story.

The second quadrant of the analytical tool will analyze the kinds of people employed by news organizations, namely, the staff. While there are exceptions to every rule, this part of the tool will examine patterns that emerge when looking at similarities among people in charge of major news organizations in the United States. Furthermore, this quadrant of the tool will look at patterns of personal belief commonly held by staff members. “Personal beliefs” is an extremely broad topic, and so a few main themes will be selected: religious, political, class and gender beliefs. Here again, ethical considerations of each aforementioned sub-category will be taken into consideration. For example, a staff member at a news organization might favor male, white, college graduates from Ivy league schools over other male, white college graduates from non-Ivy league schools who are just as qualified. This part of the tool will examine the ethical consequences of this kind of behavior, as well as the conditions within news organizations that allow these kinds of beliefs to foster.

The third quadrant in the tool will examine corporate ownership. This is perhaps the most under recognized part of the news process, while also being one of the most important factors in news reporting.
In this section, ownership of the company will be examined. Is it a liberal leaning organization that tends to support a Democratic agenda, or is it a more conservative institution that tends to slant its news as such? Does the organization make an effort to appear neutral, or are there noticeable political leanings in its reporting?

The second major component of this section will be financial motivators, and the impact monetary considerations can have on news reporting.

This part of the analysis will cover everything from what kinds of companies choose to buy advertising, commercial or online space with a news organization, to the kinds of commercials and advertisements a news organization is willing to buy and run or not run.

Again, ethical considerations will be examined. Does the organization give discounted rates to advertisers who are in some way aligned with the interests of the news organization? Do they refuse to sell ad space to companies pushing products or services they don’t agree with?

The final quadrant of the tool is made up of the logistics that go into compiling a news broadcast online or on television, or for a newspaper or magazine. A newspaper is only so large, a television show is only a certain number of minutes, and there is never going to be enough room for everything. Here again, ethical decisions play a vital role as editors, publishers and producers make decisions about what they do and don’t have room for. This part of the tool will also look at differences between a print publication versus an online or television broadcast. A
newspaper is a fixed product with physical pages, versus a television or online broadcast, which can literally be changed even as the program is airing. With this in mind, decisions made in breaking news situations and the consequences of time constraints will be examined.

The above framework will help deconstruct the elements that go into developing a story for public consumption. In addition to the framework, each one of the three selected stories will be varied in such a way as to get as wide a variety of information as possible from the analysis.

The first category of stories will be self reflective, and will include news that consumers interpret in light of themselves (as Americans) in the country in which they live. The stories in this category will be related to the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The ways that these two wars have been carefully reported by the American media will be examined. The January 30, 2009 edition of The Week magazine includes an excerpt of an article from The Boston Globe by Eric Calderwood entitled “Putting the horrors of war on TV.” In writing about the Arab television network Al-Jazeera in contrast to American television news, Calderwood writes:

…Al-Jazeera won’t win any prizes for objectivity…but the Qatar-based television network, whose pro-Arab partisanship boosts its popularity throughout the Middle East, could teach American networks something about war reportage. The reporting [on Al-Jazeera] isn’t fair—Israeli victims are never shown. But covering the war bloodlessly is a form of bias in itself. What we need is a TV network courageous enough to show the brutal realities found
on Al-Jazeera - not to support one side or the other, but to give Americans a visceral understanding of how horrific war really is.4

While the set of stories to be concentrated on will be drawn from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Calderwood’s writings about the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine in Gaza are also very applicable.

Calderwood likens the American experience of war as being a kind of “privileged status”, the kind of “bloodless coverage” made possible only by living in “a country far from conflict.”5

The second set of stories will focus on events outside the United States, specifically the way events outside the U.S. are reported by the American media and interpreted by Americans. The stories in this category will be drawn from the 2005 London bombings. Bias (although often unchecked and unnoticed) plays a monumental role here.

Present day Americans have long been conditioned to think of England as an ally, and as such, reactions to and coverage of events in London have always garnered greater interest than events of similar circumstances in other parts of the world. For their part, many mainstream media outlets in London acted in kind when pledging their support for our President as he prepared to go to war following the September

4 Eric Calderwood, “Putting the horrors of war on TV,” The Week, January 30, 2009, 12.

11th attacks. Many photo opportunities for the media were provided to capture the solidarity between former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former President George W. Bush in the lead up to the war in Iraq, but what was hardly reported by the American media were tensions between the two men, and the disagreements they had over the course the war should take.

Differences of opinion between the two leaders were rarely mentioned by the American media during the lead up to the war, and many Americans remained in the dark about the disagreements over “responsibility for post-Saddam Iraq”6 and the tensions it would later cause between the U.S. and England as the war in Iraq began to show no sign of an exit strategy. These kinds of inclusions and omissions in reporting are important to note because they speak to ways international events are covered by the American media. These kinds of examples also serve to highlight differences that often exist in reporting when events occur in counties allied with the United States, that is to say, the reporting may be more favorable.

The final set of stories will deal with nature, and how natural disasters in other parts of the world are seen by Americans as reported by the American media. For this part of the analysis, news pieces from the 2004 tsunami will be analyzed. Here the U.S. reaction to and coverage of the U.S. based Hurricane Katrina will be juxtaposed with Thailand’s 2004 tsunami that claimed so many lives.

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While Hurricane Katrina dealt a massive blow to the southern United States, the death and damage toll was in no way comparable to the devastation of the 2004 tsunami in Thailand.

It is the goal of this comprehensive analysis to methodically examine the circumstances at work behind the scenes at American media outlets, and to give American consumers a keener eye through which to view all facets of American produced media. The analysis will begin with an examination of coverage concerning the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Much of this coverage will reveal ways mainstream American media picks and chooses elements to report and omit when reporting. Many Americans who haven’t closely followed either conflict would be hard pressed to name distinct differences between the two situations, and one of the main reasons for this is because of the kind of coverage they are privy to here in America.
CHAPTER 2
AMERICAN JOURNALISM AND THE WARS IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

From the beginning of the Iraq war, this war has always been about “9/11” in the eyes of many Americans. For some, the differences between Sadaam Hussein and Osama bin Laden are scarcely known. A recent study published by The Associated Press found that despite the fact that “their country has been at war there [in Iraq] for three years, six in ten young American adults were unable to locate Iraq on a map of the world.” ¹

This shocking statistic serves to highlight the lack of interest many Americans share when it comes to the war, to the extreme that, statistically speaking, some of the same people who have a strong opinion about the war are at the same time unable to locate the place of conflict on a map.

It would be too convenient to place all the blame on American citizens, because they are only as good as the variety of information to which they have access. Most people don’t have opportunities to be worldwide travelers, or even have the option of subscribing to the BBC via their local cable provider.

The extent to which the press misrepresents and omits things in reporting can be so extensive that even some U.S. politicians can’t get the facts straight. A 2007 article from The Boston Globe noted:

…in the May 15 Republican debate in South Carolina, Senator John McCain of Arizona suggested that Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden would ‘follow us home’ from Iraq -- a comment some viewers may have taken to mean that bin Laden was in Iraq, which he is not.²

Critics of the war were quick to point out that this wasn’t just the result of shoddy reporting by American journalists, but rather that “Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney encouraged…using misleading terms to describe the threat posed by Iraq before the war” and used the press to disseminate their agenda.³

Alex Jones is the director of Harvard University's Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy and a Pulitzer Prize winner. Jones has studied the media for decades, and agrees that American journalists are not solely to blame for failures in reporting about Iraq and Afghanistan. Jones says that post September 11th, “the United States reentered the sacred domain. Having been made aware of the nation's vulnerability, the American people and media were behind President Bush and his response.”⁴ In analyzing U.S. coverage post 9/11, an MIT article noted:

...invading Afghanistan faced little debate within the country. There was much debate in the media elsewhere, but not in the sacred domain of the U.S. Although in the early stages, The Guardian reported that the conflict would be "ten times worse than Vietnam," the U.S. had a surprisingly successful moment in Afghanistan, where the tribes and clans turned against the unpopular Taliban, and there was relatively little guerilla warfare. This set the stage for the movement into Iraq.⁵


³ Ibid.


⁵ Ibid.
Many American journalists found themselves caught up in the newfound sentiment of patriotism and pride for country. The late, well respected journalist Tim Russert of NBC was quoted as saying, “Yes, I’m a journalist, but first, I’m an American. Our country is at war with terrorists, and as an American, I support the effort wholeheartedly.”

If only it were as easy as pointing to an article from a mainstream American newspaper that contained some kind of black and white proof that a bias exists in the media’s war reporting. But, as the saying goes, if it were that easy, everyone would do it. Perhaps a lot of the reason the debate over what kind of a bias exists in American media continues is precisely because there’s little “concrete proof” in writing. A literal “reading between the lines” is needed, a keen eye to look for not just what is being reported, but also what isn’t being included that perhaps should be.

If there’s a bias that exists in the American media when it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan (and I believe there is), its not for some journalists’ lack of trying to abolish it. In an article from *The New York Times* entitled, “Reporters Say Networks Put Wars on Back Burner”, CBS News Correspondent Lara Logan recalled how one producer told her “one guy in uniform looks like any other guy in a uniform” when justifying why the war wasn’t a top priority for the newscast.

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In fact, reporters from various mainstream American outlets have all reported frustrations in trying to get stories about war on the air and have questions surrounding their continued presence in Iraq.

Journalists at all three American television networks with evening newscasts expressed worries that their news organizations would withdraw from the Iraqi capital after the November presidential election. They spoke only on the condition of anonymity in order to avoid offending their employers.8

In present day 2009, many Americans think the invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq were entered into too quickly. Many of the people sharing this belief have arrived at this notion because time has revealed it. But we have to wonder if more Americans would have questioned the war earlier had it not been for the cheerleading by the American media leading up to and during the early stages of war.

Just a few weeks ago, Iraqi citizens held their first national provincial elections, but in 2004, many mainstream American media outlets were already heralding the so called “transfer of power” over to the Iraqi government as a major milestone, when many reports of people in the know pointed to the contrary. The front page of the The Washington Post featured a large picture above the fold depicting the transfer of power. The article was entitled, “U.S. Hands Authority to Iraq Two Days Early”, a choice of words that comes off as something positive to passersby on the street.9 The “transfer of power” was hyped up by the American media as a big achievement. Meanwhile, even someone who had read only a few

8 Ibid.

articles about the latest in Iraq would know the “transfer of power” ceremony was actually moved up a few days in an effort to avoid attacks by insurgents on the ceremony, a clear sign that things in Iraq were far from being even minimally stable.

Using the ethical framework designed to analyze news stories, the facts of the story are the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and the “transfer of power” ceremony that had recently taken place. The Post article mentions key players involved in the ceremony, and reports the facts of the situation accurately. There are no glaring ethical breaches in terms of the information reported. As is often the case in this area of study, its the way things are placed or phrased rather than a glaring factual error that puts a black mark on the way American media reports the conflict.

The presentation of the article isn’t a case of ignorance or misreporting on the part of the writer. The author, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, is a recognizable name to anyone who reads The Washington Post on a regular basis. Chandrasekaran is a former bureau chief for the newspaper’s Baghdad bureau, and lived in Baghdad during the build-up to the war, so he certainly knows first hand what on-the-ground conditions are like. 10

Chandrasekaran is also the author of Imperial Life in the Emerald City, a book about life inside Baghdad’s “green zone”, so again, there’s no shortage of first-hand information that’s likely to cause misrepresentations in his reporting.11


11 Ibid.
Chandrasekaran is an American-Indian male, and given his extensive background in Iraqi affairs, it’s hard to imagine he would hold some kind of religious, political, or gender bias or any kind of personal bias that would impact his reporting.

In this instance, the third quadrant of the analytical tool seems to be exerting its influence. *The Washington Post*, in the past thought of as a liberal leaning publication, has trended more towards the center in recent years. *The Post* is, after all, a business like any other, and during a time when positive coverage of the war was selling newspapers and heightening the morale of the American public, *The Post*, along with other newspapers that have trended “left” in the past, found themselves moving more towards the center as it became popular with consumers.

During an episode of the cable news show, “Hardball” in March of 2007, outspoken host Chris Matthews commented on *The Post’s* move towards the right in recent years. During a segment with Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), Matthews said, “Well, *The Washington Post* is not the liberal newspaper it was, Congressman, let me tell you. I have been reading it for years and it is a neocon newspaper.” MSNBC has long been regarded among cable-watchers as the most liberal of the three cable news outlets and Matthews seems to have noticed a change in *The Post’s* reporting, calling it a “neocon” (meaning neoconservative) newspaper.

This is just one example of why it’s important to remember that news outlets are businesses like any other and that they need to sell newspapers to survive. Long

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time Post editor Katharine Graham wrote in her book, *Personal History*, about the paper’s long tradition of not endorsing Presidential candidates. This was done as part of an effort to remain neutral in reporting and combat any perceived bias at the paper. But even this changed as newspaper endorsements of Presidential candidates became popular, and *The Post* followed suit to remain competitive.\textsuperscript{13}

Whether or not this behavior is ethical is up for debate, which accounts for a large part of the reason why ethics is news reporting goes unchecked and undiscussed. On the one hand, there is the argument that it's simply a hazard of doing business, and that *The Post* is merely trying to stay in the game. But on the other hand, there’s the fact that Americans are conditioned to buy things that are pleasing rather than disturbing or upsetting, and while no doubt a variety of photos depicting on-the-ground scenes in Iraq could have been chosen to accompany the “transfer of power” article, the one chosen (three men in suits smiling against a nondescript white background) is a picture that doesn’t offend.

In her book *The Making of Arab News*, Noha Mellor talks about the differences between what is acceptable in American news reporting versus in overseas reporting. Mellor says American newspapers will often sacrifice issues deserving attention for more flashy and fun pieces. “CNN…relies on health and

lifestyle news at the expense of political news. The boundary between hard news and soft news has become blurred, with the latter becoming a staple of the news diet….” 14

In 2003, The Los Angeles Times, in keeping with many other American newspapers that year, declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended with the fall of Tikrit. The banner headline read, “The Iraq Regime ‘Is At Its End’: Major Combat Over With Fall of Tikrit; Bush Thanks Troops.” 15 However, right below the headline and next to a picture of U.S. soldiers aboard a humvee waving an American flag and smiling were the words, “smaller firefights are expected to continue. Ground forces will probably remain in large numbers for more than a year, official says.” 16 Despite the positive headline and seemingly happy photo, the newspaper itself acknowledged that all was not well in the region, but the photo and headline they chose to run emphasized a different aspect of their lead story.

The facts of this story aren’t misleading, but there are certainly ethical concerns that need to be examined. An argument can be made that in 2003, many Americans, including members of the American media, were hopeful that things in Iraq really were turning around, and the quagmire that currently exists was not even thought of as a likely possibility.

Having stated that, the front page of the Los Angeles Times does not create itself. Editorial decisions are made everyday with regard to content and what will sell


16 Ibid.
papers, and it’s these decisions that must be examined. The *Los Angeles Times*, or *LA Times* as its commonly referred to, has long been thought of as a liberal newspaper, although it too has trended more towards the center in recent years (further proof of newspapers adapting to what’s popular and adjusting publications to fit the move towards the center) as the nation followed the Presidential primary season and the 2008 Presidential election.

The newspaper recently changed ownership, and is currently owned by U.S. billionaire Sam Zell, who has a long history of promoting and contributing to Republican political campaigns. Zell took over the newspaper in 2007, so perhaps any favorable war coverage since then can be linked to Zell’s guidance and right-wing political leanings, but that doesn’t explain this article from 2003. What explains it then? Just two years after the September 11th attacks, patriotism was still riding a high wave, and many Americans remained hopeful that the invasion of Iraq would end up being a success, and this edition of the *LA Times*, along with so many other newspapers and broadcasts that year, chose to play up positive elements of the story in Iraq out of a desire to cater to what many Americans wanted to hear.

The argument of “available space” is more applicable to newspaper publications than it is to cable news stations that have 24 hours in a day to fill, but here, with the *LA Times* article, we’re talking about a front page story. The front page

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story is the most visible story in any newspaper, and is chosen very deliberately and after much debate. It is here that the ethics of decisions really comes into play.

According to the Society of Professional Journalists, it is the obligation of journalists to seek the “truth and prov[ide] a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.” 18 Also included in the code is the command to “never distort the context of news photos or video” and to “distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.” 19 In the past, the press has been criticized for its promoting of the Bush Administration’s agenda, and putting a largely positive spin on the war seems to be a symptom of that.

Defenders of the American media (myself included among them) often have an inclination to give journalists the benefit of the doubt when it comes to certain aspects of their reporting. Journalists in America (with the exception of those embedded overseas on foreign assignments) heavily rely on the Associated Press for information. Peter Phillips is the author of “A Study of Bias in the Associated Press” an investigative piece that examined the kinds of stories distributed by the AP and also which U.S. newspapers chose to run them. Part of their investigation focused on the 2004 death of an Iraqi male by suspected torture, although the cause of death of

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19 Ibid.
the male was technically ruled to be “undetermined.”\textsuperscript{20} The controversy surrounded the possible link between torture and U.S. interrogations.

The article looked at two separate cases of Iraqi citizens who likely died as a result of torture situations imposed on them during interrogations. Only one major newspaper and a dozen smaller newspapers covered this story, which was distributed via the AP. The study found that “given that nearly every daily newspaper in the United States subscribes to AP wire service and that AP had in fact sent out the torture story led us to question if story selection bias was widespread within U.S. newspapers and if bias was evident within the AP system itself.” The implication here is that U.S. based newspapers stayed away from the story because it wasn’t flattering to the United States. This lack of coverage in U.S. newspapers likely then led to a lack of coverage on national television, because so many stories that make it to mainstream broadcast news are generated from newspaper articles.

I can say first hand as a result of my work experience that the Associated Press wire service is the first place I look to for breaking news stories, and subsequent updates of stories. I know I am not alone in doing so, and that in fact, this is a very common practice among television journalists. This is why the above example is so important, because it highlights the power the AP has when it comes to story dissemination for both print and broadcast news.

When crafting the proposal for this research, I certainly didn’t think that the U.S. economy was going to play a role in my thesis research. But as the weeks have turned into months and more and more Americans have lost their jobs and are increasingly worried about finances, I have seen the U.S. economy become a major player in American news.

Over the past few months, I have become very familiar with business reporting and learned more “Wall Street jargon” than I ever cared to know. After all, I’m a “journalist”, if I was interested in the stock market, that’s what jobs at FOX Business Network and CNBC are for. Much to my own surprise, I’ve watched the fragile state of U.S. businesses become the news, and dominate coverage in both newspapers and on television here in America.

There is no better example of the economy as “issue number one” than the speech President Obama gave to a joint session of Congress in February in Washington. An excerpt from The Chicago Tribune stated:

…the new president's premier speech to the House and Senate at 9 pm EST is not a State of the Union address, but one television network already is billing it as a ‘Fate of the Union’ appeal in an era of economic crisis: rising unemployment, sinking stock prices, rampant home mortgage foreclosures and a crippling credit crunch.21

The economy has taken center stage, and news about Iraq and Afghanistan is playing a supporting role at best. Earlier this year, President Obama signed the economic recovery package into law on the same day he announced he was sending more troops into Afghanistan.

News of the troop surge could not compete with images all over the news of the President signing the stimulus plan into law. Even if the coinciding of the two news events was a tactical move on the part of the Obama Administration, that is not an excuse for why the stimulus bill was covered more by mainstream American media outlets.

As journalists, we’re not supposed to follow an agenda set forth by the Administration, but rather to report all of the news, regardless of what it is. But during a time when Americans have an insatiable hunger for Wall Street numbers and the latest bank bail outs, it's mutually beneficial for both the Administration and American news outlets to heavily focus on the economy. The Administration wants to “sell” their economic message to the American public, and at the same time, the news organizations want to rake in ratings by covering it.

It might sound callous when bluntly stated, but a majority of Americans are only interested in news that directly impacts them. Some may argue that for small town America, news of the war in Iraq and a troop surge in Afghanistan have a direct impact, because many of these towns have sons and daughters serving overseas.

While this may be the case, its may not be so for the majority, because if it was, it would be dominating mainstream news coverage. “The war” is still front page news in many other parts of the world, but here, in America, citizens have grown tired of it. At this point, they would rather not see another report on the nightly news of how yet another improvised explosive device has needlessly killed American soldiers.
In the introduction, I planned to look at how Americans interpret coverage of international news events in light of their own situations, with a focus on the most timely examples of ongoing conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to the economic freefall here in the U.S., a trend away from war reporting was already taking shape, due to oversaturation of stories about the war. But now, economic uncertainty has given way to full out panic, making it much more difficult to stay interested in the war when families are worried about things as fundamental as having a job and money for groceries.

Soon after taking office, President Obama ordered that a law that was followed under his predecessor, President George W. Bush, be reexamined. The law, first imposed on American media photographers during the Persian Gulf War, was a ban on photographing caskets of deceased American soldiers as they returned from war.

Supporters of the law argue that, “fallen warriors deserve to be honored without compromise and not made the object of a media event or be made vulnerable to exploitation for propagandistic purposes.” But some who want the law repealed, including former Democratic Presidential candidate Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts say “the truth is on the line” and that the ban “violates the very principles of free speech and free exchange of ideas for which these very heroes have

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died.”\textsuperscript{23} The article goes on to note that, “\textit{The New York Times} and other newspapers also want the ban rescinded in the name of transparency.”\textsuperscript{24} In recent weeks, the law was repealed for casket arrivals at Dover Air Base, and the choice left up to family members of the deceased to decide whether to allow media photographs to be taken or not. Many people credited the American media with getting the ban lifted, because it devoted so much coverage to the issue which allowed people to become well informed on the topic.

In the news business, journalists are subject to all kinds of photos and videos that are questionable for broadcast. I was working as a News Assistant at CNN during Hurricane Katrina and can tell you that the control room (usually a busy and boisterous place) had a hushed silence over it as we watched footage of the damage being fed in from various sources. Many of these images made it to air, but many more did not due to their graphic nature. I cite this example because despite all the video I see day in and day out in my job, the un-aired images of Hurricane Katrina are the most vivid in my mind, because they were so jarring. Perhaps if caskets were allowed to be photographed from the start of the war it would have helped Americans to remember the war – to keep it present - for longer than we did. Having said that, with the way things stand now, with the economy in total upheaval, the images of casket arrivals that have been published have been a distraction at best from the economic news.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
CHAPTER 3  
AMERICAN JOURNALISM AND OVERSEAS TERROR EVENTS

The previous chapter focused on the way stories about Iraq and Afghanistan have been covered in the United States by mainstream media and also the American people’s reactions to stories about the conflicts. But what happens when the stakes are a little lower? What happens when even at its peak, an international news event does not strike fear into the hearts of Americans? That is to say, when something is not perceived as posing a direct threat to U.S. interests, are American citizens still interested or does a kind of tune-out factor take over?

As has been made apparent, American news can be in large part driven by consumer perception and interest, and it is through this lens that the 2005 London bombings will be examined.

England is perhaps the strongest ally to the United States, and it’s within U.S. interests to maintain positive perceptions as well as relations with England. Many of the positive feelings about our across the pond ally exist because of the long term kinship between the two countries. As a result, many Americans (and this is certainly reflected in the press) have a stronger interest in news about England versus that from other parts of the world.

The July 7, 2005 London bombings, while no doubt a tragic occurrence, are an example of this. The bombings took place on the morning of July 7th during London’s rush hour along the city’s public transportation system. Three bombs were all detonated within seconds of one another on underground trains, and a fourth bomb
exploded on a city bus shortly thereafter. Speculation quickly swirled that the bombings were acts of terrorism by Islamic extremists. The attacks claimed the lives of 56 people, including four suicide bombers. Additionally, more than 700 people were injured as a result of the violence.

Not surprisingly, the media coverage in and around London was non-stop. But what is perhaps more surprising is the kind of coverage the bombings received here in the United States. I don’t mean to posit that anyone should be shocked by the fact that U.S. news was largely focused on the bombings, but rather the lasting effect that the bombings have had, and the follow up stories that have been done here in America about the bombings by sheer virtue of the fact that the bombings occurred in England, and not a more distant, less “relatable” country. When news of the bombings began to be covered in America, the press made the story interesting to Americans by creating connections between what was happening in London with people living in the United States.

At the same time that an examination of the amount of time devoted to U.S. coverage of this story will be examined, the ways that Americans react to and interpret news that is happening “somewhere else” will be undertaken. The ways the American people’s reactions impact major American media outlets as a business will also be examined.

By July of 2005, the war in Iraq had been underway for some time, and the Bush Administration often praised Tony Blair and the British people for their support in the war effort. President Bush and Britain’s Prime Minister discussed the war and
its progress with regularity, and the American press covered photo opportunities of the visiting Prime Minister whenever he was a guest of President Bush at the White House.

Despite the good natured relationship between the two world leaders depicted in the press, not all was well behind the scenes. While largely absent from mainstream media reports, tensions between the two men existed. A 2005 report published by the conservative think tank *The Heritage Foundation*, emphasized strains in the relationship between Bush and Blair. The article noted that, “the special relationship [between the 2 men] may, this week, take a behind-the-scenes battering, but it is strong enough to withstand even major disagreements.”¹

One of the main reasons the mainstream American press was reluctant to discuss any kind of rift between the two was so a united stance on the war in Iraq could continue to be presented. The article acknowledged this, saying in part, “a joint statement of resolve on the part of London and Washington will send an important message to the terrorists who sow death and destruction in the Sunni heartlands that Allied forces will remain in the country until the insurgency is defeated.”²

The London bombings occurred a few months after this article was published. At the time, European news outlets went wall to wall with coverage. The American media also extensively covered the bombings with continuing coverage, meaning the


² Ibid.
coverage lasted for longer than a news cycle, and the story continues to be updated even today, years later, as new arrests are made in the case. A FOXnews.com article from January of this year entitled, “Al Qaeda Suspect in London Terror Bombings Arrested in Pakistan” covered the arrest of operative Zabi-ul-Taifi in connection with the bombings.\(^3\)

The reasons for this kind of extensive coverage are two-fold. As I briefly referenced in the introduction, the United States has long had a close relationship with England and as such, has an interest in the news that happens there, to the point that American citizens may be more interested in news that happens to and in a country with which we’re closely allied.

In covering the July 7, 2005 London bombings, the American media was quick to draw parallels to the attacks of September 11, 2001. While the United States was sympathetic to what had happened in London, there were some questionable motives behind the ways major U.S. newspapers reported the bombings.

Following the attacks that Thursday, the front page of The Washington Post here in the U.S. read, “Bombers strike London at Rush Hour”. While there is nothing especially sinister about this headline, there are some editorial decisions that need to be questioned. For example, when reporting the story, that is relaying the facts of what happened in London, there was no need to reference the September 11\(^{th}\) attacks,

Bombers Strike London at Rush Hour

At Least 37 Killed on Trains, Bus

In this issue of The Washington Post, readers can find news articles and insights into various topics. The front page features a significant event in London, where multiple bombings occurred during rush hour, leading to the loss of at least 37 lives. The article highlights the intensity and impact of the attacks, providing a comprehensive overview of the situation. The content is accompanied by images and graphics that enhance understanding and convey the gravity of the event.
especially in the sub-headline and again in the very first words of the article on the front page.

The sub-headline of the article leaves no doubt - written is boldface type is, “Attacks Bear Earmarks Of Evolving Al Qaeda.”\(^4\) This sub-headline gives blame a prominent place, leaving no question as to who is to blame for the attacks, branding this as “just another” act of violence from Al Qaeda.\(^5\) This sub-headline is even more misleading when you consider all the people that will catch a glimpse of the headline while passing by. People will walk by, not having read the substance of the article and will walk away misinformed. They will never read the portion of the piece that explains with better accuracy possible players and those claiming ownership for the attacks.

The text of the article was positioned at the very top left hand corner of the newspaper, so that when reading, as we naturally do from left to right, the very first words someone reading the article sees are, “After Sept. 11, 2001…”\(^6\) This is a word choice that immediately creates a link between the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the attacks in London.

According to the analytical framework, this phrasing amounts to some stretching of the truth when it comes to the facts of the “story”. While The Post article does not outright misinform people, it does draw conclusions that are not relevant or


\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.
worthy enough to be included in the first paragraph of the first story on the front page of the newspaper. These kinds of editorial decisions stem from questionable ethics, and because of this it is necessary to question the motives behind these decisions.

The second and third quadrants of the framework look at staff and monetary considerations. *The Post*, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, has been a notoriously left leaning publication that’s been trending towards the center as of late. Having said that, it’s necessary to keep in mind that in July of 2005, much of the United States was still very much backing the war effort overseas, and it would not have been popular for *The Post* to question this line of thinking, especially when the attacks had occurred on the soil of our most trusted ally. It was prudent for *The Post* to follow suit as many other mainstream American news outlets were doing, and to project ideas that immediately drew a link between the attacks in London and September 11th 2001, because it served as a kind of reinforcement of the United States and the war effort abroad.

The final quadrant of the tool looks at what is logistically possible in a news piece, and in this case, logistics were working with, not against *The Post*. The attacks occurred during the morning rush hour in London on Thursday July 5, 2005, and this Friday edition of *The Post* did not come out until the following day. While there were of course printing deadlines to be met on July 5, 2005 for the newspaper, there was enough time to format the next day’s paper in a manner that fit the liking of editors at the newspaper. The attacks, having occurred in London, were 5 hours ahead of east coast time in the United States, giving papers in the United States an extra half a day
to prepare the next day’s paper. It’s not as if a special edition had to go to print late at night to accommodate late breaking news. Had this been the case, the paper could be forgiven some of its choices due to the extreme time crunch that would have existed.

But these were not the circumstances for *The Post*, nor were they the circumstances for another leading U.S. newspaper, *The New York Times*, which chose to go with the headline, “Subway and Bus Blasts in London Kill at Least 37” on the cover of its Friday, July 8, 2005 edition.⁷

Similar to the cover of *The Post*, this edition of *The Times* chose to go with a grainy photograph depicting the bombings on its cover. The picture appears on the front pages of both newspapers and was taken by a cell phone camera so it’s grainy and hard to decipher. Prominent in the picture are the underground beams and piping systems, which appear eerily reminiscent of the September 11th, 2001 ravaged steel photo that was published so many times following the attacks on the World Trade Center towers here in the United States.⁸

Images of familiar gray steel and hazy smog blanket the scene in both photos, similarities that subconsciously, if not consciously, force a mental connection in the minds of many Americans. It’s not enough to excuse the American media for using this photo on their front pages by saying that this was the photo that was most

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Subway and Bus Blasts in London Kill at Least 37

700 Are Wounded
4 Survivors Range to 18
More than 100 Injured

In Americans, Lurking Fears Rise to Surface

Timers Used in Blasts, Police Say
Parallels to Madrid Are Found

Out of Practice, Senate Crams For Battle Over Court Nominees

The New York Times, July 8, 2005
available following the attacks, as examples of Friday editions from other major newspapers around the world reveal.

In France, the July 8, 2005 edition of the newspaper, *Le Monde* went with a picture of two women, one wrapped in a blanket and the other with a small mask on her face on its front page. The picture is above ground, in daylight, and is not hard to decipher in any way. In Ireland, the *Irish Independent* used a picture of the bus that exploded on its front page, and while the image of the torn apart bus is no doubt disturbing, it’s in no way reminiscent of the grainy photos used by newspapers in the U.S. on July 5, 2005. Even in London, the home of the bombings, the grainy images weren’t used. Instead, the July 5, 2005 edition of *The Daily Telegraph* featured a close-up photo of a woman holding a cloth to her face in an attempt to protect herself from the severe burns she had suffered from the attack.

In applying the analytical framework to the front page of *The New York Times* from July 8, 2005, the questionable choice of photograph is clear. As for the text, the main article on the front page, entitled “700 Are Wounded”\(^9\) included a graph about halfway down the front page that read:

...after the attacks, the United States raised its terror alert level from elevated to high for mass transit systems, and European nations also increased mass transit security precautions. A group describing itself as being affiliated with Al Qaeda took responsibility for the attacks on a Web site....\(^{10}\)

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
Une série d'attentats a frappé les transports publics de Londres.

Figure 3: Le Monde, July 8, 2005
Half a bus was flying through the air... I think it was the 205

London passenger panic as terror blasts kill dozens

Figure 4. The Irish Independent, July 8, 2005
Al-Qa’eda brings terror to the heart of London

Figure 5. The Daily Telegraph, July 8, 2005
The article goes on to say that the “group, the Secret Organization of Al Qaeda in Europe, said the attacks had been undertaken to avenge British involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.”11

Editorially, there is nothing false about this, but there also is no journalistic need to mention a possible motivator for the attacks being retaliation for British involvement in the wars. Later in the article, when describing one victim’s struggle to survive in the bombing, the article reads, “he broke down in tears once above the ground, calling his mother to assure her he was in good shape, just as people did on Sept. 11, 2001.”12 The reason for this inclusion can be attributed to the same kind of motivations editors at The Post may have had, a desire, whether knowingly or not, to connect in some way the attacks of September 11th to the 2005 London bombings. Another title on the front page of The New York Times read, “In Americans, Lurking Fears Rise to the Surface” another phrase linking the bombings and the September 11th attacks.13

Here again, because the bombings were front page news, the availability of space was not an issue. The formatting of the front page was used entirely to frame the London bombing story. The American media’s reaction to news of the London bombings was one of horror - but the events also served as a kind of affirmation that

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
the war effort was “worth” it, that the U.S. was going after legitimate enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the United States, coverage in The Washington Post and The New York Times, only served to reinforce connections between the two terror events. But in other parts of the U.S. as well as London, many citizens were wondering just the opposite. In a July 2005 article published by the San Francisco Chronicle, Zachary Coile wondered about the “meaning” behind the London bombings. According to Coile:

…on the streets of London and elsewhere, the bombings have rekindled a debate that has raged in Britain ever since Blair pledged to join President Bush in the invasion of Iraq. While virtually unanimous in their condemnation of the bombings, some have begun to ask whether the country's role in the Iraq conflict helped bring about the worst attack on the British mainland since World War II. "France hasn't had any attacks, has it?" said Liam Bennet, 53, who runs a diaper delivery service in west London near the Edgware Road subway station, site of one of the bombings. "They're not attacking the French because they made it clear they were not going to send troops to Iraq."

This perspective was not widely reported in the American media, because it wasn’t advantageous to the American stance at the time that we needed to support our troops overseas.

David Altheide is the author of “Format and Symbols in TV Coverage of Terrorism in the United States and Great Britain.” In his writing, Altheide notes the importance of understanding how communication systems work.

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The dominant source of information for most Americans about international affairs is the evening newscast of the three major American networks which devote approximately 10 minutes per newscast to news of an international nature.\(^{15}\)

In my job, we pay close attention to ratings, and it’s in fact true that the three main nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC have been the main staple of the average American consumer’s news diet for years. It’s important to reiterate that many of the stories that make it to major television news outlets in this country originate from newspaper articles. If newspaper coverage is biased or omits information, there’s a good chance these mistakes will carry over to television.

When the London bombings occurred, I was working in the newsroom at CNN’s Washington, DC bureau. The bombings were one of the first major news events I covered. I remember the newsroom buzzing, like it always does during breaking news situations. I also remember how quickly speculation turned to Al Qaeda, and possible reports that they were behind these attacks, an example of journalists making the same kinds of assumptions (accurately or not) that everyday Americans make.

The way Americans think about and react to news is symptomatic of how we live here in the United States. One of the reasons the current economic recession has been such a wake up call for many Americans is because it has directly impacted them. Economic news has largely taken over American news reports in both its broadcast and print forms.

I bring up the current economic crisis because it underscores the point that when the news is directly connected to U.S. interests, Americans care deeply. In the case of the 2005 London bombings, Americans cared insofar as the attacks might be an indicator of future attacks in the United States. The mainstream American media cared because making the connection between Al Qaeda and September 11th to the London bombings was an effective way to tell the news in terms of viewer interest.
 CHAPTER 4

DISASTER REPORTING: HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE 2004 TSUNAMI

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast of the U.S. in August 2005, the world was no stranger to the havoc natural disasters were capable of inflicting. Less than two years prior, in December 2004, the world watched in horror as a major tsunami decimated countries along the Indian Ocean, including parts of Indonesia, India and Thailand.

While Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. claimed the lives of nearly 1,400 people, the natural disaster received as much (and as some would argue, more) press coverage in the United States than the 2004 tsunami, which left over 200,000 dead or missing.¹

One of the reasons that could account for this disparity is the predisposed nature many citizens have toward “American” news. Specifically, the way many Americans are conditioned somehow compels them to care more deeply about American based news events versus international news events. In previous chapters, this behavior has been looked at in relation to the war in Iraq and in terror situations, such as the 2005 London bombings.

In an article published by Reuters shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, author Marc Serota wondered if one American life was more “valuable” than a whole group of lives in another part of the world. In comparing Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 tsunami, Serota described the disparity, noting it was:

…unfortunate but inevitable [that] many will recall these two significantly different disasters as being of similar impact, complete with the implication that, like the crude news maxim, in today’s world, one American life is worth thousands of any other country’s inhabitants.2

In war situations, such as the previously examined case of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, many Americans made excuses for the reasons they cared more about “American” news. With regard to the war effort, people claimed their interest stemmed from the September 11th attacks, and this line of reasoning also carried over and served as a rationale for many Americans in relation to the 2005 London bombings. In the instance of the bombings, many Americans largely cared about the ongoing details of that situation because of the implications the attacks could potentially have for the United States with regard to future terror acts.

Will the tune be any different when the story isn’t about a war or terror situation? Does news of natural disasters trump country borders? Or does the interest only last until something more “U.S. based” comes along to shift the focus? At first glance, when the 2004 tsunami hit, all of the major U.S. newspapers covered the story, just as they did during Hurricane Katrina. The accompanying pictures of newspaper covers from both events prove that much, such as the covers of both stories from The New York Times, which gave front page billing to both events. The December 27, 2004 edition of The Times read, “Thousands Die as Quake-Spawned

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Waves Crash Onto Coastlines Across Southern Asia.”³ The August 30, 2005 cover of The Times read, “Hurricane Slams into Gulf Coast; Dozens are Dead”.⁴ What is interesting to note is that despite the huge difference in the death toll, both the tsunami and the hurricane were both on the front page of The Times, even as the headline explicitly stated that “thousands” of people had died in the tsunami and “dozens” had died in the tsunami.

What could account for these differences other than the supposition that Americans are simply more interested in what’s happening in the U.S. versus in other parts of the world? A study published jointly by the Salzburg Global Seminar and the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda may have the answer. In researching this very question with respect to natural occurrences like tsunamis and hurricanes - if “newspapers give equal coverage to all natural disasters that occur around the globe,” the study found that U.S. newspapers are inconsistent when it comes to their reporting of global natural disasters.

According to the study, the extent of coverage is determined by several factors, including “geographic location, ethnicity of the people involved” and “proximity.”⁵ The study examined the newspaper coverage a natural disaster

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⁴ Joseph B. Trester, Kate Zernike, “Hurricane Slams into Gulf Coast; Dozens are Dead,” The New York Times, August 30, 2005.

Figure 6. The New York Times, December 27, 2004
received within the first week of its occurrence. In a bar graph entitled, “Coverage of disasters in their first week”, the study found striking differences between the amount of a coverage an event received based on 3 factors. Notably, the amount of coverage was largely dependant upon the location of the disaster when it came to the amount of articles written by *The New York Times*, the U.S. newspaper the study focused on.

When the 2004 tsunami occurred, the study concluded that *The New York Times* published 36 articles about the tsunami, compared to London’s *The Guardian* newspaper, which published 86 articles about the tsunami.⁶ By comparison, the number of articles published in the first week by *The New York Times* about Hurricane Katrina clocked in at 190 articles. While less than the 86 articles published by *The Guardian* about the tsunami, the London newspaper still published 47 articles about Hurricane Katrina within the first week of its occurrence.⁷ These numbers support the theory that U.S. news coverage is largely driven by the direct impact or perceived threat the news story is thought to have by Americans. The study accompanying article noted that, “Hurricane Katrina dominated the newspapers throughout the first week and the year of the disaster.”⁸

When compared with the coverage of other bigger disasters, Hurricane Katrina received more coverage than any other of the disasters; 190 articles in the first week, and 2,978 in the first year in *The New York Times*. At the same time the earthquake in Chile received little or no attention, emphasizing that the proximity has an impact on the amount of coverage. The tsunami in the Indian Ocean despite its cross continental impact did not receive as much

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⁶ Ibid, “Coverage of disasters in their first week” Graph.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.
(Number of Articles in the first week from each paper)

Fig 8. Coverage of disasters in their first week
attention as the U.S. hurricane, and, in comparison, got a mere 36 articles in the first week, and 140 by the end of the year in The New York Times. The people of Sumatra, where the tsunami struck its most devastating blow, received less attention compared with those affected in the U.S.9

The same study also found that, “Hurricane Katrina got the most news coverage when the total amount of [hurricane related] casualties was 1,326. The tsunami had the highest number of casualties, 225,000 in total, but received less attention.”10

The article ultimately concludes that a number of factors, chief among them the amount of press coverage an event receives, can ultimately have an impact on everything from the amount of aid a country receives to the amount of follow up stories that will be done about the story. In quoting United Nations Humanitarian Chief Jan Egeland, the article says:

…human life is of as much worth in Sudan as it is in Sri Lanka or Thailand. There might have been a comparable outpouring of aid in African emergencies if they had received as much TV coverage as the Indian Ocean tsunami. There was no such coverage of the 1.6 million refugees that were nearly in a ‘tsunami’ of killing and scorched earth tactics that were displaced in Darfur. If there had been the same kind of video clips I think we might have had a comparable response. In the Congo there is also not that kind of response because there is no coverage.11

The analysis of coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the 2004 tsunami has revealed the inclination that American journalists seem to be predisposed to. In looking at the coverage through the lens of the analytical framework, the biggest issue

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.
is unchecked bias. When the American journalists covering the story are operating a certain way and may not even be aware of it, what kind of an impact does this have on coverage?

Back in 2005, when speaking about Hurricane Katrina, Biloxi, Mississippi mayor A.J. Holloway was quoted as saying, “this is our tsunami.”¹² This quote from Holloway was the title of an article published online by FOX News, which is troubling because it makes it appear as though writers and publishers at FOX News thought it a fitting title for the story. I take issue with the title because in some ways it legitimizes the mayor’s quote, and underscores the idea that some people already held – that Hurricane Katrina was “as bad” as the tsunami. In some ways its an understandable sentiment, especially coming from the mayor of a Mississippi town that was hard hit by the storm, but editorially, I don’t think it should have been used as a headline because its not a factual statement.

The “staff” quadrant of the analytical framework deals with a variety of personal beliefs that staff at an organization may have. In comparing Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami, its understandable that the hurricane, which hit the United States, would strike a stronger emotional blow to people living in the United States.

As journalists, there is an obligation to recognize bias and make an effort to report events accurately. Here, the issue is not about inaccuracies in reporting but rather a failure to provide factual and accurate reporting of both natural disasters.

¹² Foxnews.com, “‘This is our Tsunami,’” Foxnews.com, http://www/foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,167633,00.html (accessed March 10, 2009).
From a corporate ownership standpoint, Hurricane Katrina was the biggest and most devastating hurricane that many people had ever experienced and as such, there was a huge desire for around the clock updates on the storm, and the subsequent relief and rescue efforts. For cable news, it was a perfect fit. The 3 cable outlets covered the story nonstop, and problems with FEMA and protracted relief efforts only lengthened the life of the story.

In writing about the ways media coverage can set the tone for a story and subsequently determine the ways and the extent to which a story is covered, political strategist Mark Mellman wrote:

…media coverage plays a central role in agenda setting – in determining the priority Americans attach to various issues. More than 20 years ago, when we were all studying together, Roy Behr and Shanto Iyengar demonstrated that responses to Gallup’s “most important problem” question flowed directly from the level of TV news coverage issues received and not necessarily from ‘real world’ conditions.13

In terms of how Americans and the American media relates to events having to do with nature, I’ve found that what matters is where the event takes place, not the kind of event it is. A major story will hold America’s attention span for a block of time, until the next, closer to home event occurs. We need look no further than the numerous cases of missing, white women that have dominated the news in recent years. Many Americans know the intimate details of the lives of Natalee Holloway,

Chandra Levy and Laci Peterson and are in fact more interested in these types of stories than any kind of international news event, natural disaster or otherwise.

Hurricane Katrina was a disastrous event on levels that ranged from the individual lives of residents all the way up to the political circles of the Bush Administration. But the storm was not comparable (no matter the scale you use) to the 2004 tsunami. In the aftermath of the hurricane, people were worried about rescuing displaced residents and getting into flooded wards to give the deceased proper burials. Issues of water cleanliness and hygienic concerns were certainly present, but there wasn’t a sense of an “immediate health threat[s] from corpses” or concerns that the dead would have to be “buried without an effort to identify them”, as was the case during the 2004 tsunami.14

After the storm, many people began to wonder why anyone would choose to live in a low lying area like New Orleans, a city so vulnerable to rising sea level. Following the storm, many residents decided to relocate instead of moving back to the area, because this was an option available to them, because in America people can move and live wherever they desire. Some of the residents living in areas devastated by the storm were from low income brackets, but it was (at least in theory) possible for these people to move to different areas within the United States if they desired. I mention this because much of the coverage surrounding Hurricane Katrina focused on the low socioeconomic status of the people living in areas hardest hit by the storm.

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This issue added another layer of complexity to the story, and by extension, added to the coverage of the hurricane here in the United States.

Conversely, residents living in countries hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami had no such option of moving available to them. Yet this aspect of the story and the dire economic situation of the people impacted by the tsunami was hardly a focal point of coverage in the American media. In making this observation, Marc Serota noted that:

Asia’s coastal inhabitants lack choices about where to live, and few can afford insurance to share their risks. By contrast, the people of New Orleans could and should abandon their city’s unsustainable location below sea levels, since only multi-billion dollar coastal and river defenses prevent its demise.15

Years after Hurricane Katrina, many sympathize with Serota’s assessment. Many areas impacted by the hurricane have been rebuilt, due, in no small part to the amount of coverage a combination of activists, politicians, and Hollywood actors have helped bring to the scene. Can we say the same for countries devastated by the tsunami? Reports of progress (or lack thereof) in areas impacted by the tsunami are hardly ever reported by American media outlets.

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CHAPTER 5

ETHICS AND AMERICAN JOURNALISM

Ethics aren’t just a critical part of journalism, they’re an important part of life. For the purposes of this chapter, ethics is defined as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.”\(^1\) No matter the profession, employers of all kinds depend on employees to be reliable and responsible no matter the position they hold. But as much as society would hope that all citizens are ethical all of the time, we know this is not the case. All people are flawed, and an individual’s shortcomings can and often do carry over into a person’s job, and for journalists this is no exception.

In journalism, the problem is two-fold. Not only are employees subject to the same ethical temptations and pressures that all employees are subject to (the use of office copy machines for personal use or stocking up on the supply closet’s post-it supply) for journalists, the work they produce is completely contingent upon ethical decisions they make at every turn in telling a story. Is a journalist telling the story in such a way that is favorable to a person of interest in the story? Or conversely, is the author working on a story because of some personal grudge he holds against participants in the story? Or are there purely selfish motivating factors at play?

Is the journalist trying to get exposure to further his own career aspirations? Chief among these concerns is, how does the ethical behavior of American journalists

impact the work they produce in the U.S. mainstream media? How does ethical or unethical behavior impact the way news consumers interpret things they see on television or read in newspapers and magazines?

To begin, we’ll explore the unethical decisions of two well known American journalists, Jayson Blair and Mike Barnicle. In 2003, the former, Jayson Blair, left The New York Times after reports surfaced showing he had fabricated many stories during his short career, notably including during his tenure at The Times, a very well respected newspaper. Blair’s behavior proved to be not only a black mark on his career but on the newspaper as well. In 2003, the chairman of The New York Times Company, Arthur Sulzberger Jr. was quoted as saying the Blair incident was, “a huge black eye” and that it was “an abrogation of trust between the newspaper and its readers.”²  Among his numerous fabrications, Blair:

…misled readers and Times colleagues with dispatches that purported to be from Maryland, Texas and other states, when often he was far away, in New York. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not.³

By the newspaper’s own admission, Blair’s behavior proved not only to be the end of his career as a respected journalist, it also did a substantial amount of harm to The Times and forced the paper to reevaluate the ethical standards for which their

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³ Ibid.
employees held themselves accountable. In talking about the Blair debacle, the
newspaper noted that:

Every newspaper, like every bank and every police department, trusts its
employees to uphold central principles, and the inquiry found that Mr. Blair
repeatedly violated the cardinal tenet of journalism, which is simply truth. His
tools of deceit were a cellphone and a laptop computer—which allowed him
to blur his true whereabouts as well as round-the-clock access to databases of
news articles from which he stole.\(^4\)

Blair’s career never recovered from the scandal. Anyone who followed journalism
news, even in a passing manner, was aware of his behavior, and the mere mention of
his name draws disparaging comments in newsrooms across the country to this day.

In sharp contrast to the massive amount of negative press Jayson Blair
received after his behavior of plagiarism and fabrication was exposed, *The Boston
Globe* columnist Mike Barnicle escaped relatively unscathed in 1998 after
accusations of plagiarism were made against him. Barnicle ultimately resigned from
the newspaper after it became known he fabricated a story about two young children
in a Boston hospital, and another story where he used jokes from comedian George
Carlin but did not attribute them. Barnicle, who had become somewhat of a Boston
fixture in Massachusetts media before gaining popularity around the country,
ultimately resigned after a back and forth debate, telling local Boston television station
WCVB “his resignation was the ‘best thing for the paper’”\(^5\).

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\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) CNN.com, “Boston columnist resigns amid new plagiarism charges,” CNN.com,
But today, Barnicle serves as a regular contributor on the cable network MSNBC, appearing nearly every day on “Morning Joe”, the network’s weekday morning show. In addition to his television news gig and in spite of the ethical breaches in some of his earlier reporting, Barnicle was also hired at The Globe’s rival newspaper, The Boston Herald, back in 2004.6

So how is it that Barnicle was able to land another job, a job that is in fact far more high profile than his gig at The Globe was, when Blair was written off as being a total disgrace? Among journalists, some people pointed to race as a possible factor.

Could the fact that Jayson Blair was an African American male and Barnicle a white male have made any kind of difference? Others raised the issue of age. To many, Barnicle was a fixture on the journalism scene, versus Blair, who was a young reporter just starting his career. Whatever the reason, there’s no discernable way to determine why the public may be more forgiving in one instance over another, but book sales by disgraced journalists who end up landing publishing deals are usually not high, no matter the author.

Just as the public’s forgiveness or condemnation of an unethical journalist is subjective, so is the code of ethics that exists for the profession. The Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics is voluntary, there is no sort of contract a person must sign or a set of rules they must agree to before becoming a journalist.

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Actually, circumstances are just the opposite. As a journalist in the United States, the onus is on the individual to join the Society of Professional Journalists. First, the journalist must provide proof of their affiliation with a news organization, then, the individual must pay a yearly fee in order to become and remain a member of the society, a move that quite frankly, probably deters many journalists from joining at all.

Contrary to what many people believe, ethical codes for many professions are not mandatory, including the hippocratic oath for doctors. There is no way of telling whether the requirement of some kind of signed contract would cut down on the amount of unethical choices that some journalists make, but I don’t think it could hurt.

In addition to the ethical nature of the journalists they employ, news organizations must also be held accountable for the quality of reporting their organization produces. An article published by the American Journalism Review praised The Times for taking ownership of the Blair affair in a 2003 article. The article acknowledged that taking ownership of the Blair debacle wasn’t an easy thing to do. The review said that the newspaper should be given “its props for an extraordinary airing of some very dirty linen. That’s a courageous - and appropriate - thing to do.”

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In April 2002, the Blair problem was so severe that Metropolitan Editor Jonathan Landman wrote in a memo, “We have to stop Jayson from writing for the Times. Right now.” Blair was warned he was in danger of losing his job. He took a leave to try to straighten himself out. But-astoundingly-by December he was the national staff's lead reporter on top-of-the-charts news: the sniper story. For The New York Times. Worse yet, the national editor and Washington bureau hadn't been told of Blair's pothole-strewn track record. So no alarm bells went off when serious questions were raised about two of his sniper scoops. Editors didn't even ask the young reporter to ID the anonymous sources on which they were based.  

This passage further underscores the need for responsibility at all levels, and for news organizations as an entity. After all, “unethical journalists will come and go. The critical issue here is the health of [the] …news organization."

The worlds of what is and isn’t acceptable in terms of ethical journalism often collide when individual journalists try to work with and for specific news outlets. To get some perspective from current, working journalists (apart from my own experiences) I turned to two colleagues, one former and one present, both of whom I respect immensely as journalists.

I worked with Melanie Buck while at CNN, and she is currently Wolf Blitzer’s personal producer for the CNN DC Bureau’s flagship show, The Situation Room. I asked Melanie a variety of questions about her experiences with ethics and how they fit into her work as a journalist, especially when covering international news stories for an American audience. I began by asking the most basic question as

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.
related to international news in the U.S., that is, are Americans, for the most part, even interested in it? Melanie said:

I think if journalists somehow make the story relatable to Americans, they are interested in it. I think most Americans think about themselves and their families and don’t really care to know about something if it doesn’t relate to them. So if there’s a “why should I care about this” angle to it, Americans are going to be interested. Otherwise, no.10

When I asked Melanie about the biggest ethical issue facing her in her job as a journalist today as related to both international and domestic news events, Melanie said it was a struggle for her to feel as though she was doing an acceptable job of getting all sides of a given story on the air. Melanie said her biggest challenge was:

…covering both sides of the story. Not just focusing on one opinion or one side, especially when dealing with politics. It’s hard to stay down the middle and not allow any of my own personal opinions into how I approach a story. It’s also hard sometimes when those around me are fighting to put a story on the air that I don’t agree with.11

When asked what kinds of things the mainstream American media could do to be ethical in their reporting, Melanie felt very strongly that journalists need not rely on the internet too heavily.

First, with the internet, you cannot just trust what you read. People need to be diligent about fact-checking and not trusting everything they see out there. That’s why it’s important to have good reporters, not just people who tell you what they read online. You need to have a process for researching and fact-checking and you can’t just put any old rumor on the air.12

10 Melanie Buck, interview by Lauren Torlone, March 24, 2009, CNN, Washington, DC.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
I then asked Melanie to play devil’s advocate and name just one thing that the
American media is really doing to get it right when it comes to ethical reporting.

Melanie replied:

…the media is still what it’s meant to be: a watchdog for government, and a
way for Americans to get their news. I think there’s still integrity in many
places, from print, to broadcast media, to radio. The audience is smarter than
we think.13

When I worked for CNN, I found that I agreed with a large majority of the material
that was put on the air. Since leaving CNN, I have come to realize that this was due in
large part to my own personal political leanings, which are largely liberal. Now that I
am employed by FOX News Channel, I have found I don’t always agree with the kind
of stories the channel reports, or even the way the network chooses to report a
mainstream story. There seems to be a concerted effort by some people in
management at FOX to get a conservative agenda conveyed on television. Rightly or
wrongly, there’s nothing specifically unethical about this, because freedom of the
press assures that news outlets can report stories as they best see fit. Actually, I enjoy
the fact that working at FOX consistently challenges me to step back and look at
other sides of the story that I don’t agree with and perhaps would otherwise dismiss
as invalid points of view. I wish journalists would do this more often, in fact I
encourage them to do so, as its only by getting outside one’s comfort zone that you
can best appreciate other perspectives as well as revaluate your own personal beliefs.

13 Ibid.
Adam Hudson is a producer on the show we both currently work for, *America’s News Headquarters*, on FOX News Channel. Like myself, Adam has struggled with what he perceives to be a conservative agenda at the network, which also happens to be at odds with his personal beliefs. Adam was an especially great journalist to interview because he has been a local news reporter, and also an anchor and bureau chief, so he’s seen all kinds of ethical issues at play in journalism from a variety of vantage points.

Like the interview with Melanie, I started off asking Adam what he thought of how the U.S. media covers international news events. Adam had some interesting distinctions to make between the mediums of print and television media, noting that:

…for the most part, I think print media does international news the best. Granted there is more time and space to get the story done and correctly, however, the needs of broadcast news (i.e. advertising and commercials) make it so that a story is abbreviated for the sake of getting the commercials in. For instance, in Mumbai, there was an initial interest in what happened in the terrorist attacks. But, once it wasn't breaking and thrilling for TV, there was less of an interest on the broadcast part, and of getting understanding of the facts or of putting the attacks in context.  

I then followed up by asking Adam what he thought of American news consumers and what kind of a value they place on international news stories. Adam, like Melanie, thought Americans don’t place much value on international news.

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14 Adam Hudson, interview by Lauren Torlone, March 27, 2009, Fox News Channel, Washington, DC.
Unfortunately, they don't have much of one. For example, most of the broadcast cable news outlets went wall-to-wall in their coverage of the Mumbai attacks, but ratings weren't off the charts. For the most part, American consumers have more of a domestic interest. Some of that, is on us. Journalism schools drill in the "who cares?" with students. "Why would the Average Joe care about something overseas?" was a mantra I heard often in local TV news.\textsuperscript{15}

I also asked Adam to describe the biggest ethical issue he has faced in his career as a journalist.

My biggest ethical issue in my job has to do with the talking points that come from upper management and how I fit in to "following" them. I do think some corporate news agencies have a very defined agenda, and I find it difficult to follow if I don’t agree. My other biggest ethical issue has to do with single source reporting. On big stuff, we always attribute or confirm it. I can't say those "smaller" wire stories or print stories that we re-write, get confirmed.\textsuperscript{16}

I then asked Adam what American journalists could do to produce more ethical reporting. Adam felt strongly that following up on your own work should be a requirement.

Make confirming or doing your own newsgathering an absolute must. How often does a cable news outlet recycle someone else's story, some other reporter's take on the story, or another outlet's strategy? Too often in my view. We seem to all cover the same story the same way, and that leaves precious little for the average news consumer to get in the way of variety.\textsuperscript{17}

Lastly, I asked Adam to name one positive thing about American news.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
One way the mainstream media is getting it right is using "citizen reporters". Letting average people tell the story and their stories I find much more compelling than the standard fare.  

I include these interviews to highlight the fact the no person sets out to become an unethical journalist, or to make unethical choices in their reporting. What happens to the American journalist is what happens to any other average American in his or her job: life. Life gets in the way. External and internal pressures bear down on journalists from all sides, and it is nearly impossible to get a story produced without one side or another taking offense to it.

The analytical framework I created for the purpose of this research exists only because there are so many different factors bearing down on American journalists. It has become their job not just to report the story but to navigate a path through a variety of constraints and pressures most of which go unseen by average American news consumers.

Much like the underlying factors present in American journalism, ethics often go unseen and unnoticed. There are no “rules” that determine if a person will be punished for making unethical choices in everyday life, and conversely, there’s often no praise when people do make ethical decisions.

In light of this, it’s not surprising that many people chose to pay such little attention to the ethical part of their nature. I was a philosophy minor in college, and have always been interested in the ethical part of human beings, and why people make the choices they do. But when it comes to ethics, I have found I don’t always

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18 Ibid.
agree with the experts. While Plato and Aristotle placed an emphasis on “virtue”, I would disagree. Too often moral people do immoral things, and as such, I don’t agree with the emphasis on the virtue of simply being that these schools of philosophy teach.

I’m more inclined to agree with the consequentialist line of thinking, that is that a morally correct action is the one that results in a good outcome or consequence. I also recognize the value of utilitarianism, because often times, for a journalist especially, the reporting of a story may be damaging to a few people but overall greatly benefits a large group of people.
CHAPTER 6

AMERICAN JOURNALISM: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It's takes hardly any effort to point the finger at unethical journalists or unethical practices, and it is my hope to minimize unethical mistakes by offering some suggestions for practicing journalists and their employers. Like any habit, good procedures that are put in place from the start will have the most impact. As early as high school when students start writing for their school newspapers, ethical practices should be both taught and enforced. It's not enough to tell students not to plagiarize or fabricate stories, as many students will not be clear on what exactly constitutes plagiarism and what doesn't. Specific examples need to be laid out, and the best way to do this would be to use examples of individuals, not unlike the example of Jayson Blair cited earlier.

Workplace training sessions for professionals are also important. As much as employees might complain about having to attend sessions that take them away from their normal work duties, it's imperative that the principles of journalistic integrity be upheld, and updated as times continue to change, and reporters of all kinds rely on and use the internet more and more.

For journalists, the professional code of ethics exists but it's also important for employees to be able to conform to the ethical standards set forth by their employers. It's interesting to note the differences between the major networks and newspaper publications, and the different approaches they take to the ethics code at their organizations. For example, The New York Times Policy on Ethics in Journalism can

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The core of the code of ethics is divided into four parts, as laid out below.

The Core Purpose of *The New York Times Company* is to "enhance society by creating, collecting and distributing high-quality news, information and entertainment." The central place of our news and editorial units in fulfilling that promise is underscored by the No. 1 statement in our Core Values: “Content of the highest quality and integrity: This is the basis for our reputation and the means by which we fulfill the public trust and our customers' expectations.”

Companywide, our goal is to cover the news impartially and to treat readers, news sources, advertisers and all parts of our society fairly and openly, and to be seen as doing so. The reputation of our company rests upon that perception, and so do the professional reputations of its staff members. Thus the company, its separate business units and members of its newsrooms and editorial pages share an interest in avoiding conflicts of interest or any appearance of conflict.

Conflicts of interest, real or apparent, may arise in many areas. They may involve tensions between journalists' professional obligations to our audience and their relationships with news sources, advocacy groups, advertisers, or competitors; with one another; or with the company or one of its units. And at a time when two-career families are the norm, the civic and professional activities of spouses, household members and other relatives can create conflicts or the appearance of them.

In keeping with its solemn responsibilities under the First Amendment, our company strives to maintain the highest standard of journalistic ethics. It is confident that its staff members share that goal. The company and its units also recognize that staff members should be free to do creative, civic and personal work and to earn extra income in ways separate from their work in

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2 Ibid.
our organization. Before engaging in such outside activities, though, staff members should exercise mature professional judgment and consider the stake we all have in the irreplaceable good name of our company and its newsrooms.3

The code is similar to the professional society’s code of ethics in that it places the highest priority on the distribution of accurate information to the American public. I selected The Times code of ethics because of the amount of time and detail it pays to a variety of different scenarios that their employees might face. Rather than simply say their goal is to be ethical, the code acknowledges that various conflicts of interest may arise, and addresses them head on instead of making sweeping blanket statements about the importance of ethics.

In contrast to the detailed code laid out by The New York Times, the ethical codes of news organizations on television are much harder to come by. An internet search for the ethical codes of these organizations revealed no official codes for any of the networks. When I was at CNN, we had an ethics seminar that talked about responsibilities in reporting, but I don’t recall any specific set of guidelines or ethical code being handed out to employees. There was an employee handbook, which dealt with a variety of subjects and appropriate behavior for employees, but not with journalism and ethics specifically. At FOX, I have never been given a code of ethics, but there is a sign that hangs outside the FOX News Edge, the network’s affiliate news service that does state the network’s goals. The sign reads:

3 Ibid.
For FOX to achieve its overall goals we must have a great news division. The foundation of this depends on the success of news in our local markets. We are dedicated to helping every station to become the first in news.

The sign is talking about ratings, something that I find to be very telling, especially in a cable news market. Anyone who has ever watched a cable news show knows that a significant portion of programming on these channels is editorialized. Among cable watchers, MSNBC is generally regarded as very liberal, while FOX News is often regarded as right leaning. CNN lies somewhere in the middle, although many people also think its quite liberal in the way it reports the news.

Whatever the political leanings of the station, the fact that there are tendencies to report things one way or another answers the question of why there are no ethical codes to be found online, and why the stations are less concerned with having ethical codes to begin with. The news on American cable channels is presented in such a way that so much of it is opinion, and no ethical codes are required to express personal beliefs.

Having worked at both CNN and FOX, I do think there is a need for a specific set of ethical guidelines, but at the same time, I can see why there hasn’t been one to date. Television news is constantly changing and expanding, and it would be difficult to create an ethical code that would adequately encompass the ever changing landscape of cable broadcast news.

Another factor that could account for the lack of a specific ethical code among American cable channels is the variety of roles working together within news organizations. There are so many different kinds of jobs, many of which are very
different from one another. Because of this, I think its even more understandable that a specific set of ethical guidelines might not exist, because the job descriptions are really varied.

For many viewers, the main component of the program is perceived as being the anchor and contributing reporters. The viewers perceive the job of these people as researching or uncovering a story and presenting it on the air. However, with the exception of some breaking news situations, nearly everything an anchor or reporter says on the air is scripted in advance, and usually not written by the anchor. Anchors and reporters work closely with their producers to conduct story research and interviews. They then work with an editor to produce the story, called a package, for air. Then in the control room, the technical staff, which includes the director as well as sound and lighting technicians, work to ensure the visual and audio elements of the story are acceptable for air. This is a basic overview of how stories make it to air, but of course there are many more people in between.

The news business, especially twenty-four hour cable news, is a ripe environment for young journalists because there is a lot of time to fill, quite literally in many cases there are 15 or 20 live hours of programming in a day. As such, the networks often employ young journalism graduates, who are just learning and getting their footing in the business. As is the case with starting out any new job, mistakes are going to be made.

As new employees learn new jobs and take on more responsibilities mistakes will happen, just as they do in any learning environment. The unfortunate side effect
of working in live television is that many of these mistakes will happen on the air and there’s nothing that can be done about it.

I think its important to touch on the role of American journalists as portrayed in American cinema. Americans have long been interested in plots about American reporters and the stories they cover. While the genre may make for a compelling film, the intriguing, yet often predictable and unrealistic story lines can be misleading.

Reporting for a newspaper or a television station no matter who you are or what country you live in is not nearly as glamorous or interesting as films such as All the President’s Men or Broadcast News make it out to be. This spring, the film State of Play starring actors Ben Affleck and Russell Crowe hit theatres across the United States. The plot follows Crowe’s character as he uncovers a murder mystery involving a Congressman played by Affleck. In the film, Crowe is described as follows:

…a shaggy character [who] tosses junk-food wrappers into the back seat of his car, lives in a dump of an apartment and knows seemingly every cop in Washington, D.C., on a first-name basis. A typical movie reporter, in other words.4

The film’s director, Kevin Macdonald, says that journalism is a “great genre” for movie making.

It's an attractive genre as a filmmaker because you do have these rich characters, and you have this kind of investigative element and this

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detective-y kind of element, and the thrill of the chase and the smell of a story... that thrill of the chase makes a hard-driver character at the heart of a movie.5

The article also describes ways the film made an effort to appear realistic, by trying to:

…create an accurate portrayal of a newsroom, with its idiosyncratic office culture, but everything is heightened. And a good thing - most of us have jobs that, if they were depicted with 100 percent authenticity, would be a crashing bore to sit through. Journalism is no different; no one wants to see a movie about a roomful of people typing.6

Being an active participant in breaking news and shaping the way news is told to people all over the country is in fact a very exciting thing. But not all news is breaking, and that is part of the point that the film’s director is making. When its “on” its non stop chaos and excitement, and when its not, it is just as ordinary as any other job.

I think journalism and ethics come into conflict here, because of certain types of images (like the ones depicted in the aforementioned films) that elevate journalists to some kind of off the grid hero status. There’s pressure to produce something groundbreaking, and to uncover the latest scandal or story.

Sometimes, because of outside expectations placed on the profession, when you are simply reporting the news to the best of your ability it can feel instead like you’re not doing your job. There is an urge to sensationalize stories that aren’t

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
sensational and to make a big deal about small stories. All too often I’ve observed instances where news programs will alert to a story as “breaking news” when it isn’t just to catch the viewers eye, and I have a huge problem with this. Its terribly misleading and not honest journalism.

For better or worse, journalism has long been and will likely remain a popular topic for American directors and moviegoers.

“Whether they show journalism positively or negatively, they make journalism matter in the public imagination,” Ehrlich said of movies. “They make it the center of attention and make it dramatic and exciting. They show the good that journalism can do when it's done properly, and the harm it does when it's not done properly. Especially at a time when some people think the press doesn't matter so much anymore, that's significant.”

Ethical breaches committed by journalists are not acceptable but perhaps the pressures journalists are under can help people to better understand why some journalists do choose to commit ethical breaches.

FOX News has been criticized by both opponents and the competition for offering too much opinion based commentary and not enough straightforward news coverage. But at the same time that they are being criticized, they are the number one cable network on television and have been for years, consistently beating rival networks CNN and MSNBC in the ratings.

The situation is a bit of a catch-22 in that while the original desire may be to report news fairly and accurately, that’s not what brings in the ratings. So even if its what people (the viewers) claim they want, the ratings prove it isn’t so. More people

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7 Ibid.
are watching FOX News. If the people want personal opinions and commentary with their news and those are the kinds of programs getting the highest ratings, there is no way to be number one without providing this brand of news.

American journalism is at risk of becoming secondary to the faces that report the news. Its not hard to understand why. When Katie Couric made the move from being co-host of NBC’s Today Show to become the first solo female anchor of the CBS Evening News, she broke not only gender barriers but salary barriers as well. The annual salaries of the major news anchors on both cable and network television stretch into the millions of dollars, and with salaries that high, its obvious to see that network executives are paying for a specific personality, style and look rather than for just news.

This can be legitimate with a news personality that has become reputable over time, as a specific person becomes known for his or her fair and accurate reporting, but its quite another matter when a network hires someone with name recognition simply because they know the name itself will be an attraction for viewers.

In many ways, the press can be its own worst enemy. American journalism is on the cutting edge of computer and internet technology and has the ability to break news better and faster than perhaps anywhere else in the world. Because of this, the American press has an unprecedented amount of power. When the press chooses to use this power for a noble purpose, the results can be fascinating, rewarding and enlightening for the American public. But when the news is reduced to little more
than a ratings game, the ethical principles of journalism become less and less necessary.

Giving American citizens the tools to recognize unethical types of behaviors in American journalism provides consumers of American news with choices they didn’t know they had, and hopefully will open their eyes to decisions they weren’t even aware they were making in terms of the news outlets they gravitate towards to get information.

I hope I have helped to cast a tiny sliver of light onto the massive beast that is American journalism in the United States. The way that the United States reports and produces the news, specifically international news is so important because we are living in a global world. Everything that the United States does has consequences not only for U.S. citizens, but for citizens around the world. We need look no further than the current global economic crisis to realize that the way the United States behaves and thinks has worldwide impact.

Americans must be vigilant about ways they receive the news, and must demand better from news agencies and hold them accountable. There are tools that exist to aid the American public to help them accomplish this task of keeping the media in check. Just as the American media, the free press, exists as a watchdog to keep the truth from being covered up, American citizens must fact check the sources from which they get their news.

In Washington, DC, the “Newseum” is a great place for anyone who has an interest in news to go and get a better picture of how stories are put together for both
print publications and broadcast. This museum has the advantage of hindsight in exhibits that look back at past news events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It’s so interesting to see newspaper coverage from decades ago and observe how stories were reported by various media outlets, many of them discussed in this paper. It’s fascinating to see the same publications that were considered to be liberal or conservative years ago reporting stories with the same liberal or conservative slant today, and to see cases where the style of reporting at a newspaper or network has changed with the times.

The museum also has current exhibits and features an ever evolving outdoor display of the day’s newspapers from around the world, which is a great visual way to see what stories are being covered around the world, and to also observe the varied ways that newspapers in the United States choose to cover the same story.

Online, there are a number of watchdog groups that patrol the American media landscape looking for everything from political leanings to inaccuracies in reporting and trends in what kinds of stories are reported and with what frequency.

A site that I recommend for people interested in getting help spotting trends in American media reporting is journalism.org. The website is maintained by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The site contains a link to a webpage entitled State of the News Media which does an excellent job of tracking trends in American media. One of the most notable stories in journalism during the last year was the 2008 Presidential election, and this site does a very nice job of analyzing how the election of the first African American president in the U.S. was
covered around the world, and how interest in the historic election turned out to be ratings gold for American cable news outlets.

Why did cable news outperform virtually every other news organizations? The answer begins (and perhaps ends) with the presidential election. All three channels focused more of their time on the race than virtually any other news operations in the country, especially at night. The talk show format that dominated cable’s prime time became even more ideologically polarized, FOX News hewing right, MSNBC left, and CNN coming closer in tone to the media elsewhere. And cable’s politically active audiences tuned in as never before. The formula was not without controversy, especially at MSNBC. When the network allowed talk show hosts to anchor primary night and convention coverage, even some people at its parent NBC News complained, worrying about damaging the NBC News brand. At almost the same time, however, the channel found new ratings success in liberal pundit Rachel Maddow. While the formula paid off, by the end of the year it also left as many questions as it had answered. 

While American cable news outlets found ratings success in 2009, American newspaper publications found themselves struggling just to stay afloat. Despite the dire situation that threatened even major papers and forced smaller papers across the country into foreclosure, the major U.S. newspapers managed to survive.

The newspaper industry exited a harrowing 2008 and entered 2009 in something perilously close to free fall. Perhaps some parachutes will deploy, and maybe some tree limbs will cushion the descent, but for a third consecutive year the bottom is not in sight. We still do not subscribe to the theory that the death of the industry is imminent. The industry over all in 2008 remained profitable. But the deep recession already threatens the weakest papers. Nearly all are now cutting so deeply and rapidly that simply coping with the economic downturn has become a major distraction from efforts to reinvent the economics of the business. And even once the downturn ends, growing or stabilized revenues are no sure thing.

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9 Ibid.
Where American journalism goes from here remains to be seen. As the internet continues to grow, and means of communication that were never considered possible become reality, print versions of media may become obsolete. On the other hand, many people can’t imagine starting their day without reading their favorite morning newspaper but that may just be a lingering habit from an older generation that younger generations will have no attachment to.

As more and more television broadcasts are put online, regular television news will surely be impacted but it remains to be seen exactly how. Nearly all of the major networks and many local markets already have an online presence. The use of social networking sites like Facebook has proven to be a valuable tool for American television networks to create connections between their broadcasts and online sites.

If the future of American journalism lies in television, it will likely become increasingly harder to police ethical principles on the internet. As things stand now, its hard enough to regulate information and pick apart good information from the bad, and as more people and networks turn their focus towards the internet the enormity of this task will only increase.

The problem of ethics in American journalism is such a great one that it almost seems foolish to take it on as an issue. I’m not certain if even a thesis worth of work and research has been enough to uncover what is surely just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding some of the mistakes and unethical choices
that have been made throughout the history of the American media and continue to be made today.

Especially when dealing with international news matters in the United States, the issue of ethics is especially dicey. I don’t know if I believe it’s possible to have any American journalist who has lived in the U.S and has loyalties and ties to this country, report a story in an unbiased manner. This isn’t a conundrum of what came first, the chicken or the egg, here, we know the answer. American journalists are people first and foremost, with opinions and beliefs that I don’t know can be set aside completely when reporting stories. And that is fine, as long as it’s recognized and acknowledged.

Journalists need to present all sides, and there is a time and place for personal commentary and it’s certainly not appropriate to insert it into every story. But there are times when a journalist’s opinion can add value, so long as both the journalist and the viewer realize there is a difference between reporting and editorializing.
APPENDIX

Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics

Preamble
Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It
Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists should: Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible. Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing. Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability. Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises. Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context. Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations. Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it. Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.

Never plagiarize. Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so. Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others. Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status. Support the open exchange of views, even views they
find repugnant. Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid. Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context. Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm. Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should: Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects. Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief. Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance. Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone’s privacy. Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity. Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes. Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges. Balance a criminal suspect’s fair trial rights with the public’s right to be informed.

Act Independently. Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. Journalists should: Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility. Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.

Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage. Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.
Be Accountable. Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should: Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct. Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media. Admit mistakes and correct them promptly. Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media. Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of writers, editors and other news professionals. The present version of the code was adopted by the 1996 SPJ National Convention, after months of study and debate among the Society's members.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984, 1987 and 1996.

http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp


