One Message for Many Audiences: Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globalization and telecommunications technology have made every message global. The consequence of this phenomenon is that when the United States makes announcements concerning the Global War on Terrorism a global, rather than a local audience, receives the message. While similar messages may circulate in different areas throughout the globe, the messages interact with national and/or cultural traditions that result in different types of message interpretation.

Using Entman's (2003a; 2003b) Cascading Activation Network model we charted the news of Zarqawi's death, specifically the photographs of his death, as those messages reached different audiences. The news was interpreted in a wide variety of ways by a great number of actors. For example, Jihadi leadership and media moved quickly to proclaim him as a martyr through the reframing of the photographs of his body in an attempt to continue their campaign of terror. In this analysis, we trace the story of Zarqawi's death through three media outlets: the mainstream United States press, Al-Jazeera, and Jihadi media. We offer a modification of the Entman model and three policy recommendations to assist in adapting messages for a global audience.

First, we urge policy makers to accept that messages are global. Policy makers must consider if/how messages and images could be re-appropriated by individuals who hold an antagonistic stance toward the United States. Our second major policy recommendation reflects the harsh reality of a global media environment. Policy makers should immediately adopt a formal pre-release analysis and decision making process which takes into account the likely effect of those messages on strategic cultures such as those in the Middle East, in addition to the effect of those messages on domestic audiences. Finally, we offer a suggestion based on the specific issue of publicizing death photos of Jihad leaders. Decision makers should seriously consider (1) preventing images of the dead from mass circulation, (2) releasing information about the dead from non-US sources, and (3) avoiding messages that portray the United States as voyeuristic and/or barbaric.

The adoption of these three message strategies provide a framework that accurately reflects the reality of global communications. In addition, the third recommendation will have a positive impact in the specific scenario of releasing information concerning dead Jihadi leaders. Together, these policy recommendations represent general principles and a specific application of those principles that will help the United States win the Global War on Terrorism.

One Message for Many Audiences:
Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

BACKGROUND

The United States does not normally publish photographs of citizens or soliders who die in war. There have been exceptions. For example, in response to questions concerning the publication of the death photos Uday and Qusay Hussein Secretary Rumsfeld commented "It is not a practice the United States engages in on a normal basis" (Hedges, 2003, p. A23). Publication and mass circulation of death images is a complicated subject that some critics believe is covered under the Geneva Convention code prohibiting the publication of photographs of prisoners of war. Others advocate the practice when it demonstrates the loss of a major political figure or terrorist leader.

Despite the general prohibition on publication of photos of war casualties the United States elected to make public certain photos in the Global War on Terrorism. The first notable exception occurred when the Department of Defense allowed Uday and Qusay Hussein to be photographed in July 2003. According to government officials the publication of the photographs was justified because "there was no other, less graphic, way to prove to people that the potential heirs of Saddam's Baathist regime were gone" (Hedges, 2003, p. A23). In addition, the photos were said to provide "higher troop morale, more intelligence from Iraqi people and irrefutable evidence that Saddam's tyranny is over" (Manly, 2003, p. 004).

This highly controversial media event served as a preview of the more recent publication of photos of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. On June 8th, 2006, the US military, killed al-Zarqawi in a coordinated coalition effort. Locating Zarqawi in a safe house near the town of Baqubah, the U. S. Air Force dropped two 500-lb. bombs on the house. Following the strike, Iraqi Police discovered Zarqawi, who survived for an additional 52 minutes. His death was seen as a success for the Bush Administration and for the war effort in Iraq because one of the terrorist masterminds and leaders had been eliminated and additional leads on al-Qaeda in Iraq were found in a "treasure trove" of information amongst the rubble. In announcing the death of Zarqawi, Army Major General William B. Caldwell led a press conference detailing the strike and subsequent identification of the body. In doing so, Caldwell displayed maps of the area where the safe house was located, video of the air strike, and images of the deceased Zarqawi.

The Media Response

In reaction to the display of Zarqawi's body, various news outlets noted that images of his death were "gruesome" (Adams, 2006, p. 12), a "trophy" (Kennicott, 2006, p. C01), and even "sanitised" (Nason, 2006, p. 10). The mixed responses highlight the complexity of the global media stage, where information and images travel faster than ever. Editors of

One Message for Many Audiences:
Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

newspapers received complaints of the graphic nature of the images appearing on front pages, arguing that the display was expected from the terrorist enemy, not from the United States (Diadiun, 2006). In descriptions of the trophy-like status of the document, writers note that its presentation in a professional mat and frame the photograph looked as "something one might preserve and hang on the wall next to other family portraits" (Kennicott, 2006, p. C01). Finally, the sanitization of the photograph was noted through Caldwell's statements that the body was altered before the image was obtained. Debris and blood were removed to make the body more presentable and in hopes of not inflaming the Islamic World (Nason, 2006). Given the mixed reviews of the photographic evidence of Zarqawi's death, questions should be raised regarding the efficacy of such a display, especially in the environment of global media.

"In examining the prominent news outlets, the story was disseminated across the globe in a matter of minutes after the initial press conference. Al-Jazeera listed Zarqawi's obituary in the same day"

In examining the prominent news outlets, the story was disseminated across the globe in a matter of minutes after the initial press conference. Al-Jazeera listed Zarqawi's obituary in the same day, remarking about the exaggeration of his prominence ("Obituary," 2006). On June 12th, four days after the strike, Al-Jazeera featured a photograph of the news conference including the image of Zarqawi's body ("Doubts shroud," 2006). Bloggers also tracked the story as it progressed. From both sides of the political spectrum ("georgia10" at *Daily Kos* and Michelle Malkin's Blog), the story broke the same day with fellow bloggers adding to the general commentary. With a global network of information flow, the dissemination of details regarding the event moved at a lightning fast pace, which means that words and images must be carefully crafted to avoid cultural insensitivity and misinformation.

Given the policy of photographic censorship and its rare exceptions, the notable event of the death of Zarqawi and the subsequent mass circulation of images of his body was received with mixed results. Importantly, letters to the editor and other news outlets questioned the use of the image due to its graphic and trophy-like status. While the U. S. military takes cautionary steps in the production of the image through cleaning the body, the image and the means of execution still struck many as barbaric ("Talk back to the media," 2006; "Allies wrong to display," 2006; Diadiun, 2006). Increased global circulation of images gave them political weight and communicative importance, especially in a global news cycle. In short, this death image was on display, with commentary, everywhere.

We offer the following analysis. First, we discuss the nature of the global audience vs. local audience. With the use of mass media outlets, the nature of audience and their reception to messages has changed over the past 20 years. Second, we examine scholarship which has approached the problem of how messages are interpreted by global audiences in various sectors of society, including business, politics, and culture. Finally, we review the

work of visual communication and rhetoric scholars who have evaluated the impact of images on diverse audiences. Our aim in this paper is to illuminate the possible effects of image distribution within global networks.

THE POWER OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization has profound implications for the way information is distributed. Smith (1999) noted that control over information is "passing into the control of managements (of that information) whose outlook is exclusively global" (p. 355). This change in focus is a reflection of how information circulates in a media saturated global news environment. Put another way, there is no such thing as a local message. Ward (2005) writes:

> News reports, via satellite or the Internet, reach people around the world and influence the actions of governments, militaries, humanitarian agencies, and warring ethnic groups. The reach of the Al-Jazeera and CNN networks, for example, extends beyond the Arab world or the American public. (p. 4)

Not only are media outlets global in scope, but they are also interconnected and overlapping. This produces a remarkably fluid and rapid dissemination of information that crosses national and cultural boundaries with little impediment. In addition, "national governments cannot easily enforce even the modest rules some have adopted to regulate or impede these processes" (Smith, 1999, p. 356).

The issue that both Ward and Smith hint at is that while messages are primarily universal, audiences are not. Ward's (2005) commentary on Al-Jazeera's reach beyond the Arab world is especially interesting. Al-Jazeera is accessible on the Internet, and, more importantly it is accessible in English. The problem we are left to grapple with is one of a single message reaching multiple national and cultural audiences.

A Framework for Message Dissemination

Robert Entman (2003a, 2003b) proposes a model for understanding how information is disseminated from government sources to the public. Entman's work is exceptional for two reasons. First, his model has been adopted and/or cited my numerous researchers as an accurate framework for evaluating message framing and dissemination (Byerly, 2005; Cherribi 2006; Dahiden, 2005; Jerit, 2005; Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006; Tiley & Cokley, 2005; Wang 2006; Wicks, 2005). Second, the model itself is exceptional in that it not only isolates key stages of message development,

but also provides insight into who has influence over the message as it changes and moves.

Figure 1: Cascading Network Activation Model (Entman, 2003a, p. 419)
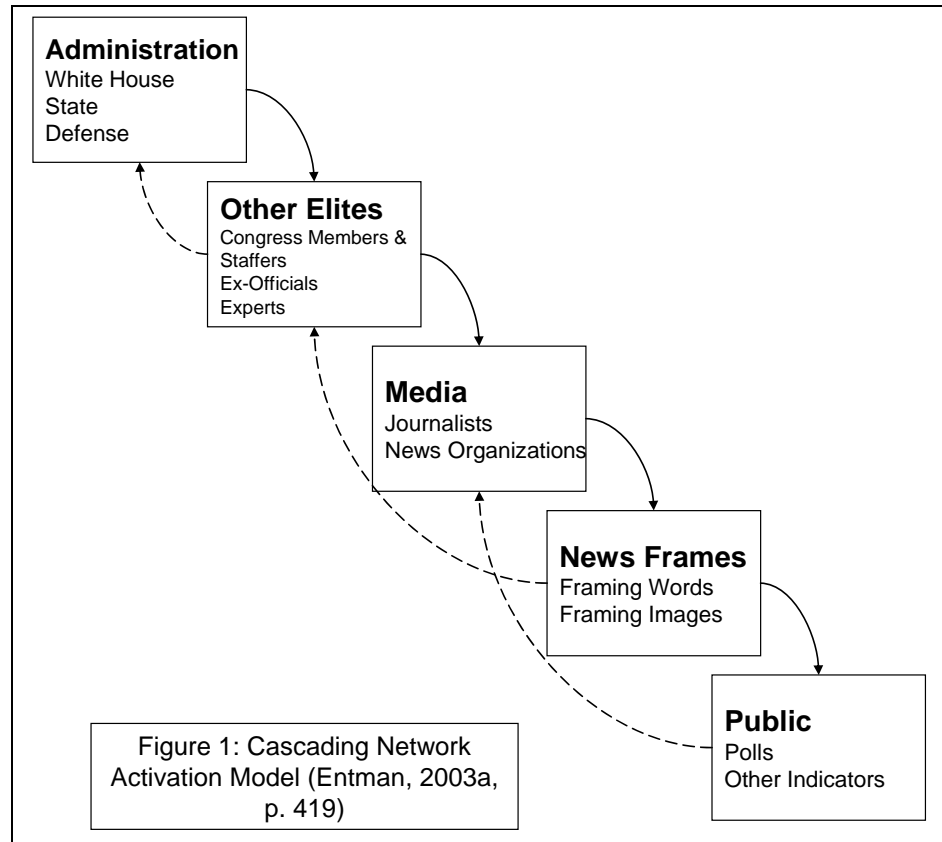
In this model:

- Administration/Military: At this level command decisions are made about how to deal with events.

  - President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld take advice from staffers and make the final call about how to make information public.

- Other Elites: Staffers, such as press secretaries, convey the information and message agenda from the Administration and communicate with the press.

  - These elite information gatekeepers maintain a close eye on the press and can adapt, or spin, their message accordingly.

- Media: Members of the media receive information from staffers and other information elites. The media keep tabs on polling data from the public as it attempts to craft a more marketable message.

One Message for Many Audiences:
Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

- News Frames: This area represents the media's crafting of a specific message.

    o News frames emphasize certain details and omit others in an effort to mold information into a more acceptable (to the elite stakeholders') story.

- Public: The public receives information from press sources and form opinions based on it and in response to it.

In short, this model provides a way to understand the stages a message goes through (i.e., "cascades") as it makes its way from decision makers to the public. An important aspect of this cascading model is its *portability*. Cherribi (2006) notes:

> The metaphorical model of the cascade created by Robert M. Entman in his book *Projections of Power* (2003b) to explain the process of influence over the frames projected into the news about foreign crises, public opinion, and elite thinking offers a dynamic approach to analyze a global media outlet like Al-Jazeera. (p. 134)

Cherribi (2006) focuses his discussion on the political controversy over the use of veils among Muslim women in France. He uses Entman's model and concludes "Al-Jazeera may, on the surface, look as if it offers pluralism with its variety of programs and opinions. In the case of the veil, however, there is only one perspective, an Islamic perspective that is to encourage women to wear the veil" (p. 134). The important aspect of this study is that it displays the utility of Entman's model (2003a; 2003b) in the context of the mass circulation of political messages throughout the Middle East.

The diagram used above may be modified and expanded to enrich our understanding of how single messages, such as the death of Zarqawi, can be locally appropriated and re-interpreted by multiple audiences. Returning to the theme from earlier—*there are no local messages*. We adopt a modified version of Cerribi's (2006) Al-Jazeera diagram to reflect the release of information about Zarqawi's death and provide a model of how information flows within each media network. Compared to the traditional cascading model proposed by Entman (2003a; 2003b) there are many opportunities for constructing more appropriate messages for international audiences.

Figure 2: Global Cascading Activation Networks Model
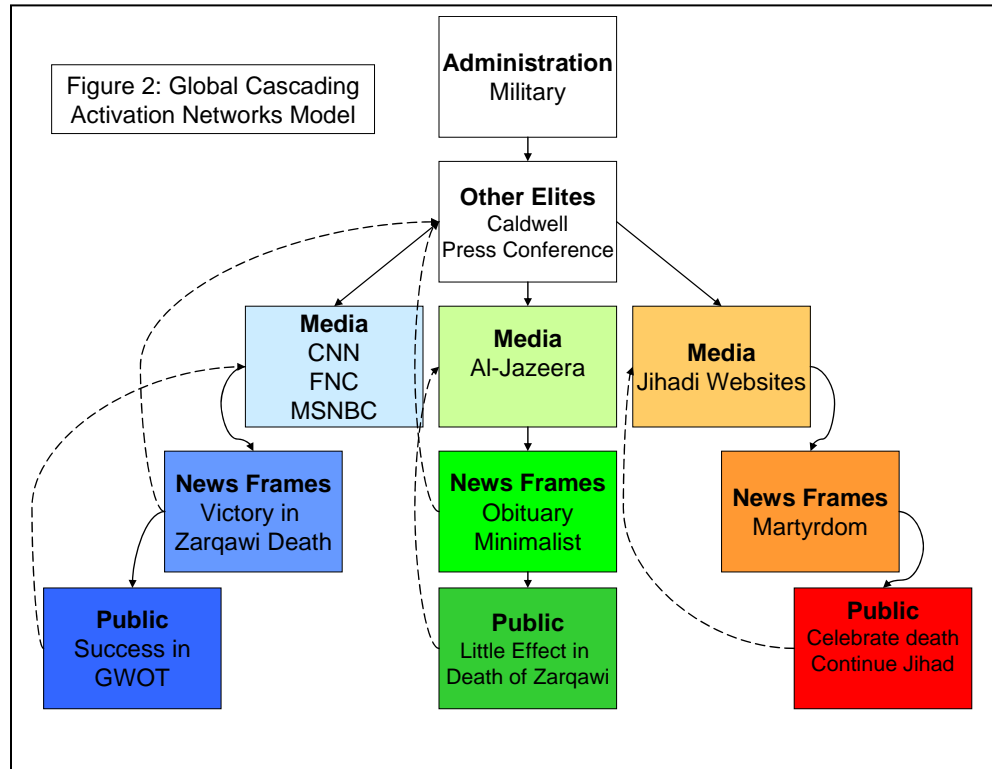
The right side of the diagram outlines the distribution of information along Jihadi channels deserves further explanation:

- The first and second levels of the diagram remain the same. Administration officials and staffers still have a degree of control over the information that becomes public.

- At the third level, Jihadi websites are a primary mechanism of information distribution (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006). It should be noted that websites/bloggers also obtain information from Al-Jazeera and from Western news sources.

  o These websites also report on and react to the actions and beliefs of a public that is sympathetic to Jihad.

- The websites/bloggers report the news in a differing ways, but more importantly, how they see and interpret the information is beyond the control of Western media elites and their spokespersons. In the case of the circulation of the death images of

One Message for Many Audiences:
Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

Zarqawi, *it was the release and circulation of those images that led to his death being framed as worthy of martyrdom.*

- Diverse publics receive and likely adopt the interpretation of the more culturally and politically-aligned websites. Zarqawi's death is both mourned and celebrated as an act of martyrdom.

Asia Times reporter Michael Scheuer (2006) writes:

> On bin Laden's side, al-Qaeda publicly will mourn Zarqawi's death, recall him as a noble and selfless mujahid, and cite him as a brave comrade-in-arms killed by the crusaders' high-tech aircraft while he was armed only with faith and an AK-47. This is likely the way many Muslims outside Iraq recall him, *thanks in large measure to the post-attack photograph US public relations officers distributed of Zarqawi's face*. (n. p.; emphasis ours)

Visuals, especially photographs, are very powerful symbolic forms of communication and influence (Finnegan 2006; Lucaities and Hariman, 2001; Scott, 2004). The photographic information presented in a military press conference is the exact same photographic information that appears on a Jihadi website, but the interpretation of its meaning is entirely dependent upon the local framing of the image within a specific cultural and political environment. Our recommendations for navigating this situation are the subject of the following section.

THREE GUIDELINES FOR MESSAGE CREATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Guidelines:
1. Recognize that messages are global.
2. Adopt an independent analysis and message coordination process.
3. Reconsider the release of images of dead leaders.

1. **Recognize that messages are global**: Information distributed at a military press conference is available to domestic media outlets, Al-Jazeera, conservative and liberal blogs, and jihadi websites, all in a matter of hours.

   a. When deploying messages concerning new events in the Global War on Terror, consider the impact of a various media organizations and their ability to reframe messages in reference to their cultural politics. Use the above revised Entman model to predict responses to global messages.

   b. Absolute control over the message is impossible. Craft messages that result in meaningful exchange. Constructing ambiguous messages can convey appropriate information as well as generate dialogue (Goodall, Trethewey & McDonald 2006).

One Message for Many Audiences:
Framing the Death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

2. **Adopt an independent analysis and message coordination process**: The unfortunate reality of global media is that it is impossible to please everyone with one message due to different religious/cultural/national circumstances. Situations will present themselves when the release of information will please one group, but cause others to grow uneasy. We suggest that in these unfortunate circumstances the government should adopt a consistent media strategy that focuses on the needs of strategic cultures (such as the Middle East) rather than other options.

3. **Reconsider the release of images of dead leaders:** Photos of the death of Zarqawi are seen as signs of progress in the GWOT for domestic audiences, but the larger global audience did not interpret them in the same way. Part of recognizing the reality of global media is accepting that messages must be crafted for a global audience, as well as a domestic one, and that the messages, media strategies, and reinforcement mechanisms are likely to require far more complexity and subtlety than is currently in place.

   a. Due to the current low credibility status of the United States government (Corman, Hess, and Justus, 2006) *utilize third-party credible sources* to release controversial information and images and to confirm the validity of the diplomatic and military acts used to obtain them. In the Zarqawi example, it may have been more politically useful to for the newly elected Iraqi government officials to release the story of his death.

   b. Avoid the perception that the United States engages in barbaric practices. The display of Zarqawi's body has been compared to the beheading videos, which he orchestrated, and which make the U.S. military actions symbolically equivalent to those barbaric acts. *In all things symbolic, avoid media tactics that allow the comparison between Jihadi organizations and the US government*.

   c. If and when Osama bin Laden is located, if he cannot be captured alive, avoid symbolic displays of his death which support his ascension to martyrdom. If he is found alive, use a more culturally-sensitive approach to releasing the story and any accompanying photos to demystify his status as the leader of al-Qaeda by publicizing his accountability to the international justice system.

CONCLUSION

The recent controversies over the display and mass circulation of the death images of al-Zarqawi highlight the need for a more culturally-sensitive and symbolically nuanced approach to news releases. Jihadi leaders and media quickly moved to proclaim his martyrdom, and, in turn, mitigated the death of Zarqawi as a victory in the war on terror. In the event of another leader's capture, following the above guidelines will prevent such a hasty reappropriation of our success.

Our adaptation of Entman's model of cascading influence provides a way of thinking about the diverse ways in which messages are reframed by media outlets and audiences. This model also strongly suggests the necessity of creating an independent mechanism for the pre-release cultural and political analysis of the likely effects of messages on diverse media markets and audiences.

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