

An Analysis of the Role of Mass Media and the United States Government in Manipulating  
Public Opinion During Times of Crisis with Modern Application

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## INTRODUCTION

Crisis changes the way we as a country respond to any situation. Whether the crisis is a person that wishes us harm, an idea that opposes our own, or the consequence of our actions, there are countless different responses to the crisis. These responses are chosen by the government, which acts in the people's best interests, and needs their support to do so. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt<sup>1</sup>, when faced with the Great Depression<sup>2</sup>, called for a "temporary departure from" the "normal balance of executive and legislative authority", calling on the people to grant him more power to for recovery legislation<sup>3</sup>. The United States (US) government has called upon the people for their support during times of crisis to take action across the world in a controversial manner that is regretted or condemned after the incident. As Ted Thomas<sup>4</sup> and Ira Chaleff<sup>5</sup> put it, the government needs to recognize there is a problem, "exercise restraint, prioritize what can be done instead of lying about what was done, and lead truthfully"<sup>6</sup>. Public opinion has little problem with questioning the morality of government action after the fact, yet struggles to do so at the moment, raising the question of the extent to which public opinion is manipulated during times of crisis to justify potentially immoral action and silence opposition. There are three major events during which the US government took action that was illegal, those being the Vietnam War, due to the fact that a state of war was never declared, the Invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, due to a lack of approval from the United Nations Security Council

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt was the 32nd president of the United States, who "assum[ed] the Presidency at the depth of the Great Depression" ("Franklin D. Roosevelt").

<sup>2</sup> "The Great Depression, which began in the United States in 1929 and spread worldwide, was the longest and most severe economic downturn in modern history" ("Great Depression").

<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Inaugural Address." 4 Mar. 1933, Washington, D.C. The American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14473](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14473). Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.

<sup>4</sup> "Ted Thomas is Director of the Department of Command and Leadership in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas" (Thomas, Chaleff).

<sup>5</sup> "Ira Chaleff is president of Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates in Washington, DC" (Thomas, Chaleff).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Ted, and Ira Chaleff. "Moral Courage and Civil Disobedience." *InterAgency Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, Winter 2017, pp. 58-66. <https://thesimonscenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/03/IAJ-8-1-Winter2017-pg58-66.pdf>. Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.

(UNSC) and the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, due to an International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision. All three conflicts will serve as valuable and unique frames of reference for this paper. Vietnam is unique due to the fact that it was the first conflict to be televised and the motivation behind it was to deter the further establishment of communism, an idea whose threat arises from its difference. Afghanistan is unique because it was a retaliatory effort. Iraq is unique because it was a proactive measure to prevent the interaction of a feared technology and a feared ruler. In spite of these differences, these conflicts similarly were inspired by ambiguous sources and were regretted later. The two main sources that hold sway over public opinion in political matters are the news and the media. Over time the media has used its credibility to manipulate opinion and push an agenda. Similarly, the US government has exploited public opinion by manipulating information to ensure compliance in controversial action among citizens. The government and the media can be prevented from shaping public opinion in the modern day with the formation of a coalition against misinformation that works to inform the public so they can hold the government and media accountable.

### THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN MANIPULATING INFORMATION DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

The media has held control of public opinion for decades, through their role as a source of information, and have abused that role to manipulate public opinion. According to a study<sup>7</sup> by William M. Hammond<sup>8</sup>, the media during the Vietnam war was an extremely trusted source of information, and they used their platform to push anti-war sentiment<sup>9</sup>. Hammond's perspective as

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<sup>7</sup> The study was published in *Reviews in American History*, a highly credible journal that "covers all areas of American history, including cutting-edge and more traditional sub fields" to "offer anyone interested in American history a way to stay current with the discipline" ("Reviews in American History").

<sup>8</sup> William M. Hammond was a senior historian with the U.S. Army's Center of Military History and a Lecturer In University Honors at the University of Maryland ("William M. Hammond").

<sup>9</sup> Hammond, William M. "The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination." *Reviews in American History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1989, pp. 312–23. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2702936>. Accessed 21 Feb. 2024.

a government historian is unique because his work had to be extremely objective to serve as a baseline for government response to media bias and its effect on public war support.. Well after the Vietnam War, specifically around OEF<sup>10</sup>, the media evolved into newer mediums and styles while retaining its bias. This was proved in a study by Beatriz Diana Tellaeche García<sup>11</sup>, who studied the use of diction in reporting and its correlation with public opinion for the war effort to conclude that the media's use of diction aligned with manipulative psychological techniques employed to encourage support for the war effort<sup>12</sup>. Tellaeche's perspective as a Spanish citizen is unique because it provides a perspective from a country with little involvement in Afghanistan. Moreover, OIF<sup>13</sup> was the same as OEF, as proved by a study<sup>14</sup> by Seth Ashley<sup>15</sup>, which found that domestic news outlets did not entertain any international dissent to the invasion, whereas foreign news outlets portrayed all international ideas. Ashley's perspective uniquely observes trends between foreign and domestic news outlets. These sources converse to show that the media manipulated opinion, with anti-war sentiment becoming aggressively pro-war in modern times.

### THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN MANIPULATING INFORMATION

#### DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

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<sup>10</sup> Operation Enduring Freedom, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Beatriz Tellaeche is a project manager at the Elcano Royal Institute, a think tank based in Madrid focused on global peacekeeping issues ("Beatriz Tellaeche").

<sup>12</sup> Tellaeche García, Beatriz Diana. *The Impact of the Media on the War of Afghanistan From a Western and Middle Eastern Perspective*, June 2022, [repositorio.comillas.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11531/55791/TFG%20COM%20-%20Tellaeche%20Garcia%20Beatriz.pdf?sequence=1](https://repositorio.comillas.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11531/55791/TFG%20COM%20-%20Tellaeche%20Garcia%20Beatriz.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>13</sup> Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003.

<sup>14</sup> The study was published in the *Sage Journal of Media, War, & Conflict* which is a "major international, peer-reviewed journal that maps the shifting arena of war, conflict and terrorism in an intensively and extensively mediated age" ("*Media, War & Conflict: Sage Journal*").

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Seth Ashley is a member of the Department of Communication at Boise State University in Idaho and a researcher with a focus on the interaction between media and democracy ("Dr. Seth Ashley").

In order to justify controversial action, the US government has manipulated information to instill compliance within the American people. According to a study<sup>16</sup> by Lawrence R. Jacobs<sup>17</sup> and Robert Y. Shapiro<sup>18</sup> that tracked former president Richard Nixon's use of public opinion polls, Nixon manipulated the poll results and released falsified versions to gain public support by making his critics think they were in the minority<sup>19</sup>. Jacobs and Shapiro's perspective stands out in its observation of public opinion polls, an inaccurate metric in today's society but a very insightful tool for 1960s America. The precedent that the two authors argue Nixon set carries on into OEF. Michael Brenner<sup>20</sup> argues that the government tried to instill fear in the public to manipulate NATO allies into joining invasion efforts through disturbing images<sup>21</sup>. Brenner's perspective is unique because it justifies government manipulation of public opinion by presenting a goal, in this case being launching a NATO invasion. Moving ahead Iraq, Liesbeth van der Heide<sup>22</sup> explains in a study<sup>23</sup> how the US justification of OIF to foreign powers was based off of evidence with little credibility, whereas domestic justification of OIF cites long-term

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<sup>16</sup> The study was published in *Political Science Quarterly*, the "most widely read and accessible scholarly journal covering government, politics, and policy, both international and domestic" ("Mission and Activities").

<sup>17</sup> "Lawrence R. Jacobs is [the] McKnight Presidential Chair in Public Affairs, the Walter F. and Joan Mondale Chair for Political Studies, and director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance in the Hubert H. Humphrey School and the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota" ("Larry Jacobs").

<sup>18</sup> "Robert Y. Shapiro is a professor and former chair of the Department of Political Science at Columbia University, and he served as acting director of Columbia's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP) during 2008-2009. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science" ("Robert Y. Shapiro").

<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. "Presidential Manipulation of Polls and Public Opinion: The Nixon Administration and the Pollsters." *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 110, no. 4, 1995, pp. 519–38. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151882>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Brenner is a "Professor Emeritus of International Affairs" at the University of Pittsburgh ("Michael Brenner: Scholars strategy network").

<sup>21</sup> Brenner, Michael. "The 'War on Terror.'" *Toward a More Independent Europe*, Egmont Institute, 2007, pp. 25–32. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06708.6>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

<sup>22</sup> "Liesbeth van der Heide is a researcher and lecturer at Leiden University" as a part of the "Institute of Security and Global Affairs" ("Liesbeth van der Heide").

<sup>23</sup> The study was published in *Historical Social Research*, a "peer-reviewed international journal for the application of formal methods to history. Formal methods can be defined as all methods which are sufficiently intersubjective to be realized as an information science algorithm" ("Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung on JSTOR").

military planning to invade<sup>24</sup>. This study further develops both the foreign perspective and the perspective of providing a motive. These sources converse to show that the government has manipulated information to ensure that American citizens support their foreign military efforts, by either withholding information or creating entirely new information. The government tells the people anything that will gain them support and sympathy.

## THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA IN MANIPULATING PUBLIC OPINION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

US media outlets and the government are currently manipulating information to aggressively push a pro-Israeli agenda. According to a study<sup>25</sup> by Yakubu Ozohu-Suleiman<sup>26</sup> that compares the depiction of the Israel-Palestine conflict between foreign and domestic news outlets, American media outlets use diction and imagery that inspire aggression and call for war, which runs contrary to the peace-focused journalism of foreign media outlets<sup>27</sup>. Ozohu-Suleiman's study further develops the foreign perspective with a unique twist by representing a perspective that has a view on the conflict based on its proximity to the middle east. Furthermore, a paper<sup>28</sup> by Osama Anter Hamdi that explores the motivations behind US involvement in the Middle East found that the US has plans to develop significant economic and

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<sup>24</sup> van der Heide, Liesbeth. "Cherry-Picked Intelligence. The Weapons of Mass Destruction Dispositive as a Legitimation for National Security in the Post 9/11 Age." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 38, no. 1 (143), 2013, pp. 286–307. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23644501>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

<sup>25</sup> The study was published in the *Sage Journal of Media, War & Conflict*, a "major international, peer-reviewed journal that maps the shifting arena of war, conflict and terrorism in an intensively and extensively mediated age" (*"Media, War & Conflict"*).

<sup>26</sup> "Yakubu Ozohu-Suleiman is a tenured member of the Ahmadu Bello University Social Sciences faculty. He teaches Journalism, Communication and Media with research interests in Conflict; Terrorism, Governance and Development ("Biographies: War journalism on Israel/Palestine: Does contra-flow really make a difference?").

<sup>27</sup> Ozohu-Suleiman, Yakubu. "War Journalism on Israel/Palestine: Does Contra-Flow Really Make a Difference?" *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, pp. 85–103. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26001055>. Accessed 6 Mar. 2024.

<sup>28</sup> The paper was published in *Insight Turkey*, "a leading journal in the area [of] Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. The journal covers a broad range of topics related to Turkish domestic and foreign policy issues and global affairs" ("History").

military interests in the region, some already in progress<sup>29</sup>. Hamdi's perspective as a middle eastern researcher is important because while he may have bias about foreign involvement, Hamdi is seeing the results of the involvement firsthand. He sees that the US has not attempted to establish peace in the region due to a lack of public pressure to do so. A mobilized effort by Americans to call for peace would cause the US to act, and as a paper<sup>30</sup> by Robert O. Smith<sup>31</sup> explains, to carry out its role as the only world power that is able to bring peace to the area<sup>32</sup>. These sources converse to highlight how the US media and government have manipulated American public opinion to sympathize with Israel, rather than communicating the situation objectively.

### SOLUTION OVERVIEW

In order to hold the US government and mass media accountable, a coalition must be formed to thoroughly investigate US foreign actions and their motivations. The coalition should be composed of multiple branches. The first branch is made up of investigative journalists from various political affiliations that travel to areas of conflict to collect facts that will act as a baseline of truth. The second branch is made up of researchers that acknowledge this truth and use it as a frame of reference to study media coverage and government press releases of the conflict. The third branch, constituted of lawyers, attacks any media outlets and companies that are diverging from the truth both using different forms of the mainstream media other than news

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<sup>29</sup> HAMDI, OSAMA ANTER. "American Foreign Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Strategic Transformations." *Insight Turkey*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2018, pp. 251–72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26390316>. Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.

<sup>30</sup> The paper was published in *The Journal of Church and State*, which "publish[es] constitutional, historical, philosophical, theological, and sociological studies on religion and the body politic in various countries and cultures of the world" ("About the Journal").

<sup>31</sup> "Robert O. Smith is [a] historian of the present working at the intersection of Christian theology and political theory with interests in Indigenous studies, coloniality, and white supremacy" ("Department of History").

<sup>32</sup> SMITH, ROBERT O. "Between Restoration and Liberation: Theopolitical Contributions and Responses to U.S. Foreign Policy in Israel/Palestine." *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2004, pp. 833–60. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23920576>. Accessed 8 Mar. 2024.

channels, like social media. These lawyers expose injustice in the media and in the government, and the government injustice is addressed by states that hold membership in the United Nations, who can bring forward a case to the International Court of Justice. The coalition's ultimate goal is to seek the truth and ensure that, regardless of bias and political tensions, it is being communicated to the American people so that they can respond accordingly.

### COMPARATIVE VALUE OF SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT MEDIA BIAS

Current attempts to prevent media bias fall short in one major way: they only expose the issue without providing a solution. One current attempt to prevent media bias is AllSides, which “display[s] the top news stories from the Left, Center and Right of the political spectrum”<sup>33</sup>. Similar to AllSides, ProCon “creates what [they] call ‘beneficial confusion,’ causing readers to struggle with well-presented opposing positions, and therefore, to engage in evaluative thinking to formulate their own views”<sup>34</sup>. Both of these solutions essentially serve as a debate forum for different opinions to be represented. These fall short in losing the objectivity of news. Rather than hearing about what actually happened in a given situation, the reader hears how the Left would describe what happened and their thoughts, and then hear how the Right would describe what would happen and their thoughts. To truly eliminate media bias, a solution needs to provide objective, fact-based news reporting that reports all facts, so that people can form their own conclusions and create an opinion based on what they perceive rather than base their opinion on an argument they agree with.

### COMPARATIVE VALUE OF SOLUTIONS TO HOLD THE US GOVERNMENT

#### ACCOUNTABLE

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<sup>33</sup> “About Allsides.” *AllSides*, 23 Feb. 2024, [www.allsides.com/about](http://www.allsides.com/about).

<sup>34</sup> “About Us.” *ProCon.Org*, 12 Feb. 2021, [www.procon.org/about-us/](http://www.procon.org/about-us/).



The largest hurdle that a solution to combat government bias and immoral action faces is addressing who is at fault. The government is made up of many different offices and jobs that can take accountability, especially in a military conflict. These different positions can also absolve themselves easily by passing blame around. Current methods of government accountability are limited to the GAO<sup>35</sup>, “an independent, nonpartisan Agency that works for Congress”<sup>36</sup>. The agency is limited in its effectiveness because it answers to Congress rather than the people, which means that the only accountability system in the federal government reports to the federal government, withholding information from American citizens that would allow them to question the government.

### IMPACT

A coalition designed to eliminate misinformation in the United States helps reinforce democratic values in the United States by reintroducing dissenting opinions to the country and granting them the evidence necessary for justification. Furthermore, an increased availability of facts will allow citizens to fact check the government and the media, which will incentivize the two parties to cut back on the manipulative strategies they employ to gain credibility in trust. In the short term there will be heavy resistance to such an idea, but the long-term will reinforce trust between the American people, the government, and the media.

### LIMITATIONS

The aforementioned solution is most limited in its ability to survive financially. The costs of maintaining a running staff of lawyers, journalists, and researchers, is extensive. These costs paired with the cost of their services, and the political turmoil it may cause between countries

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<sup>35</sup> Government Accountability Office

<sup>36</sup> “The Federal Register.” *Federal Register* :: Request Access, [www.federalregister.gov/agencies/government-accountability-office#:~:text=The%20Government%20Accountability%20Office%20\(GAO,702%20note\)](http://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/government-accountability-office#:~:text=The%20Government%20Accountability%20Office%20(GAO,702%20note).). Accessed 20 Mar. 2024.

and the United States to have American reporters investigating cannot be ignored. That said, organizations of such a scale have existed with the help of charity from individuals and foundations.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, media and government bias is ever present in our modern world, as it was in the past. It is up to the citizens of the United States to acknowledge this bias, and work to seek a truth beyond what they are told. This is most important in the year 2024 with the conflict in Israel/Palestine ramping up and significantly more nations becoming involved and outspoken about the conflict. Readers should formulate their own opinions, with or without a coalition, to strengthen democracy and justice in the United States and abroad.

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