News Frames and National Security

Covering Big Brother

Did media coverage contribute to Americans' tendency to favor national security over civil liberties following the 9/11 attacks? How did news framing of terrorist threats support the expanding surveillance state revealed by Edward Snowden? Douglas M. McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah explore the power of news coverage to render targeted groups suspicious and to spur support for government surveillance. They argue that the tendency of journalists to frame stories around individual targets of surveillance – personifying the domestic threat – shapes citizens' judgments about tolerance and participation, leading them to limit the civil liberties of a range of groups under scrutiny and to support "Big Brother."

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(*continued after the Index*)

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Preface and Acknowledgments

When this story began more than a decade ago in the early fall of 2001, we were relatively new professors at the University of Wisconsin. We were in the process of launching a research collaboration that has lasted to this day. We were on our way to work when a report came over the radio that a second plane had struck the World Trade Center. Within the hour, we were both at work watching CNN in a conference room along with other faculty, staff, and students. Like everyone else in the room – and so many others across the country – we sensed that the world was about to change.

What we didn't know was how profound this change would be, nor that we would spend the next decade writing this book that focuses on one particular aspect of this change, the War on Terror, how it was covered in the media, and the effects that this coverage had on the public. But we did know that the public opinion survey that we were planning was going to have to be redesigned to deal with public reactions to the 9/11 attacks. As the ensuing weeks unfolded, we read news reports about the federal government's reorganization of its various intelligence agencies, as well as proposed legislation that would allow them to fight terrorism more effectively. This legislation, dubbed the PATRIOT Act, was passed overwhelmingly by both the House and Senate and signed into law by President Bush on October 26, 2001, only 45 days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Throughout the fall of 2001, we encountered the concerns of civil libertarians, who warned that the PATRIOT Act would violate the civil liberties of innocent Americans, particularly political activists and Arab-Americans. Alarmed at this prospect, and curious as to how this concern might be received by the public, we began planning a series of experimental studies in the summer of 2002, work that continued through the spring of 2004. These experiments collected the data that we analyzed for the framing studies reported in the later chapters of this book. At the time, we worried that our experimental stimuli,

hypothetical news stories about how the government was using the PATRIOT Act to engage in the surveillance of peaceful groups, innocent of plotting or executing acts of terrorism, might be seen as far-fetched scenarios. But then, during this period, more to our dismay than relief, news reports began to trickle out that confirmed suspicions that the PATRIOT Act was being extended beyond investigating potential terrorists to conduct surveillance of Arab immigrants and citizens as well as political activists.

Initially, these revelations spurred our sense of urgency to develop the results of our research into what ultimately became this book. As we were doing so, reports indicating that the scope of surveillance might actually include a broader cross section of Americans, not just terrorism suspects, came out in 2006 and 2007. As we drafted and revised the book, we waited to see if President Obama would roll back the PATRIOT Act and government surveillance when he took office in 2008, as he had campaigned he would. When we spoke to reporter Eric Lichtblau prior to the election, he warned us that Obama would not cede the powers provided by the PATRIOT Act. And indeed, he did not. As we recast the book to consider a prolonged climate of fear and an ongoing War on Terror, other revelations shifted our thinking regarding the findings and the book. In 2010, the *Washington Post* had published a series of reports under the title of *Top Secret America,* which detailed just how massive the government's national security system had grown to be. These reports strengthened and supported the claims of our research, leading us to revise the book to include them. Yet we also felt a certain unease that there was more information to come. And there was. In 2013, Eric Snowden leaked documents to major news organizations detailing the true size and scope of the surveillance state. Big Brother was watching, and he was watching all of us. Shortly into 2014, even President Obama had to admit that the government surveillance had gone too far and was in need of greater oversight. With that decision, the arc of our story was sufficiently complete, with the surveillance state and its toll on civil liberties being questioned in earnest.

It is this fundamental tension between national security and civil liberties that is at the heart of this book. As we note in Chapter 2, external conflicts and domestic threats often push the pendulum of the national agenda, including government policy and public opinion, in the direction of national security. As time passes, and the conflict or threat subsides, the pendulum often swings back toward civil liberties. In the aftermath of 9/11, we expected the pendulum to swing back relatively quickly but were struck by how long it took this to occur. To be sure, the 9/11 attacks as well as the PATRIOT Act and its application have raised the stakes and complicated these processes unlike anything we have seen before in American history. What is starkly clear is that the news media played an important role in this story, both in terms of what they reported and how they reported it – how they "covered" the PATRIOT Act. The research that is the subject of this book represents an exploration into the role that the media play as an intermediary between the political actors and the larger public in understanding how this law has been applied.

We chose the subtitle for this book, *Covering Big Brother*, because the two alternative readings of the title reflect the two strokes of the pendulum in the tension between national security and civil liberties. First, we mean it in the sense that, particularly in the first decade after 9/11, the largely complacent mainstream media were essentially covering *for* Big Brother by allowing elites to frame the issue of terrorism around individual exemplars while the pendulum swung out toward national security. But more recently, with the help of key whistleblowers, elite journalists became more active in performing their watchdog function in covering Big Brother's activities and abuses as the pendulum began to swing back toward civil liberties.

As important as these insights regarding the swing of the pendulum between national security and civil liberties may be, we believe that an equally important contribution of this book arises from the various ways in which we reconceptualize framing theory to provide direction for future research on media effects. The conventional approach sees the news frame as a "story-level" concept, a characteristic of a news story as a whole, under which information and facts are assembled into a package that connotes a particular meaning and fosters certain cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. This approach also raises certain complications for effects researchers; most notably, how do we identify and isolate the frame of the story for subsequent experimental effects testing?

Framing effects researchers have taken different approaches to answering this question. Some scholars advance specific frames that are narrowly tied to the story in question (e.g., a global warming frame), whereas others use transcendent frames, which are applicable across a wide variety of story contexts (e.g., an ethical frame). In addition, some work argues for an idealist conception of frames, manipulating the story frame in isolation while holding all other information constant, whereas other work advances a pragmatic conception of frames, in which accompanying features and facts strengthen and support the frame. While the goals of the former approach are laudable in terms of internal validity concerns, there are two limitations that impede their advancement. First, it may be impossible to identify exactly what content feature constitutes the frame, and thus, it may not be feasible to manipulate only the frame. Second, we realize that frames may derive their true power through their co-occurrence with the facts and other information that fit them.

The research presented in the middle section of the book that examines these issues was a product of the Mass Communication Research Center (MCRC) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Though literally hundreds of graduate students have been involved in MCRC projects since it was founded by Ralph Nafziger in 1959, very few outsiders, including many of our own colleagues, truly understand the MCRC, what it is, and what it does. To put it simply, the MCRC is more of a pedagogical philosophy than it is an institution, an organization, or even a place. The MCRC pedagogy is based on the premise that the best way to learn theory and research is to do it, and to do it collaboratively, in a open peer-learning environment.

Jack McLeod, who was brought into the MCRC by Percy Tannenbaum in the early 1960s, instilled this pedagogical philosophy. In 1966, McLeod took over the leadership of the MCRC and guided teams of graduate student researchers through the yearlong process of designing, executing, analyzing, and publishing research based on community surveys that were conducted each fall on an annual basis. These efforts yielded scores of influential publications in the field of political communication research. Perhaps even more important than that, these projects involved dozens and dozens of graduate (and undergraduate) students, training them in the finer points of social science research, and launching many successful careers in research and academia. Over the years, the MCRC developed the collaborative culture of which we were the beneficiaries when Jack McLeod retired at the end of 2000.

Our first turn as faculty mentors of the MCRC was in the fall of 2001. Indeed, it was only about a week into our stint that a group of terrorists set out to hijack four airplanes. This tragedy and its aftermath became the focal point of our political communication research and output for the next five years. During this time, we were blessed with a large of group of bright and dedicated graduate students, many of whom are co-authors on the research chapters of this book. Through these 9/11 data collections, we were able to witness the benefits of MCRC collaborations. We trained and learned from many outstanding scholars, almost all of whom are now rising stars in political communication. Those students honed their research skills working on this project. As graduate student collaborators, they learned about research through painstaking, and at times agonizing, deliberations over even the smallest of research details. We recall (admittedly somewhat fondly) several incidents in which the intensity of this work led to some heated debates and internal battles among the students. But the output of this process is high-quality research, proof that good graduate training and groundbreaking scholarship can go hand-in-hand. And we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that students are not the only ones who learn from this collaboration. Very often, we learn just as much from the graduate students, who bring new techniques, the latest research, and fresh ideas to these collaborations.

To be sure, the MCRC was, and remains today, a vibrant laboratory for learning about the practice of research. Fueled by collaboration, sweat equity, and a desire for learning, the participants continue to do high-quality, multimethod, theoretically grounded research that is making important contributions to the field. While this is certainly not the fastest way to produce research, we personally feel it is the best way to both generate knowledge and mentor scholars.

Acknowledgments

Before we close this preface, we want to acknowledge those who have shaped the development of our respective careers and research programs. Sadly, we

cannot identify all of them here, as the list is far too long. We apologize for any inadvertent omissions.

But before we do that, we must first thank the editors of the Communication, Society and Politics series, Lance Bennett and Robert Entman, for both their patience and their guidance. Thanks also to Lewis Bateman and Shaun Vigil of Cambridge University Press, who served as our principal editor and senior editorial assistant, respectively, and moved this volume from the proposal stage though the production process. We also thank Mark Mastromarino for his assistance with our manuscript indexing.

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Three of the chapters in this section had their origination in articles published with our co-authors in *Communication Research* (Sage Publications), *Human Communication Research* (Wiley), and *Journal of Communication* (Wiley). Accordingly, we thank Sage and Wiley for granting us permission to reengage with that earlier work in this book. Chapter 4 draws and expands upon "Cue Convergence: Associative Effects on Social Intolerance," which was originally published in *Communication Research* in June 2006. Likewise, Chapter 6 further develops ideas initially engaged in "Personifying the Radical: How News Framing Polarizes Security Concerns and Tolerance Judgments," which appeared in the July 2005 issue of *Human Communication Research*. Finally, Chapter 7 extends work presented in "Expressive Responses to News Stories About Extremist Groups: A Framing Experiment," which was published by *Journal of Communication* in June 2006. Although our analyses and interpretations have changed, these pieces served as the starting points for this book.

We are also grateful for the involvement and feedback of Elliott Hillback, Tom Hove, Michael McCluskey, and Chris Long, who were also graduate students at UW-Madison during the time that this research was conducted.

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Finally, we would like to thank the heroes of this story. In an era when the institutions of journalism are being threatened by financial pressures that have imposed severe cutbacks on news organizations, including the dismantling of investigative units, a small cadre of reporters doggedly pursued the story of the expanding surveillance apparatus of the federal government. Particularly prominent were Eric Lichtblau and Charles Savage of *The New York Times*; Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek*; Dana Priest, William Arkin, and

Barton Gellman of the *Washington Post*; and Glenn Greenwald of *Salon.com* and *The Guardian*.

But, of course, this story did not come out through the efforts of investigative journalists alone. The journalists were fed information from sources, many of whom remain anonymous. Whistleblowers, such as William Binney and Edward Snowden, who observed what they felt was an egregious violation of civil liberties, exhibited extreme courage in standing up and sharing information and substantiating documents. They came forward at considerable professional and personal sacrifice. They were branded as traitors, lost their livelihoods, had their homes invaded, and, in the case of Snowden, had to leave his home country altogether.

Without the efforts of intrepid journalists and conscientious whistleblowers, most of what we know about the extent of domestic surveillance might still be buried. The stories about Big Brother's activities that were told through the media, even those that personalized surveillance by highlighting individual targets, eventually let the pendulum swing back far enough that the powerful individuals within the power structure began to take civil liberties infringements seriously. Without the pressure from that pendulum swing, President Obama might never have acknowledged that "high-tech surveillance poses a threat to civil liberties" in his announcement that he intends to impose greater oversight and restrictions on the NSA's domestic spying activities. Ultimately, these news reports lifted the veil on Big Brother's surveillance activities, doing what the news media are supposed to do in their role as the fourth estate, providing a check on the activities of government. In the process, they confirmed what we only feared was possible when we embarked on this research.