
MEDIA COVERAGE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

May 5-26, 1998

·

October 11-31, 2002

·

May 1-21, 2003

Susan D. Moeller

**Philip Merrill College of Journalism
University of Maryland, College Park**

March 9, 2004

CISSM

**Center for International and
Security Studies at Maryland**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was prepared as part of the Advanced Methods of Cooperative Security Program at the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM). The author wishes to thank John Steinbruner, Director of CISSM, for his overall direction and his foreword, which gracefully lays out the reasons this study matters; Nancy Gallagher, CISSM Research Director, for her always-incisive comments and assistance; Anja Kuznetsova, CISSM associate, for her dogged research support and her diligent compilation of the tables in Appendix B; and Robert D. Lamb, Graduate Research Fellow at CISSM, for his paper in Appendix F that provides an overview to the weapons, organizations, treaties, and countries discussed in this study, and for his extraordinary copy-editing and formatting assistance. Thanks also go to the journalists and international security scholars who read and commented on earlier drafts of the study.

FOREWORD

The American political system is in the early stages of contending with an unwelcome but ultimately unavoidable problem. The United States government initiated war against Iraq on the basis of an inaccurate representation of the scope and immediacy of the threat posed, and it did so without international authority. That has prejudiced the legitimacy of the occupation, thereby undermining the single most important ingredient of successful reconstruction. The consequences are likely to be seriously troublesome over an extended period of time. Reconstructing Iraq and restoring international support for non-proliferation policy will require admission of the original error and correction of the processes that generated it — a very difficult feat for any government.

So far, debate about this problem has focused largely on the Executive Branch, but Congress, the media, independent security analysts, and indeed the entire US political system are all implicated. An action of this magnitude and consequence cannot be exclusively ascribed to the President and his advisors or to the intelligence community that provided the information on which their judgments were based. If we are the democracy we claim to be — and need to be — then all of our institutions and all individual citizens bear some responsibility and are obliged to conduct some self-examination.

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction is intended to contribute to this process of reflection and correction. This study reviews the content of American news media coverage during three periods of time when issues relating to what have been ubiquitously termed “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) were being featured: May 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war; October 2002, when both Iraq and North Korea were featured in the news; and May 1998, during the South Asian nuclear tests. It also compares the US coverage to comparable discussion in the British media. By analyzing coverage across time and between countries, it puts current concerns about news reporting on the war in Iraq into a larger context.

The study makes three important observations.

- First, it documents that virtually all of the news coverage accepted without serious question the political formulation “weapons of mass destruction” as a single category of threat. The very extensive objective differences in destructive potential among the various agents included in that category were barely noted if at all.
- Second, the paper analyzes the media’s habit of associating mass destruction agents with the phenomenon of terrorism. That is undoubtedly an accurate reflection of common fears, but it is not an accurate representation of established fact. No terrorist organization has yet demonstrated the capacity to perform an act of mass destruction under a strict definition of that term. There is an important difference between common fears, however prudent they might seem, and actionable threat. It is extremely important that those who wield American military power understand the difference. Media coverage did not acknowledge that distinction during the periods examined, and that is an evident defect.
- Third, the paper notes that established operating principles of the American media make it easier for the incumbent President, whoever that might be, to dominate news coverage by setting the terms of public discussion. Journalistic standards that are meant to ensure objectivity and guard against political bias had the effect of insulating the president from informed critical scrutiny. That effect was compounded during the latter periods under review by the media’s inclination to amplify what was considered to be patriotic sentiment. As a result, the American media did not play the role of checking and balancing the exercise of power that the standard theory of democracy requires.

It is important to note an important substantive omission in media coverage during the second and third time periods examined. It would have been especially irresponsible for the United States military to have initiated military action against Iraq believing that the country might be able to improvise massively destructive retaliation but not knowing where the relevant assets were located. It seems evident in retrospect, however, that American military commanders were in fact confident in Fall 2002 and Spring 2003 that Iraq did not have any truly serious capacity to harm the United States or any country in the region. That judgment, which would have undermined the justification for war, was not recorded in the news reports reviewed.

Recognizing the limited scope of the paper and the magnitude of the issues in question, we are circulating this study in hope that it will stimulate productive discussion, further research, and ultimately greater wisdom.

John Steinbruner

Director

Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
------------------------	---

Foreword

John Steinbruner, CISSM	iii
-------------------------------	-----

Introduction.....	1
-------------------	---

Summary

Overview of the Study	3
-----------------------------	---

Major Findings.....	3
---------------------	---

General Findings

Overall lessons	5
-----------------------	---

Setting the news budget	7
-------------------------------	---

Framing the debate.....	10
-------------------------	----

Narrowing the policy options.....	12
-----------------------------------	----

Comparison of US-UK coverage	18
------------------------------------	----

Concluding observations.....	20
------------------------------	----

Recommendations.....	21
----------------------	----

Findings

1. The Administration as Agenda-Setter.....	25
---	----

Setting the news budget: Stenographic coverage	25
--	----

The politics of language: Seizing the moral high ground	28
---	----

Sensationalizing the story: Leading with the risks	32
--	----

2. The Terrorism-WMD-Iraq Connection.....	34
---	----

3. Habits of Coverage	39
The wish for cold facts and hard statistics	39
Misunderstandings of technical and scientific dimensions.....	41
Secondary stories: On the radar, but off the front page	44
Sourcing dilemmas	44
The discomfort with uncertainty	49
“He-said-she-said” and “horse-race” coverage.....	55
4. The Americanization of Events	57
Me first.....	57
Prioritizing US relations and US initiatives.....	59
When the Americans are safe, save the children	61
5. Telling the News	64

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology	69
Appendix B: Frequency of coverage	71
Appendix C: Differences in coverage.....	75
Appendix D: Leads, articles on President Bush’s carrier speech	81
Appendix E: Leads, articles on Senate debate over low-yield nuclear weapons.....	85
Appendix F: Definitions and chronologies	89

MEDIA COVERAGE OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

May 5-26, 1998 · October 11-31, 2002 · May 1-21, 2003

INTRODUCTION

The public relies on the media to separate facts and tangible realities from assumptions and spin.

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction evaluates how well the media has performed this task in regards to the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The study assesses how the coverage of WMD has changed over time and across geographies — especially since the launch of the “War on Terror” and the positioning of Iraq as the “big” international story.

The events of the last year and a half in Iraq — the build-up to the war, the shock-and-awe campaign, the ground combat, the “post-victory” insurgency, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the ongoing hunt for banned weapons — have dramatically demonstrated the need for greater public understanding of the role that WMD plays in the formulation of and rhetorical justifications for US security policy.

With that goal in mind, this study examines three time periods, each lasting three weeks, during which at least two major WMD-related stories were being covered. The specific beginning and ending dates were chosen to include coverage one week before and two weeks after the dates on which a major nuclear proliferation story appeared in the media: India’s nuclear weapons tests in May 1998, the US announcement of evidence of a North Korean nuclear weapons program in October 2002, and revelations about Iran’s nuclear program in May 2003. Iraq was purposely not chosen as one of these reference points because it was already overrepresented in the study relative to other significant countries. The three periods chosen cover major WMD issues during both the Clinton and Bush administrations and include important developments in Iraq and elsewhere:

- **May 5-26, 1998.** This period spans several climactic events in South Asia, including India’s first overt nuclear weapons tests on May 11-13, declarations from Pakistan about its nuclear readiness, and the run-up to six Pakistani nuclear weapons tests on May 28-30. This period also witnessed a flare-up in concern and controversy over lax security for Russian nuclear weapons — the “loose nukes” issue.
- **October 11-31, 2002.** This period starts the day after the US Congress approved military action in Iraq, if Iraq “does not disarm,” and includes the intense public debate over WMD as a justification for preventive war. It also includes the increased attention to the story of nuclear weapons development in North Korea, following the October 4 revelation by North Korean officials that the country has a nuclear weapons program using enriched uranium and the October 16 announcement by US officials that they had evidence of a nuclear weapons program in North Korea.
- **May 1-21, 2003.** This period starts on the day of President George W. Bush’s declaration of “an end to major combat operations” in Iraq and covers the ensuing US hunt for Iraq’s purported WMD. It also includes revelations about Iran’s nuclear program and Russia’s connection to it, beginning in earnest on May 8, with the Bush administration’s demand that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) find Iran in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of articles or program transcripts from a range of agenda-setting print and radio news outlets. It used news stories downloaded from the electronic archive service Lexis-Nexis, examining the coverage of WMD in eleven news outlets: four US newspapers (The Christian Science Monitor, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and The Washington Post); and two London newspapers (The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian). The study also searched two US newsmagazines and one UK magazine (Newsweek, US News & World Report, and The Economist). And it examined National Public Radio's morning and evening news programs (Morning Edition and All Things Considered). The study dropped its investigation of the WMD coverage in the Daily Telegraph in 1998 because the paper for that year was not archived in Lexis-Nexis. (See Appendix A for more information about the study's methodology.)

It should be noted that the findings in this study were at times supplemented by secondary analysis and references to news coverage that occurred outside the three designated periods. The study employed such tactics when it appeared that reporting that occurred in the time periods under investigation could be more fairly evaluated by reference to coverage and events outside the chosen 3-week spans.

SUMMARY

Overview of the Study

Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction is organized into three parts. The first section summarizes the key findings of the study and suggests ways the media might improve how they covers weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issues. The “Findings” section, beginning on page 25, is a detailed review and critical assessment of WMD coverage during the three time periods under consideration. The Appendices provide information about the study’s methodology and further detail on WMD coverage, plus a short guide to weapons, organizations, treaties, and countries relevant to the issue.

Major Findings

This study supports four major findings about the media’s coverage of WMD during the three periods:

1. Most media outlets represented WMD as a monolithic menace, failing to adequately distinguish between weapons programs and actual weapons or to address the real differences among chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological weapons.
2. Most journalists accepted the Bush administration’s formulation of the “War on Terror” as a campaign against WMD, in contrast to coverage during the Clinton era, when many journalists made careful distinctions between acts of terrorism and the acquisition and use of WMD.
3. Many stories stenographically reported the incumbent administration’s perspective on WMD, giving too little critical examination of the way officials framed the events, issues, threats, and policy options.
4. Too few stories proffered alternative perspectives to official line, a problem exacerbated by the journalistic prioritizing of breaking-news stories and the “inverted pyramid” style of storytelling.

The “inverted pyramid” style of news writing is a standard invented by the Associated Press wire service soon after its birth in 1848. Still taught as the customary method for writing breaking-news stories, most journalists associate it with impartial, “just the facts, ma’am” reporting. Journalistic standards teach that basic news stories should lead with what the most “important” player — the President or Prime Minister, for example — has to say.

What this study discovered, however, is that the tendency of the US media to lead with the most “important” information and the most “important” players gave greater weight to the incumbent administration’s point of view on WMD issues, at the expense of alternative perspectives.

Both the US and UK media tended to report uncritically the Bush administration’s conflation of all “weapons of mass destruction” into a single category of threat, an error that leads the public to mistakenly equate the destructive power of, say, chemical weapons with that of nuclear weapons. Coverage also tended to repeat the administration’s assertion that a core objective of the “War on Terror” is to prevent WMD from falling into the hands of terrorists. While that is a desirable goal, that formulation of the problem obscures the magnitude of the threat — particularly in contrast to the greater access terrorists have to non-WMD technologies — and so makes it difficult for the public to judge the appropriate degree of government response. Where such alternative perspectives were presented at all in the coverage, they

tended to appear much later in the stories. In that sense, the inverted pyramid has not served the needs of objectivity and comprehensiveness.

Poor coverage of WMD resulted less from political bias on the part of journalists, editors, and producers than from tired journalistic conventions. This study, therefore, recommends that when media cover WMD issues, events, and policies, they should strive to get more perspectives higher up in their breaking news stories — and to get more of their sources on the record. When time and space allow, an analysis or enterprise story that assesses the assertions made in the basic piece should be run in immediate and prominent juxtaposition to the basic, inverted-pyramid story.

The journalist's ethic of striving to be fair and to tell all the news demands that further commitment.

General Findings

US administrations have been remarkably successful at establishing the public parameters of WMD issues in a way that has inhibited the media from playing an independent role.

Overall Lessons

1. The Media's close relationship with the White House

It has often been noted that there is a symbiotic relationship between policymakers and the press. This study suggests that this relationship is particularly strong when the subject involves weapons of mass destruction. This seems to be the case for two reasons.

- First, issues and events relating to weapons of mass destruction often, if not always, occur in the complex realm of international affairs and involve questions of national security and intelligence. International events and issues are more easily spun by policymakers than are domestic stories because there are few unmediated channels through which the public can learn about them. The media's necessary reliance on relatively few sources themselves — and those often anonymous — makes it easier for policymakers to control leaks and stay on message.
- Second, policy responses to WMD are complicated, crossing political, military, and scientific domains. Yet “weapons of mass destruction” have a simplistic presence in the public's imagination: as conveyors of doom that threaten Americans where they live. It has been irresistible for policymakers to use threats of WMD as powerful tools of public persuasion and as forceful rationales for policy initiatives. It has been equally irresistible for the media to report both the doomsayer arguments and the defense and security arguments verbatim.

Table 1. Relationship between White House and media

General Impact of Administrations	General Impact of Media
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ successful at prioritizing which international WMD issues receive the most media attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ simple reiterations of White House, Pentagon, or other official administration statements disseminate administration's dominant messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ successful at directing how the media interpret events and policies related to WMD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ simple reiterations of White House, Pentagon, or other official administration statements validate administration's dominant messages

Overall Lessons (cont.)

2. Media's imprecise coverage of WMD

Although individual “facts” about WMD are usually reported accurately, the study noted a pattern of imprecision in that coverage. For example, there are important differences between a nuclear energy program and a nuclear *weapons* program, and between a nuclear weapons *program* and actual nuclear weapons. Similarly, there are substantial qualitative and quantitative differences between chemical and biological agents. The media’s failure to recognize these and other distinctions distorted reporting on the cost-benefit calculations to manage those risks. (See Appendix F for a guide to the relevant weapons, organizations, treaties, and countries.)

Table 2. Imprecision in coverage

Imprecision	Result of Imprecision
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ conflation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons into a WMD agglomeration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ WMD represented as monolithic menace — WMD often characterized as an integral element in global terrorism matrix
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ failure to distinguish various agents or weapons systems from one another	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ misunderstanding or under-reporting of differences in magnitude and type of threat posed by various agents and weapons systems▪ greater coverage of politics of WMD than of scientific or security debate
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ failure to draw clear distinctions between civilian nuclear programs and military use of nuclear technology, including failure to define clearly what constitutes a “nuclear weapons program”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ little coverage of how to evaluate what poses a serious or imminent security threat (nationally, regionally, or internationally)

Setting the News Budget: What Gets Covered and How

3. The White House sets the agenda

Across the three time periods of May 1998, October 2002, and May 2003, the attention that both the Clinton and Bush administrations gave to WMD issues and events received a comparable level of attention from the media — even if, on certain occasions, the journalists were criticizing the administration’s “spin.” If the White House acted like a WMD story was important, in other words, so too did the media. If the White House ignored a story (or an angle on a story), the media were likely to as well.

When journalists did take on the administration — especially when the White House’s perspective formed the “conventional wisdom” — their stories were often buried or their criticism was more implicit than explicit.

Since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has been especially successful at getting the American media to confirm its political and diplomatic agenda. Media reporting on the President amplified the administration’s voice: when Bush said to the country that Americans are vulnerable to WMD in the hands of terrorists, the media effectively magnified those fears. The media failed to independently prioritize WMD problems or to match alternative policy responses to particular problems. The net effect was to keep the administration’s message dominant.

Table 3. Setting the WMD agenda

Administrative Action	Media Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ public articulation of strong, direct link between WMD and American interests (usually security or economic interests, but occasionally humanitarian ones) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ prominent coverage of White House, Pentagon, etc. statements and actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ control of media access to story 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ acquiescence to White House, Pentagon, etc. controls in order to cover major story
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ frequent public mention of seriousness of event or alternatively lack of public mention of issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ change in volume of coverage follows Presidential lead — coverage of President results in de facto reiteration of President’s prioritization of WMD event or issue

Setting the News Budget (cont.)

4. Media's focus on the "big story"

In all but extraordinary circumstances, limited resources restrict the media to focusing on one international "Big Story" at a time — that event or issue that receives the most critical mass of attention. In the case of this study, very few WMD stories emerged: India and Pakistan's me-tooism in 1998; allegations of an imminent Iraqi WMD threat and North Korea's brinkmanship in 2002; and the failure to find WMD in Iraq in 2003.

Table 4. Determination of "big story" coverage

Coverage Emphasis	Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> focus on apocalyptic WMD events that directly engage or menace the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> undercoverage of non-event WMD topics, such as bio-security and fissile controls undercoverage of WMD situations where the problems have stabilized, even if there is no resolution to them
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> focus on a "big" WMD story in the public eye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> may trigger mention in passing of lesser WMD stories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shrinking news hole for international stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "minor" stories rarely make it into the public eye even major international stories are often covered from Washington or New York <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a tactic that saves money a tactic that also prioritizes the American angle
General Trends	How Media Trends Affect WMD Coverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> media mergers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fewer independent media voices; greater pack journalism pressure to follow "Big Story" greater oversight of news by media owners (who often have ties to White House)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increased corporate attention to profitability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reduction of resources for investigations, ongoing coverage and overseas bureaus greater pressure for profit — commercialization of news

Setting the News Budget (cont.)

5. Distribution of coverage clusters around designated “big story”

This study’s systematic review of all WMD-related coverage in the targeted US and UK news outlets during these three time periods revealed that “Big Story” coverage predominated (see Appendix B). Media outlets covered WMD in North Korea, for example, significantly less in May 2003 than they had during the previous October because of the dominance of the Iraq story that spring — even though the North Korean crisis had actually reached a more advanced state.

Other important WMD-related topics received short shrift and there was little ongoing coverage of WMD in countries other than the designated “rogue” states. Few articles or radio programs discussed the current state of Russian nuclear, chemical, and biological programs, for instance — a topic of great concern to experts. Instead, Russia made WMD news at discrete moments, including when the government gassed Chechen terrorists and their hostages at the Moscow theater, during the anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and when concerns surfaced about Russia’s role in the development of Iran’s nuclear energy program. Yet only rarely did such events rise to front-page coverage. In October 2002, for example, 65 WMD stories in the targeted newspapers mentioned Russia, but fewer than one in ten of those appeared on the front page — and the overall coverage was even worse in May 1998 and May 2003.

Table 5A. Distribution of coverage among media outlets

	Number of front-page articles citing WMD in:					
	The Washington Post	The New York Times	The Los Angeles Times	The Guardian (UK)	The Daily Telegraph (UK)*	The Christian Science Monitor
May 5-26, 1998	12	12	18	0	—	2
Oct. 11-31, 2002	15	28	18	5	2	12
May 1-21, 2003	19	9	8	1	0	4

*No data available on Lexis-Nexis for The Daily Telegraph in 1998

Table 5B. Distribution of coverage of countries

	Number of front-page articles/Total number of articles citing WMD in relation to:							
	Iraq	North Korea	India/Pakistan	Russia	China	Iran	Israel	Syria
May 5-26, 1998	1/7	0/3	35/214	2/8	3/34	2/12	1/3	0/0
Oct. 11-31, 2002	50/270	20/135	0/11	6/65	1/6	0/5	3/9	0/0
May 1-21, 2003	27/212	8/58	2/19	1/20	0/2	2/23	1/8	0/15

Framing the Debate

6. Language used to frame the WMD debate

News outlets seldom signal to their audience that the language of the WMD debate can serve a political function. Politicians employ coded language in the WMD debate to elicit fear, as, for example, in the case of President Clinton’s emphasizing the risks of WMD to Americans to defend his creation of the new Office of Infrastructure Protection and Counter-Terrorism and his decision to have US troops in the Persian Gulf inoculated against anthrax:

“We will train and equip local authorities throughout the nation to deal with an emergency involving weapons of mass destruction, creating stockpiles of medicines and vaccines to protect our civilian population against the kind of biological agents our adversaries are most likely to obtain or develop. ... If we fail to take strong action, then terrorists, criminals and hostile regimes could invade and paralyze these vital systems, disrupting commerce, threatening health, weakening our capacity to function in a crisis.”
(NPR-ATC 5/22/98)

Conversely, there have been occasions when US politicians have wanted to minimize Americans’ concern over WMD. The Bush administration, for example, has had an interest in distancing US nuclear weapons systems from being considered “weapons of mass destruction.” In the Congressional debate over funding research and development for new systems, for instance, many supporters of funding used “cute” terms such as “mini-nukes” or “bunker-busters” to refer to them.

Similarly, the Bush Administration’s creation of the “deck of cards” or its use of the monikers “Dr. Germ” or “Chemical Ali” to refer to Rihab Taha al-Azawi al-Tikriti or Ali Hassan al-Majid framed the military objective of capturing Iraqi leaders with language that minimized the seriousness of their being at large — an important public-relations objective, especially given the US lack of success at capturing the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Table 6. Language used to frame the debate

To Sensationalize WMD	To Minimize WMD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the specter of WMD raised in order to assign blame to another country or leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ WMD made light of in order to push a US domestic agenda of funding domestic WMD programs (e.g. R&D for new nuclear arms)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the specter of another country’s WMD raised in order to claim the moral high ground for the US 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ WMD made light of in order to take pressure off US military WMD-related operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the humanitarian implications of WMD raised in order to emphasize the moral/ethical rationale for international action desired by US policy-makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the humanitarian implications of domestic WMD programs overlooked and the deterrent value of domestic WMD systems emphasized

Framing the Debate (cont.)

7. Forging a terrorism-WMD connection

Terrorists have long been referenced as security threats, but their cohesion into a monolithic menace occurred with President George W. Bush’s pronouncement of a “War on Terror” in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September 2001. With that declaration, weapons of mass destruction — as a single, blurred hazard — and individually identified nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons began to be automatically identified in the media as inseparably part of a global terrorism matrix.

Although journalists have become more aware of the pitfalls associated with the use of the politically charged term “terrorism” and “terrorist” when reporting on regional security issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the same sensitivity is not shown when reporting on security disputes between the United States and another country or group. The Washington Post, for example, has explicit guidelines that instruct reporters to use these terms cautiously, to emphasize specific facts over vague characterizations, and to look independently at the applicability of the labels. But those cautions are rarely followed in the coverage of purported terrorism-WMD connections.

Politicians use the WMD-terrorism link to scare the public into supporting a particular policy stance. Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s characterization of North Korea as a “terrorist regime” for its export of nuclear technology was often quoted by the media, for example, but his meaning of “terrorist regime” was not explored.

Table 7. Coverage of terrorism and WMD

May 1998	October 2002	May 2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ few stories made a clear linkage between WMD and terrorism by either a rogue group or state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bush and Blair’s linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD extensively quoted in news stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bush and Blair’s linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD extensively quoted in news stories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ most media made careful distinctions between acts of terrorism and the acquisition or use of WMD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the reasons for Bush and Blair’s linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD questioned in opinion and analysis stories ▪ few stories expressed reservations about the evidence of Iraq’s connections with terrorists or reservations about administration officials’ flat statements that Iraq had WMD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the reasons for Bush and Blair’s linkages of terrorism and Iraq and WMD increasingly questioned ▪ more stories questioning evidence of and intelligence on Iraq’s connections with terrorists and the existence of WMD — especially those datelined from Iraq

Narrowing the Policy Options

8. White House keeps focus on preferred policy tools

President George W. Bush's administration has been particularly successful at shaping the message on the designated "Big Story" of Iraq through its declaration of an Iraqi-WMD-terrorism association — an association so provocative that it has usurped much of the space and time for WMD stories in the media.

Coverage in 2002 and 2003 repeated the administration's blanket assertions that WMD are an integral part of a global terrorism matrix — an assertion that admits few distinctions among the "terrorist regime" of North Korea, the terrorism of Al-Qaeda, and the terror of Saddam Hussein. The failure of the media to insist on a differentiation allowed the calculated muddle to become the accepted wisdom.¹ Media coverage of the Bush administration's stance on WMD also helped promote Bush's "tough guy" attitude rather than foster a more reflective policy debate about a range of options.

The Clinton administration also attempted to direct media coverage on international issues to serve its public policy ends, as when it asserted that the genocide in Rwanda amounted only to isolated "acts of genocide," a clear attempt to minimize pressure for intervention.² But because the South Asian nuclear jockeying in the spring of 1998 was not sufficiently threatening to become a domestic crisis, the Clinton administration did not try to direct and dominate the story. Clinton's response (including, for example, the automatic implementation of economic sanctions) never became the sole perspective on the events in South Asia. His administration's stance, in other words, did not loom so large in the media's representation of 1998 WMD stories as the Bush administration's did in the 2002 and 2003 WMD stories.

The greater success of the Bush administration in manipulating the WMD message is also a result of a dramatic tightening of information flow from the White House to reporters. As "Washington Week in Review" anchor Gwen Ifill noted in a "Washington Week online," officials in the Bush administration are "even tougher" about releasing information than their Clinton administration predecessors. As a consequence, she noted, "The less information we get, the more likely we are to overreact to any dribs and drabs." (1/29/04)

Table 8. Bush Administration keeps focus on preferred policy tools

White House Impact	Media Result
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ successful at dictating what to do about WMD<ul style="list-style-type: none">– confrontation rather than cooperation– unilateral action if others won't follow– force as preventive measure (rather than as last resort or response to imminent attack)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ White House policy options prioritized<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Bush policy featured, assessed (pro or con)– other policy options minimally considered

¹ Such a lack of differentiation may be the cause of many Americans' belief in such inaccurate statements as that Saddam Hussein was in part responsible for the attacks of 9/11. See the PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," October 2, 2003.

² See Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War & Death* (Routledge: 1999), ch. 6.

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

9. Media habits minimize independent analysis

The media's coverage of WMD suffers from the same lapses as their coverage of other international stories: general practices of news media coverage hinder comprehensive reporting and lead to additional opportunities for an administration's message to become dominant.

Table 9. Effect of habits on coverage

General Problems of International Coverage	How Media Habits Affect WMD Coverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ interest in statistics and quantifiable “facts” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ simple quoting of statistical claims about what a weapon can do <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – obscures scientific disagreements about effectiveness – obscures a lack of hard scientific information – obscures the often rapidly changing nature of a WMD story ▪ numerical assessments of effectiveness beg definitional questions (i.e. what do “power” or “damage” mean?)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ discomfort with reporting on uncertainty, i.e. when WMD events and issues are characterized by scientific or intelligence unknowns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ substitution of statistics for explanations ▪ uneven coverage of limitations of intelligence gathering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ tyranny of 24/7 deadlines in breaking-news coverage (even print periodicals are forced to compete with broadcast outlets) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ many stories have to go out without much investigative effort on the part of reporters. ▪ little time to confirm the statements of newsmakers, so stories appear with only one side represented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ pressures of pack journalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ push news organizations to cover the same set of stories, in roughly the same way
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ general time and space constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ limit news organizations' ability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – to proffer sufficient context and background – to analyze the technical dimensions of the issues – to interview alternative sources

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

Table 9. Media habits (cont.)

General Problems of International Coverage	How Media Habits Affect WMD Coverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the news imperatives of the “inverted pyramid” style of reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ put statements by major policymakers, such as the president, high up in a story (and often in the headline, too) ▪ put rebuttals or caveats from opposition or alternative voices (less prestigious figures) lower in the piece <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – results in more weight being given to the more ranking actors – results in official prevailing frames of reference becoming most prominent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ coverage of partisan policy debates as “he-said-she-said” contests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obscures why a WMD debate is unfolding the way it is ▪ obscures the validity of the differing perspectives ▪ allows media to avoid being identified with one side in a polarized debate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ coverage of sensational aspects of news 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ characterizes WMD through emotion-laden adjectives, rather than through more dispassionate evaluations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ coverage of debates over policy as partisan struggles between Republicans and Democrats for electoral advantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ emphasizes the notion that Americans are only interested in international news (WMD) as it affects them personally

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

10. Sourcing problems prevent independent evaluation

As has been evident in the arc of stories on WMD in Iraq, lack of specific sourcing or negligence in careful sourcing tends to buttress the administration’s message without allowing the media audience a way to assess statements purporting to be facts.

In October 2002, for example, the media covered the Bush administration’s claims that what had been the US strategy for dealing with the Iraqi WMD problem — UN inspections, economic sanctions, the 1998 bombing, and the blockade — had been a failure. But the media did not investigate, in print or on air, whether those allegations were true, as could have been explored by talking to US military figures in the region.

In both October 2002 and May 2003, there were effectively no interviews in the media outlets studied with either named or anonymous officers challenging the notion that Iraq had WMD. The only US military personnel responsible for Iraq who were questioned were at the level of Lt. Gen. William Wallace or Col. Richard McPhee. There were a few pieces quoting lesser ranks in regards to some WMD issues (such as the finding of the “mobile labs” or the looting at Tuwaitha), but none of those quotations expressed doubts about the failure of the prior US Iraqi WMD strategy.

Table 10. Effects of sourcing problems

Sourcing Dilemma	Sourcing Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “off-the-record” has become the standard operating procedure in Washington, especially on foreign policy issues such as WMD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> difficult for journalists to defy “anonymous” conventions and still retain access or get the story
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> over-reliance on anonymous sources, especially in the administration, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “senior Administration official” “a senior State Department official” “a Government expert” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reinforces the politically expedient secrecy surrounding WMD issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> over-reliance on administration sources for WMD issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> presents administration’s position as fact little independent confirmation for administration’s “findings”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unquestioned adoption of language of sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> places politicized language into public dialogue without signal of that politicization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unquestioned adoption of sources’ attribution of responsibility for conduct to individual actors (e.g., Saddam Hussein) or a nation or group (e.g., US, Iraq, Al-Qaeda) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> abdicates independent assessment of who or what has clear responsibility for conduct of events implies an individual is entirely responsible for the complex implementation of WMD policy minimizes interest in other indigenous authorities, experts or bureaucrats

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

11. Media's explanations of intelligence failures

In the three time periods of May 1998, October 2002, and May 2003, WMD intelligence failures were among the lead stories of the month. But major distinctions emerged in the media's attribution of the causes of the failures.

Table 11. Media explanations of causes for WMD intelligence failures

May 1998	October 2002	May 2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “ineptness” of intelligence-gathering agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inherent uncertainties in intelligence-gathering, esp. in regards to North Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “ineptness” of intelligence-gathering agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inability of Clinton administration to interpret and evaluate intelligence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ conscious manipulation by Bush administration of release of intelligence on North Korea for political ends (i.e. passage of Iraq resolution) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ pressure from Bush administration on intelligence agencies to find evidence of WMD (i.e. statements about mobile bio-lab)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bush administration's adoption of supportive Pentagon Iraqi intelligence while downplaying “murkier” CIA intelligence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inter-agency rivalry between Pentagon and civilian intelligence authorities in Iraq

Narrowing the Policy Options (cont.)

12. Consequences of the Americanization of events

The US media find it irresistible to focus on an American angle on WMD news. The only international stories that get consistent coverage are those that have an American angle. Regularly breaking events in a WMD crisis and a perception of imminent risk to Americans or to the United States remain the best indicators of coverage.

There were exceptions to the tendency to feature Americans. In the ongoing WMD story in Iraq, where the news media made a commitment to sustained coverage and where the indigenous situation had become familiar, non-American players were occasionally featured. Children at risk, children wounded, children killed became the preferred way into Iraq WMD stories that had no immediate American hook. Alternatively, when there was little ongoing action, on-the-ground coverage of a WMD crisis — as was the case with South Asia in 1998 and with the non-Iraq WMD events in 2002 and 2003 — there were few stories that looked at the situation through indigenous perspectives at all.

Table 12. The Americanization of events

Coverage Emphasis	Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ focus on risks that WMD pose to Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ disproportionate attention to potential risks that WMD pose to Americans▪ undercoverage of real WMD risks to citizens of non-US countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ focus on stories covering US bilateral relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ undercoverage of bilateral relations between pairs of other countries (India-Pakistan, Russia-Iran, North Korea-Japan) or multilateral interactions where the US is not the dominant player
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ focus on WMD proposals advanced by the United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ undercoverage of initiatives offered by other countries or international organizations▪ the administration's proposals appear to be the most developed and the most salient

Comparison of US-UK Coverage

13. Forms of coverage

Most of the news outlets employed a range of stories types and used changes in format and language to signal the differences among those types (see Appendix C for a discussion of some of these differences). Most stories in the news outlets were straight news items of one form or another:

- News about breaking events tended to be told in inverted pyramid fashion, while human-interest pieces led typically with dramatic anecdotes and incorporated in the body of the story more adjectives and description.
- Backgrounders and broad summary pieces tended to appear at anniversary moments or after a breaking story cooled, but soon enough that general interest in the topic was still assumed to exist (say a week after the initiating event). Background pieces were discursive.
- Background and summary stories often included multiple comments from sources. When those who were interviewed were regional or scientific experts, the quotations helped bring context or helped illuminate an identified trend. When those who were interviewed were partisan players, the quotations played the role of communicating the political perspective of that one side.

Table 13. Forms of coverage

Type of Coverage	Style of Coverage
breaking news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ frequent ▪ often news briefs ▪ datelined from field ▪ inverted pyramid (Who/What/Where/When lead sentence; organization of story from most to least “important” information)
political/diplomatic stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ frequent ▪ mid-length stories ▪ datelined from Washington or foreign capital ▪ inverted pyramid
features/human interest stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ relatively common on “Big Story” — rare on secondary stories ▪ longer pieces ▪ datelined from field ▪ anecdotal lead, discursive style
background pieces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ relatively common on “Big Story” — rare on secondary stories ▪ mid-length stories ▪ datelined from field or Washington ▪ narrative style
commentary/opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ responsive to political debate
interviews/live debates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ responsive to political debate ▪ usually conducted by Washington-based hosts

Comparison of US-UK Coverage (cont.)

14. Differences in coverage

The British media reported more critically on public policy than did their American colleagues, even though the media in both countries typically prioritized the same international WMD events (with the obvious exception that the UK media covered US domestic stories and angles lightly, if at all).

The US media are not entirely at fault for their more passive coverage of the Bush administration’s WMD claims and policy decisions. The US media presented relatively few alternative perspectives to those of the White House partly because US politicians and other Americans critical of the Bush administration not only substantially supported President Bush’s declaration and articulation of the “War on Terror” but did so well into the summer and fall of 2003. By contrast, there was more consistent and vocal opposition among senior British political figures to some of the Blair government’s WMD policies.

Table 14. Differences in coverage

American Media Coverage	British Media Coverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ emphasized the heightening of global risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ emphasized how internal politics can drive international WMD affairs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ focused on the presumably culpable country’s flouting of both global norms and general good sense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ focused on multilateral consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ tended to confidently, even patronizingly, recount WMD “facts” and analysis (especially editorial commentary) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ tended to stress, often smugly, a political critique (especially editorial commentary)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ was engaged by the importance of the US presence on the global stage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ perforce referenced the role the US plays — because American foreign policy is the acknowledged 800-pound gorilla in the WMD arena
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ emphasized the meaning of the breaking event for the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ typically criticized US policy on WMD as self-interested

Concluding Observations

15. Evaluation of coverage

Pack journalism did not drive all WMD coverage. Indeed, there were clear differences in the type and caliber of reporting among the different news outlets (see Appendix C). Both individual journalists and individual news organizations demonstrated that on specific story arcs they were capable of excellent enterprise reporting.

The clear lesson is that the public was not served well when immensely complicated WMD issues that crossed journalistic beats in domestic politics, national security, and regional affairs, as well as in science, medicine, and technology, were covered by a cavalier reporting of official statements and responses and were sourced anonymously.

In effect, weak coverage of WMD was classic scandal coverage. The media more comfortably followed breaking events and the partisan contests than the technological or scientific debates or the policy ramifications — especially the international ramifications.

Table 15. Evaluation of coverage

Strong Coverage	Weak Coverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted from an ongoing commitment to an issue by a reporter (or group of reporters) who had extensive background and expertise on the subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted when the issue was covered in the context of a political beat, where the interest was more on White House, State Department, or Congressional politics, for example, than on WMD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted when WMD was examined in-depth in the context of a specific WMD event, issue, or debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted when WMD was reflexively mentioned in general stories about terrorism and terrorists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted when articles relied on on-the-record, named sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resulted when articles relied on off-the-record, anonymous sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During Iraq War: resulted when reporters declined to sign nondisclosure agreements which freed them from special restrictions on what they wrote (as in the case with “unilateral” journalists covering WMD in Iraq, such as Washington Post reporter Barton Gellman) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During Iraq War: resulted when reporters signed nondisclosure agreements³

³ For example, embedded journalist Judith Miller reported in a page-one New York Times article about the stringent conditions she had agreed to in order to write about the interrogation of an Iraqi who was presumed to be a scientist with knowledge of Iraq’s weapons program: “Under the terms of her accreditation to report on the activities of M.E.T. Alpha, this reporter was not permitted to interview the scientist or visit his home. Nor was she permitted to write about the discovery of the scientist for three days, and the copy was then submitted for a check by military officials.” (4/21/03) In return for her scoop on the interrogation, she also, noted media critic Jack Shafer in Slate magazine, “consented to pre-publication review ‘oh, hell, let’s call it censorship!’ of her story by military officials.” (4/21/03)

Recommendations

In *Backstory* (Penguin Press, 2004), New Yorker media critic Ken Auletta writes about journalists' need for humility. Journalists have two "irreplaceable tools: the curiosity to ask questions and the ability to listen to the answers," he says in the introduction. "Each requires modesty because each requires us to assume that we don't already know the answers."

Journalists facing the admittedly difficult challenge of covering WMD stories might take his comments to heart. This study suggests that few reporters covering WMD ask enough questions of enough people — or ask the right questions of the right people. There were, however, prominent exceptions to that tendency, among them reporters Barton Gellman, Walter Pincus, and Dana Milbank of the Washington Post; Bob Drogin of the LA Times; and David Sanger and William Broad of the New York Times.

This study also suggests that during the three time periods under investigation, too few journalists recognized that certain answers were not being given — or that their assumptions about the answers they would find while reporting on WMD stories shaped not only what they ended up writing, but what they looked for in the first place. William Jackson, Jr., writing in *Editor & Publisher Online*, noted about NY Times reporter Judith Miller, for instance, that she was "a booster of the invasion who had hyped the threat of weapons of mass destruction" and had "essentially surrender[ed her] detached judgment to the Pentagon" (6/17/03 and 7/2/03).

The media cannot proffer complex and nuanced coverage of every issue — or consistently give complex and nuanced coverage of any single issue, even one as integral to national security as WMD. But they can do better. Washington Post ombudsman Michael Getler — the best ombudsman in the business — wrote in his February 29, 2004, column about the gap between "the real-world challenges of reporting about touchy subjects" and the Post's own internal guidelines about sourcing, which states the paper's "commitment to telling readers as much as possible about where the information in our newspaper is coming from."⁴

Getler writes that he understands

"that there are certain subjects, especially national security issues, about which informants simply will not allow themselves to be quoted. So a reporter and a news organization must make a judgment about whether they trust the source or, better yet, sources, and the information. And then they decide whether the public interest is better served by reporting it on that constrained basis, if they cannot get the information elsewhere, or withholding it."

Then Getler gives his own take on the Post's judgment:

"Officials get away too easily without having to use their names even on routine statements. Many reporters and editors are too comfortable with this practice. Editors do not sufficiently press reporters to go back and get something on the record or come closer to identifying the source, especially with reporting on government policy and security issues. ... It is not easy to force changes, but it is definitely worth a new effort." (2/29/04)

⁴ Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr., wrote a piece in the March 7, 2004, Outlook section about the paper's guidelines for reporting the news, and in particular about its recent restatement of policies covering "reporting techniques, use of direct quotations, attribution of information, use of confidential sources and corrections of our mistakes."

With those thoughts in mind, this study proposes a number of recommendations for improving WMD coverage. These recommendations fall into four categories: covering the President, covering WMD policy and intelligence, covering the war on terrorism, and covering the science of WMD.

Covering the President

1. Understand that reporting on the President's policies and using administration sources — even critically — validates the President's prioritization and framing of issues and events.
2. Consider the general foreign policy implications of raising the specter of WMD.
3. Consider the general domestic policy and budget implications either of raising the specter of WMD abroad or of characterizing a WMD system as a deterrent.
4. Think critically about the language of WMD and whether it serves an other than descriptive purpose.
5. Consider whether similar situations are being represented similarly, and whether distinctive situations are being represented distinctively.
6. Be alert to changes in tone of administration assessments — especially if the administration's statements become less qualified and more alarmist (or vice versa) — and examine whether there has been a concomitant reason for that change.
7. Publish or air dissenting domestic and international voices more prominently.
8. Be alert to administration pressure to respond to crises “patriotically.”
9. Be skeptical not only of information that is released by an administration, but also of the timing of the release of that information.
10. Don't let 24/7 deadline pressure preclude an assessment of official administration statements.

Covering WMD policy and intelligence

1. Cover WMD policy ramifications as thoroughly as breaking events and partisan debate.
2. Explore bilateral as well as multilateral repercussions of WMD policy — even when the US is not one of the primary players.
3. Explore potential and real WMD risks to people other than Americans.
4. Discuss how the administration has used policies of “pre-emptive war” and “regime change” as ways to deal with nuclear proliferation.
5. Consider and evaluate other policy options as ways to deal with nuclear proliferation.
6. Understand that evaluating a country's WMD status with incomplete data is not only an intelligence problem, but also a policy problem.
7. Explain the difference between intelligence collection and intelligence analysis, and explain the inherent uncertainties of intelligence gathering.

8. When the administration's intelligence claims cannot be independently confirmed, emphasize that lack of confirmation.
9. Identify for an audience the limitations and probable skew of reporting on an issue when the main sources are anonymous.

Covering the war on terrorism

1. Distinguish between acts of terrorism and the acquisition or use of WMD.
2. Challenge the assumption that WMD is an integral element in a global terrorism matrix.
3. Examine the reasons for the administration's articulation of a strong, direct link between terrorists' control of WMD and American interests.
4. Consider that reporting on administration's scare pronouncements not only serves a news function but also serves to validate the administration's policies.
5. Consider the moral suasion and political merit of language deeming a country or person to be "evil."
6. Debate worst-case scenario reasoning.

Covering the science of WMD

1. Cover not just the politics of WMD but the science of it as well.
2. Clarify distinctions in the degree of threat posed by chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, rather than reference WMD as a monolith.
3. Clarify distinctions between civilian nuclear energy programs and military nuclear weapons programs.
4. Evaluate and distinguish among the elements that would make a situation a "serious" or "imminent" security threat — nationally, regionally, and internationally.