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Media Complicity in Early Wartime Rhetoric: A Thematic Analysis

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This study investigates whether wartime conditions erode the media's critical distance from official discourse, focusing on the early phase of the War on Terror. Drawing on Media System Dependency theory and the Propaganda Model, it analyzes eight speeches by President George W. Bush and 112 *USA Today* articles published between September 11 and October 12, 2001. The study employs thematic analysis. The results reveal that immediate press coverage was markedly aligned with presidential rhetoric, reproducing themes such as moral absolutism, civilizational binaries, dehumanization, and retributive justice. The findings suggest that in moments of national crisis, heightened public reliance on the press—combined with structural constraints—facilitates media alignment with official discourse. This convergence underscores the vulnerability of journalistic autonomy in times of war.

Introduction

In times of national crisis, public reliance on mass media intensifies as individuals seek to make sense of rapidly evolving events, assess risks, and understand the implications for their lives and communities. Media System Dependency (MSD) theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), offers a framework for understanding this heightened dependence, positing that media exert greater influence during periods of social disruption, when traditional interpersonal or institutional sources of information are inadequate. In such contexts, the media function not only as conduits of news but also as central architects of public understanding, shaping the meanings attached to conflict, security, and identity.

However, media institutions are neither independent of nor insulated from the broader political, economic, and ideological systems in which they operate. On the contrary, as Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) argue in their Propaganda Model, the media operate under powerful structural constraints—most notably, concentrated ownership, dependence on advertising revenue, reliance on official sources, disciplinary flak, and dominant ideological frameworks. These constraints systematically narrow the range of perspectives that can be publicly articulated, often aligning journalistic output with the priorities of political and economic elites. Moments of national crisis tend to intensify these dynamics, further consolidating media alignment with dominant interests and curtailing critical scrutiny.

Democratic theory positions the press as a vital check on institutional power in liberal democracies. Under normal circumstances—and even in some emergencies, such as natural disasters or economic recessions—news media may be able to perform their democratic function by retaining a degree of critical posture and continuing to

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interrogate official narratives. War, as this study will demonstrate, presents a distinct case. War cultivates an atmosphere in which journalistic independence and public debate are subordinated to the perceived need for national unity. It creates conditions where dissent can be construed as disloyalty and places unique pressure on journalists to demonstrate solidarity rather than encourage critique. Consequently, under wartime conditions—precisely when public dependence on media reaches its peak—the media's critical distance from power often diminishes.

This study advances the argument that the convergence of heightened audience dependency and structural media constraints during wartime enables the press to operate as a powerful instrument of consent. In such contexts, news organizations often internalize or mirror official discourse, legitimating the government's perspectives and policies. Focusing on the War on Terror and its coverage in a national newspaper (*USA Today*), this study examines how the national crisis precipitated by the 9/11 attacks facilitated a narrowing of the press's critical distance from government narratives, resulting in news stories that frequently echoed official rhetoric. Far from serving as neutral arbiters, the press functioned as conduits of state discourse and ideology, shaping public perception of both the conflict and its designated enemy.

Media System Dependency Theory and Wartime Crises

Media System Dependency theory (MSD) posits that during periods of severe social disruption, individuals experience heightened informational and psychological needs—particularly for sense-making, guidance, and reassurance. In such contexts, dependency on news media intensifies, as mass media are uniquely positioned to meet these needs through rapid dissemination of information and privileged access to institutional and expert sources (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

Existing research on media dependency has primarily examined the degree of media reliance, its psychological and behavioral effects, and how these dynamics differ across media platforms. However, because large-scale national crises are both infrequent and complex, much of the empirical work in this area has focused on more localized, community-level disruptions.

Research on MSD has focused on three primary dependency goals: understanding, orientation, and play (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Loges, 1994; Morton & Duck, 2000). Understanding is aimed at gaining knowledge that helps individuals make sense of themselves and unfolding crises; orientation is about finding cues to guide behavior and choices; and play includes activities that offer distraction, enjoyment, stress relief, and connection to cultural experiences. While each goal plays a role, evidence suggests that in times of crisis, people tend to depend most on media for comprehension and guidance.

Empirical studies of local crises—such as natural disasters and public emergencies— have shown that different media platforms serve distinct informational and psychological needs. During community-level disruptions, television use typically increases as individuals seek to interpret their environment and make sense of personal experiences (Hirschburg, Dillman, & Ball-Rokeach, 1986). Radio, by

contrast, becomes more central for fulfilling practical needs, such as receiving safety updates and locating resources (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1999; Loges, 1994). Perceived threat levels have also been found to heighten reliance on newspapers and television, particularly for cognitive and social orientation (Loges, 1994). Additional research further links increased newspaper readership with heightened needs for both self-understanding and social understanding (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993).

Research within the MSD framework also indicates that media reliance is not uniform but shaped by a range of individual and contextual factors. Among these, perceived threat consistently stands out as a strong predictor of increased media dependency, even when demographic variables are controlled (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Loges, 1994). Other factors, such as community identification and perceived social cohesion, have also been found to influence media use—particularly increasing reliance on radio during natural disasters (Hindman & Coyle, 1999). Collectively, these findings highlight how media dependency intensifies under conditions of uncertainty, fear, and the search for shared meaning.

While much of the empirical literature on MSD has focused on localized crises such as floods, earthquakes, or public emergencies, the theory's explanatory power becomes especially pronounced in the context of war. War represents a uniquely disruptive form of crisis—one that not only magnifies uncertainty and perceived threat but also elevates the symbolic and political significance of information itself. Unlike natural disasters, which are often temporally and spatially contained, war implicates broader questions of national identity, state legitimacy, and moral order. As a result, it generates a particularly acute form of media dependency, wherein the public turns to mass media to interpret complex geopolitical developments, absorb state-sanctioned narratives, and navigate rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscapes. It is under these conditions—when the need for orientation and reassurance is most intense—that media institutions exert their greatest ideological influence.

Propaganda Model: Herman and Chomsky

The Propaganda Model (PM) developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) helps explain the above dynamic. The model remains a foundational framework for understanding how structural forces shape the operations and outputs of mainstream media, particularly in liberal-democratic societies. At its core, the model challenges the idealized view of the press as an independent watchdog tasked with informing a democratic public. Instead, Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) argue that media institutions function within a constrained economic and political environment that privileges elite interests, ultimately serving to manufacture consent for prevailing power structures.

The PM identifies five interlocking "filters" that systematically condition news content: media ownership, advertising dependence, sourcing, flak, and dominant ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008). These filters do not operate through overt censorship or direct state control but through market-based and institutional logics that subtly and persistently shape what gets reported, how, and by whom. As

Kristin Comeforo (2010) notes, this results in a media system where "freedom of expression is both bounded by, and reserved for, the elite interests of capital" (p. 220).

The first two filters—concentrated ownership and advertising dependence—reflect the structural integration of media into the market system. Deregulation, cross-ownership, and media consolidation have allowed a small number of transnational corporations to dominate global content production and distribution (Comeforo, 2010; Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & McChesney, 1997). These corporations share overlapping interests not only with one another but also with the state, which influences their profitability through regulatory policy. As a result, content that threatens political or corporate power is marginalized, while narratives favorable to elite consensus are amplified.

The third filter, "sourcing," further reinforces this alignment. News organizations, driven by profit imperatives, minimize costs by relying on "official" sources who are readily accessible and presumed credible. This structural reliance privileges governmental and corporate voices and sidelines alternative or oppositional perspectives. This process enables powerful actors to "manage" media narratives and manipulate them "into following a special agenda and framework" (Herman & Chomsky, 2008, p. 21).

The final two filters—flak and dominant ideology—function as disciplinary mechanisms. Flak refers to the negative consequences media outlets face when they challenge dominant power structures, including threats to advertising revenue and reputational attacks by corporate-funded watchdog groups (Comeforo, 2010). Meanwhile, dominant ideological currents—such as Cold War anti-communism in earlier eras or contemporary discourses around national security and terrorism—establish the boundaries of legitimate discourse.

Importantly, Herman and Chomsky (1998/2008) do not suggest a top-down conspiracy but rather highlight how media conformity to elite narratives emerges naturally from structural incentives. The result is a media system that, despite formal press freedoms, systematically reproduces the perspectives of those in power.

While the PM offers a compelling framework, it has also been critiqued for emphasizing structural constraints at the expense of journalistic autonomy. Scholars such as Sparks (2007) and Boyd-Barrett (2004) contend that the model overlooks the capacity of journalists to challenge institutional pressures or act independently. Sparks (2007) argues that the model is "blind to some of the important ways in which the dictates of the model are contested by journalists themselves" (p. 80), while Boyd-Barrett (2004), referencing the Church and Pike Committee findings, suggests that the model underplays direct state manipulation, such as CIA infiltration of media organizations.

The emergence of digital and independent media has also raised questions about the model's continued applicability. Though alternative platforms may offer space for oppositional voices, they remain shaped by structural constraints such as algorithmic curation, monetization pressures, and state surveillance (Comeforo, 2010). These forces often replicate the same systemic patterns the model critiques.

Yet it is during wartime that the explanatory power of the PM becomes most apparent. The practice of sourcing is especially central to understanding how the media operate under such conditions. In times of war, media reliance on official

sources intensifies in parallel with the public's growing dependence on the press. As audience demands for information, reassurance, and coherence intensify, news organizations increasingly turn to official sources, thereby amplifying narratives that suppress dissenting perspectives and reduce complex geopolitical realities to simplified moral binaries. As other scholars have observed, mainstream war reporting frequently reinforces oppositional framings—good versus evil, us versus them—while omitting historical context, peace-building efforts, and alternative perspectives (Galtung, 1990). In such moments, the media's structural embeddedness within existing power relations and its privileged access to political elites become more than a theoretical concern; they operate as mechanisms of consent, legitimizing state narratives, perspectives, and policies. Guided by these concerns, this study investigates to what degree the press can preserve its critical distance from official narratives during such wartime conditions.

Method

This study explores whether wartime conditions contribute to the erosion of the media's critical distance from official power by examining the convergence between presidential rhetoric and mainstream news coverage during the early phase of the War on Terror. Specifically, it investigates how *USA Today*, a widely circulated national newspaper designed to appeal to a broad and general-interest readership, absorbed, reflected, and at times reinforced the discursive boundaries established by state actors—particularly those articulated by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

The research proceeds in two stages, both guided by thematic analysis. In the first stage, the study analyzes eight major public statements delivered by President Bush between September 11 and October 7, 2001. These include: Remarks at Emma Booker Elementary School (September 11); Address to the Nation from the Oval Office (September 11); Remarks with the National Security Team (September 12); Remarks on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance (September 13); Radio Address to the Nation (September 15); Remarks upon Arrival on the South Lawn (September 16); Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People (September 20); and Address to the Nation from the Treaty Room (October 7). These speeches were retrieved from the official White House archives available online and analyzed to identify the dominant themes used to frame the War on Terror and construct the figure of the enemy.

In the second stage, the study applies a parallel thematic analysis to *USA Today*'s news coverage during the same period. A total of 115 articles published between September 11 and October 12, 2001 were retrieved from the ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database using the keywords "World Trade Center," "attack," and "terror." After removing duplicates, 112 unique articles were included in the final dataset.

The articles and speeches were cleaned, organized, and imported into NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. Two coders conducted iterative, line-by-line coding of the dataset to identify recurring patterns. The coding categories emerged

inductively from close reading, with emphasis on how the language framed the conflict, articulated the U.S. response, and constructed the image of the enemy. The analysis examined whether and how the news coverage echoed, reproduced, or internalized the themes identified in Bush's speeches.

Findings

The War and Enemy in President's Speeches

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush's rhetoric undertook the urgent task of making sense of the attacks, articulating the U.S. response, and constructing a coherent and rhetorically potent adversary. (Appendix 1).

In his speeches, Bush framed the attacks as an act of war and employed apocalyptic language to define the nature of the conflict. His characterization of the conflict was steeped in binary oppositions: good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism, freedom versus tyranny. Terms like "evil-doers" and repeated references to "evil" essentialized the enemy, rendering them irredeemable and unworthy of negotiation. In his address to the nation on the evening of September 11, Bush stated: "Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature" (Bush, 2001, September 11). As Mills-Knutsen (2011) argued, the use of "evil" in his speeches was not merely descriptive but functioned as a theological and apocalyptic trope that displaced rational engagement in favor of a righteous military response. Bush reinforced this with proclamations such as, "We will rid the world of the evil-doers," elevating military action to a moral imperative (Bush, 2001, September 16). This moral absolutism enabled a shift from justice to retribution. As Robert Ivie (2007) has noted, Bush's rhetorical frame substituted pragmatic foreign policy discourse with the ritual language of redemption. He portrayed America as an agent of divine justice on a mission to cleanse the world. In his address on September 20, Bush declared, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

In his speeches Bush framed the US response to the attacks as a war against terror. The discursive structure of this framing was anchored in militarized resolve, moral absolutism, and emotional appeal. Among the most prominent themes were militarization and national security, with frequent references to "campaigns," "conflicts," "operations," and "missions" that framed the U.S. response to the attacks as a long-term struggle requiring decisive action. This militarized framing was reinforced by calls for national unity and perseverance, with the president urging Americans to remain united, resolute, and unwavering in the face of adversity.

Bush's speeches heightened the emotional stakes of the conflict, channeling collective grief, fear, and anger into a narrative that cast the United States simultaneously as a wounded victim and a righteous agent of redemption. His invocation of *Psalm 23* during the National Cathedral memorial service sacralized national grief, transforming mourning into a spiritual mandate for war: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (Bush, 2001, September 14). He further declared, "Our nation is deeply

grateful to the men and women of our military, who are standing watch for freedom in this hour of danger." As Bostdorff (2003) argues, such rhetorical moves functioned as a form of "covenant renewal," binding national trauma to a redemptive mission and framing the military response as both divinely sanctioned and morally necessary.

Accordingly, in his speeches, Bush constructed a morally charged adversary. The enemy he described was not merely a geopolitical adversary but an ontological threat: "the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century" who followed "the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism" and would ultimately end up "in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies" (Bush, 2001, September 20). Through this framing, Bush positioned the enemy outside the realm of political negotiation, presenting eradication as the logical course of action.

Bush's discourse also engaged in a strategic dehumanization of the enemy. The Taliban, regarded as responsible for sheltering and supporting terrorists, were described as "barbaric criminals who profane a great religion," while the attackers were labeled "traitors to their own faith" (Bush, 2001, October 7). This rhetorical move allowed Bush to isolate radical actors while preserving a normative distinction between Islam and terrorism. In doing so, he projected an image of religious tolerance that simultaneously obscured the broader civilizational binaries embedded in the discourse.

Bush's speeches also employed fear to construct and reinforce rhetorical unity. This fear was amplified through metaphors that emphasized the enemy's shadowy omnipresence. "This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people... But it won't be able to hide forever," Bush warned (September 12, 2001). Such imagery cultivated a perpetual state of alertness, contributing to the formation of a securitized public sphere in which dissent could easily be framed as disloyalty (Lee, 2017). Emotional binaries further polarized the discourse: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001, September 20). As Ivie (1980) and Galtung (1990) have shown, such rhetorical constructions collapse political nuance into moral dualism—a pattern common to wartime justifications.

Repetition of mythic language, such as "we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail" (Bush, 2001, September 20), reinforced an ethos of righteous perseverance. Bush also emphasized a redemptive arc: "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail" (Bush, 2001, October 7). This rhetoric of resolve parallels what Mills-Knutsen (2011) describes as the apocalyptic logic of violence: the enemy must be eradicated not merely for security, but as a sacred act of purgation. Smith (2005) similarly argues that Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric constituted an "enthymeme of evil," in which "evil" was not merely invoked but functioned as an unstated premise grounding all justifications for war (p. 33).

Taken together, these rhetorical strategies constructed a war that appeared inevitable and an enemy who was ontologically evil, existentially threatening, and morally irredeemable.

The War and the Enemy in the News Articles

A thematic analysis of *USA Today*'s coverage in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks reveals how the newspaper framed the events, defined the conflict, and constructed both the enemy and the legitimacy of the U.S. response. The findings indicate that the media not only echoed but at times amplified the Bush administration's official rhetoric, reinforcing a discourse grounded in civilizational binaries and moral absolutes (Appendix, 2).

Framing the Conflict: A Cosmic Struggle between Good and Evil

Relying heavily on official voices, *USA Today*'s early coverage exemplifies what Herman and Chomsky (1988) identify as the "source" filter in the propaganda model, whereby government officials and elite actors serve as primary definers of news narratives. Thematic analysis of the newspaper's reporting in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks reveals that it largely reproduced the administration's rhetoric by privileging statements from state actors. In doing so, *USA Today* echoed the administration's framing of the events as a cosmic struggle, a clash between light and darkness, freedom and tyranny, civilization and barbarism.

The coverage relied especially heavily on President Bush's statements and national addresses to characterize the events. His words were often reproduced uncritically and without commentary: "'Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward,' Bush declared upon landing at Barksdale Air Force Base" (Keen, September 12, 2001, p. A03). "That evening, in a nationally televised address, he invoked *Psalm 23*: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me'" (Willing & Richard, September 12, 2001, p. A03).

News articles echoed this spiritual and civilizational framing. Under the headline "A day that changes America's view of terror," one article reflected that "when the twin towers of the Trade Center crumpled to the ground like so much dust, at a cost of countless lives, something less tangible was lost as well—a uniquely American sense of freedom and security" (*USA Today* Staff, September 12, 2001, p. A18). In other reports, Bush was widely quoted saying, "This was an attack on freedom. And we're going to define it as such, and we're going to go after it, and we're not going to lose focus" (Keen, September 14, 2001, p. A04).

In the days that followed, the newspaper continued to publish morally loaded quotes from Bush's speeches. His address to Congress on September 20 was widely quoted without commentary or criticism. *USA Today* reported Bush's declaration that "freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war," and noted his vow that "we will rid the world of evildoers" (Drinkard, September 17, 2001, p. A01). The coverage further highlighted Bush's framing of the American public as morally resolute. As quoted in *USA Today*, he stated, "We are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom" (McQuillan, September 21, 2001, p. A03), and insisted, "We will not be terrorized so that our hearts are hardened... We are too great a nation to allow the evildoers to affect our soul and our spirit" (Drinkard, September 19, 2001, p. A01).

These moral pairings rhetorically elevated the war beyond politics, framing it as a sacred duty. *USA Today* prominently quoted Bush's now-famous declaration, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001, September 20), a statement that echoed across headlines and commentary, reinforcing a discourse that erased nuance and demanded allegiance.

Establishing the Crisis: Fear, Shock, and National Vulnerability

Another prominent theme that emerged in the news coverage was a sense of shock, dread, and uncertainty. These affective frames infused the crisis with urgency and helped justify the extraordinary measures that followed. In Bush's speeches, fear was palpable and linked to the omnipresence of an elusive threat. The newspaper coverage rendered this fear visible, translating abstract anxieties into concrete narratives and images.

Fear was not simply reported—it was enacted in the narrative. In the days following the attacks, the newspaper ran a series of reports under the byline "Under Attack: Terror Brought Home," immersing readers in the raw immediacy of unfolding trauma. Eyewitness accounts contributed to the visceral tone. "It was like the building had been hit by an asteroid," one witness recalled. "Fire was shooting out of the side. . . . I saw at least 15 people jump out of the first building. Two were holding hands. I looked away. I couldn't take it anymore" (Willing & Drinkard, 2001, p. A.03). The emotional impact was not limited to civilians. "The televised images were horrific, and the shock and fear were palpable, even on President Bush's face," reported Judy Keen in the special edition published on September 12, 2001 (Willing & Drinkard, 2001, p. A.03).

In the days that followed, articles described workplaces evacuated, city centers turned into ghost towns, and ordinary citizens confronting the fragility of daily life. New Yorkers were said to be "gripped by fear," and bracing for another possible attack. "Eight million panicked New Yorkers sought to flee the horror of the World Trade Center tragedy Tuesday," read one headline (McCarthy, September 12, 2001, p. B.04). The atmosphere of apprehension persisted across reports, many of which emphasized that the attacks were followed by widespread fear and uncertainty over where and when terror might strike next. "America on alert: Washington making preparations," declared one article under the headline "National Nightmare Keeps Many on Edge: Government Steps Up Security Amid Continued Threats" (Drinkard, September 14, 2001, p. A.05). Another article observed, "Tuesday's deadly terror attacks are taking a psychological toll as the entire USA deals with fear, grief and anxiety" (Brady, 2001, p. B.13). The fear was real, but it also functioned rhetorically, laying the groundwork for framing the national response as a matter of righteous, spiritual, and civilizational resolve.

The Enemy: Criminal and Moral Framing

Echoing the administration's characterization of the attacks as a "war on terror," the most frequent descriptors used to characterize the attackers were "terrorist," "Bin Laden," and "Taliban." These descriptors were not used in isolation but were

often embedded within narratives using morally charged labels such as "justice," and "evil." This dual framing cast the enemy as both legally culpable and morally reprehensible, aligning with the administration's narrative of justice and righteous retaliation. "As the enormity of the toll of Tuesday's terrorist attack on New York and Washington became clearer, President Bush said the onslaught had launched 'a monumental struggle of good vs. evil,'" reported one article (Drinkard, September 13, 2001, p. A03). Another piece noted that "he has become the face of evil to the American people," referring to Osama bin Laden (Moniz, September 20, 2001, p. A02). A front-page editorial reinforced this framing, asserting that the nation would not rest until "those who committed this evil act are brought to justice" (*USA Today* Editorial Board, September 13, 2001, p. A01).

The recurrence of the word "evil" across news and editorial content positioned the attacks not merely as criminal acts requiring legal remedy but as moral transgressions demanding retribution. The convergence of legal and moral vocabularies—justice and evil—produced a discursive framework in which war became the logical and ethically sanctioned response against an irredeemable evil.

Dehumanizing Language

Although used less frequently than criminal labels, dehumanizing metaphors played a significant rhetorical role in shaping the public's understanding of the enemy. Terms such as "hunt," "trap," "track," "cave," and "lair" invoked a predator-prey dynamic that positioned the attackers not as political actors but as subhuman beings to be pursued and eliminated. "Make no mistake—the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," Bush was reported saying on the day of the attacks (Willing & Drinkard, September 12, 2001, p. A01). The metaphor was echoed in headlines as "Special forces hunt for bin Laden" (*USA Today* Staff, September 28, 2001, p. A01) and "FBI hunts conspirators" reinforcing a vision of justice rendered through relentless pursuit (Johnson & Morrison, September 14, 2001, p. A01). Articles announced that the administration launched a "world-wide hunt for Bin-laden" (Cox, October 1, 2001).

Descriptions of the enemy's physical concealment further accentuated their dehumanization. They were said to be "hiding" in remote "caves" (Slavin, September 12, 2001, p. A05), and moving through the terrain "like rats" (Ritter, September 20, 2001, p. A02). One physician, quoted in a moment of emotional candor, captured the sentiment starkly: "The only way to rid the world of terror is to hunt down these animals before they destroy us all" (Kalman, September 13, 2001, p. A09).

These frames stripped the enemy of political identity and recast them as prey-like targets. As one article described it, "Elite U.S. forces" were pursuing "their prey" across an inhospitable landscape and "waging war in shadows" (Stone, September 18, 2001, p. A07). Such language normalized the logic of elimination, preparing the public to accept war not only as strategic necessity but as a morally justified response.

Civilizational Binaries and Symbolic Contrasts

The analysis uncovered more than 1,000 instances of symbolic or civilizational contrasts in *USA Today*'s post-9/11 coverage (Appendix, 2). Terms such as "freedom," "justice," "civilized," and "values" routinely appeared in opposition to descriptors like "barbarism," "chaos," and "darkness." These binaries often surfaced in the quoted remarks of government officials and in the voices of ordinary citizens interviewed by reporters "We're facing a new kind of enemy—somebody so barbaric that they would fly airplanes into buildings full of innocent people," Bush was quoted saying, "We've never seen this kind of evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action before either, and they're about to find out." He continued, "We're a nation of resolve. We're a nation that can't be cowed by evildoers. . . . We will rid the world of the evildoers. We will call together freedom-loving people to fight terrorism" (Keen, September 17, 2001, p. A10). Speaking before the United Nations and quoted directly in the coverage, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani echoed the same logic: "Look at that destruction, that massive, senseless cruel loss of human life." He insisted, "There is no room for neutrality on the issue of terrorism. You're either with civilization or with terrorists" (Drinkard, October 2, 2001, p. A01). Such framing was not limited to quotes from political leadership. A headline proclaimed, "We are all on the front line now—where civilization confronts barbarism" (Freedman, September 13, 2001, p. A13).

These discursive pairings reflected a polarized worldview—one that distilled a complex political crisis into a stark moral opposites. The pattern was not only thematic but quantifiable (Appendix 2) These binary descriptors appeared with striking frequency across the dataset, reinforcing the symbolic polarity that underpinned the public narrative of the war.

Taken collectively, the findings indicated that during the early phase of the U.S. War on Terror, the newspaper's heavy reliance on official sources significantly reduced its critical distance from the dominant political narrative.

Discussion

The findings outlined above underscore the extent to which *USA Today*'s early coverage of the post-9/11 crisis both mirrored and reinforced the official discourse. The newspaper's framing strategies—centered on civilizational binaries, moral dualism, and the dehumanization of the enemy—indicate not merely a reflection of public sentiment, but an active role in constructing a national narrative that legitimized war. The following discussion situates these findings within relevant theoretical frameworks and examines the broader implications of media complicity in the discursive production of wartime consensus.

Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) provides a useful lens for understanding the press's role during times of national crisis. As public reliance on media intensifies in moments of uncertainty, so too does the media's capacity to shape belief systems and behavioral responses. In the case of *USA Today*, heightened media dependency appears to have correlated with a

reduction in journalistic distance from official narratives. Rather than offering critical perspectives or alternative voices, the coverage often mirrored the administration's framing of events, elevating moral clarity over political complexity.

The official discourse's invocation of binary oppositions and the press's uncritical acceptance of them exemplify this dynamic. In the coverage these oppositions were reproduced not only through direct quotations from political leaders but also through similar language attributed to civilians. In doing so, the press helped embed these moral dichotomies into the coverage, often without sustained critical reflection.

Similarly, the press also adopted the dehumanizing metaphors present in official discourse. By describing the actions of local and federal forces with terms like "hunting," "tracking," and "pursuing" their "prey," news stories contributed to a symbolic economy in which military action appeared morally redemptive and necessary. This framing discouraged dissent and erased complexity.

The only significant thematic divergence between the administration's rhetoric and *USA Today*'s coverage lay in the emotional framing of fear, shock, and panic. While Bush's speeches did invoke fear, it was largely tethered to the image of an elusive and omnipresent enemy and served to justify vigilance and military action. In contrast, *USA Today*'s reporting foregrounded fear as an immediate and visceral experience. The scale of destruction, the disruption of daily life in New York, and the sheer magnitude of loss were rendered with dramatic vividness. Through eyewitness accounts, emotionally charged headlines, and sensory-rich descriptions, fear was not simply reported—it was enacted. This affective register transformed the attacks into a spectacle of trauma, amplifying the emotional intensity of the moment and anchoring the crisis in the everyday experience of American readers. In doing so, the coverage contributed to a discursive climate in which fear was mobilized in support of unity, urgency, and retribution.

Crucially, this alignment between journalistic and executive discourse did not emerge from direct coercion or pressure, but from institutional routines and narrative conventions. The reliance on official sources, the emphasis on unity in times of crisis, and the need to provide emotional closure all contributed to a media climate that privileged resonance over critique. While this may have served immediate public needs for coherence and reassurance, it also foreclosed opportunities for political reflection and critical engagement.

In sum, *USA Today*'s post-9/11 coverage exemplifies how mainstream media can function as a discursive partner in the production of wartime consensus. By reproducing the emotional and symbolic terms of the Bush administration's rhetoric, the newspaper played an important role in shaping the cultural logic of the War on Terror. These findings raise urgent questions about the limits of journalistic autonomy in crisis contexts and the ethical responsibilities of the press when democracy is most vulnerable.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the extent to which the press can preserve its critical distance from official narratives during wartime. By analyzing *USA Today*'s early coverage of the September 11 attacks in relation to President George W. Bush's public rhetoric, the study demonstrates how mainstream media not only mirrored but actively reinforced the discursive framework advanced by state actors. The findings reveal a convergence in tone, language, and thematic framing—particularly in the construction of the conflict as a moral struggle, the enemy as ontologically evil, and the nation's response as both just and inevitable.. These patterns underscore the media's role not simply as a passive conduit of information, but as a discursive partner in the production of wartime consensus.

Theoretically, this study brings into conversation two frameworks that are often treated in isolation: the Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008) and Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). While the Propaganda Model explains how structural forces constrain media content, it has been critiqued for overstating ideological closure and underemphasizing audience dynamics. Media Dependency Theory, by contrast, focuses on how public reliance on media intensifies in times of uncertainty, enhancing the media's power to shape public understanding. By integrating these two frameworks in the context of wartime journalism, this study advances a more nuanced account of media behavior—one that accounts for both structural constraint and situational intensification. The alignment between official rhetoric and media coverage in the aftermath of 9/11 was not merely a function of ownership concentration or elite sourcing, but also of heightened dependency, emotional urgency, and narrative closure.

In doing so, the study addresses a critical gap in literature: the lack of integrative theoretical models that explain how mainstream media participate in shaping public understanding during moments of national crises. Scholarship on the Propaganda Model has tended to focus on peacetime ideological reproduction, while media dependency research has rarely been applied to analyze discourse in periods of armed conflict. Bringing these perspectives together in the post-9/11 context offers a framework for understanding how democratic institutions—especially the press—can become enmeshed in the machinery of war through routinized journalistic practices and affective amplification.

This contribution holds particular relevance for peace and media studies. If the media are to serve democratic deliberation and peace-building, scholars and practitioners must remain attentive to the mechanisms through which journalism can normalize conflict, simplify moral landscapes, and foreclose critical reflection. The case of *USA Today* demonstrates how the affective force of fear, coupled with structural dependencies and institutional routines, can render dissent unintelligible and war inevitable. By illuminating these dynamics, the study not only enriches our theoretical understanding of media behavior in wartime but also urges a reexamination of journalistic responsibility in moments when democratic values and peace are most at risk.

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Appendix 1
Major Themes in President Bush's Early Post-9/11 Speeches

Theme	Key Descriptors / Phrases
The Conflict	
Militarization and Security	Campaign, war, conflict, mission, operation, defense, military response
National Unity and Resolve	United, we will not falter, strength, great people, unwavering, resolve, American spirit
Mythic and Apocalyptic Language	Monumental struggle, good vs. evil, grave of lies, history's judgment, good will prevail
Fear and Omnipresent Threat	Hidden, shadows, danger, terror, lurking, enemy among us, unpredictable threat
Divine Sanction and Redemption	Prayer, Psalm 23, Lord, God bless, covenant, spiritual calling, God with us, US divinely charged to destroy evil for humanity
Victimhood and Heroism	Innocent victims, sacrifice, heroes, mourning, first responders, national grief
The Enemy	
Moral Absolutism	Evil, evildoers, righteous, justice, divine purpose, moral clarity
Civilization vs. Barbarism	Barbaric, profane, uncivilized, enemies of civilization, traitors to their own faith
Justice as Retribution	Bring them to justice, rid the world, punishment, they chose, vengeance
Fear, Omnipresent Threat	Enemy as hidden in shadows, omni present danger, terror, lurking, enemy among us, unpredictable threat

Appendix 2

The major themes used in USA Today's post-9/11 coverage, based on descriptors and frequency analysis:

Thematic Frame	Key Descriptors Found	Interpretive Summary	Approximate Frequency
The Conflict			
Dichotomies of Civilization	terror, freedom, evil, civilized, justice, tyranny, order, chaos, peace, fear	Aligns the U.S. with civilization and portrays the attacks and the attackers as a threat to order, progress and freedom.	1034
Freedom vs. Tyranny	freedom, liberty, tyranny, values	Moral high ground and universal appeal of U.S. action	47
Justice vs. Evil	justice, evil, evildoer, act of evil	Manichean framing of the conflict as an act of evil	123
Civilization vs. Barbarism	civilized, barbaric, terror, fear, killers,	Attacks coded as barbaric, unjustified, targeting values, horrific, justifying intervention	63
Light vs. Darkness	shadowy networks, dark threat	Conflict elevated to symbolic/mystical dimensions	33
"Most Wanted" Branding of attackers	most wanted, wanted terrorists	Frames conflict as law enforcement — pursuing fugitives of justice.	12
Fear as a Narrative Force	fear, panic, afraid, terrified	Fear is used to justify urgency, reinforce threat, and unite public opinion around policy.	216
The Enemy:			
Omni presence of threat	Waiting for the next attack, anxiety, fear,		324

	panicking citizens		
Order vs. Chaos	Chaos, stability, endless war	Enemy associated with disorder and chaos	27
Progress vs. Backwardness	cave, mountain lair, tribal	Enemy as stagnant/primitive, U.S. as modernizing force	27
Justice vs. Evil	evil, evildoer, merciless, targeting innocents	Manichean framing of the enemy as evil incarnate	123
Civilization vs. Barbarism	civilized, inhumane, killers, beasts	Enemy coded as uncivilized, justifying intervention	73
"Most Wanted" Branding	most wanted, wanted terrorists	Frames attackers as fugitives of justice.	12
Dehumanization and Animalism	killers, inhuman, barbaric, animal, monsters, beasts	Strips the enemy of political agency, encourages punitive rather than diplomatic responses.	39