

Enhancing Media and Information Literacy for Peace and Global Understanding Through Scientific Research: Deciphering the Relationship between News Agenda, Political Agenda and Public Opinion

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Abstract

The promotion of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has become a fundamental imperative for 21st-Century education. In a globalized landscape where information flows are increasingly complex, equipping university students with technical skills is no longer sufficient; there is an urgent need to anchor their learning in a robust theoretical and research-driven framework. This approach is not merely pedagogical but also serves as a prerequisite for fostering inclusive peace and knowledge societies. The aim of this article is two-fold: to present the evolving concepts of MIL in the digital age and to introduce an enhanced theory-based level of MIL. Taking the “War on Terror” as a case study, this qualitative analysis revisits the Agenda-Setting Theory in its relation to the political agenda and public opinion. A systematic alignment is found between the political and news agendas, confirming the high efficiency of the latter in shaping public perception during the Iraq War. The findings demonstrate that the news agenda was largely subordinated to government narratives, creating a “top-down” information flow where the media adopted

political terminology, including the “War on Terror” itself, to transform a political construct into a perceived social reality. This process was reinforced by the use of binary framing, which reduced complex geopolitical issues to simplified “us versus them” dichotomies, thereby heightening public anxiety and normalizing military interventions as the primary response to conflict. Furthermore, the study identifies a significant pattern of “agenda-cutting,” where the deliberate omission of contexts and voices reinforced cross-cultural illiteracy. By prioritizing fear over accuracy and cultural understanding, the media failed to provide the necessary public sphere for deliberation, ultimately proving that without the integration of Media and Information Literacy strategies, the synergy between political and media agendas will continue to marginalise peaceful alternatives and reinforce global political polarization.

Keywords: Media and Information Literacy; inclusive peace; global understanding; critical news literacy; agenda-setting theory

Resum. *Millorar l'alfabetització mediàtica i informacional per a la pau i l'entesa global a través de la recerca científica: desxifrar la relació entre l'agenda informativa, l'agenda política i l'opinió pública*

La promoció de l'alfabetització mediàtica i informacional (AMI) ha esdevingut un imperatiu fonamental per a l'educació del segle XXI. En un panorama globalitzat en el qual els fluxos d'informació són cada vegada més complexos, ja no n'hi ha prou amb dotar els estudiants universitaris d'habilitats tècniques; existeix una necessitat urgent d'afermar el seu aprenentatge en un marc teòric sòlid i basat en la recerca. Aquest enfocament no és merament pedagògic, sinó que també constitueix un requisit previ per fomentar la pau inclusiva. L'objectiu d'aquest article de recerca és doble: presentar els conceptes en evolució de l'AMI en l'era digital i introduir un nivell millorat de l'AMI basat en la teoria. Prenent com a estudi de cas la «guerra contra el terrorisme», aquest estudi adopta una anàlisi de recerca interpretativa i qualitativa, que revisa la teoria de l'agenda de la premsa en la seva relació amb l'agenda política i l'opinió pública. L'anàlisi revela una alineació sistemàtica entre l'agenda política i l'agenda informativa, la qual cosa confirma la gran influència d'aquesta última a l'hora de modelar la percepció pública durant la guerra de l'Iraq. Els resultats demostren que aquesta agenda es va subordinar en gran manera als discursos del govern, la qual cosa va crear un flux d'informació «de dalt a baix» en el qual els mitjans van adoptar terminologia política, com la mateixa «guerra contra el terrorisme», per transformar un constructe polític en una realitat social percebuda. Aquest procés es va veure reforçat per l'ús d'un enquadrament binari que va reduir qüestions geopolítiques complexes a dicotomies simplifiades del tipus «nosaltres contra ells», la qual cosa va augmentar l'ansietat pública i va normalitzar les intervencions militars com a resposta principal al conflicte. A més, l'estudi identifica un patró significatiu de «retallada de l'agenda», en el qual l'omissió deliberada de contextos i veus va reforçar l'analfabetisme intercultural. En donar prioritat a la por per sobre de la precisió i la comprensió cultural, els mitjans de comunicació no van proporcionar l'espai públic necessari per a la deliberació, la qual cosa va demostrar en última instància que, sense la integració d'estratègies d'alfabetització mediàtica i informacional, la sinergia entre les agendes polítiques i mediàtiques continuarà marginant les alternatives pacífiques i reforçant la polarització política global.

Paraules clau: alfabetització mediàtica i informacional; pau inclusiva; entesa global; alfabetització mediàtica crítica; agenda de la premsa

Resumen. *Mejorar la alfabetización mediática e informacional para la paz y el entendimiento global a través de la investigación científica: descifrar la relación entre la agenda informativa, la agenda política y la opinión pública*

La promoción de la alfabetización mediática e informacional (AMI) se ha convertido en un imperativo fundamental para la educación del siglo XXI. En un panorama globalizado en el que los flujos de información son cada vez más complejos, ya no basta con dotar a los estudiantes universitarios de habilidades técnicas; existe una necesidad urgente de afianzar su aprendizaje en un marco teórico sólido y basado en la investigación. Este enfoque no es meramente pedagógico, sino que también constituye un requisito previo para fomentar la paz inclusiva. El objetivo de este artículo de investigación es doble: presentar los conceptos en evolución de la AMI en la era digital e introducir un nivel mejorado de AMI basado en la teoría. Tomando como estudio de caso de la «guerra contra el terrorismo», este estudio adopta un análisis de investigación interpretativo y cualitativo, que revisa la teoría de la agenda de la prensa en su relación con la agenda política y la opinión pública. El análisis revela una alineación sistemática entre la agenda política y la agenda informativa, lo que confirma la gran influencia de esta última a la hora de moldear la percepción pública durante la guerra de Irak. Los resultados demuestran que esta agenda se subordinó en gran medida a los discursos del gobierno, lo que creó un flujo de información «de arriba abajo» en el que los medios adoptaron terminología política, como la propia «guerra contra el terrorismo», para transformar un constructo político en una realidad social percibida. Este proceso se vio reforzado por el uso de un encuadre binario que redujo cuestiones geopolíticas complejas a dicotomías simplificadas del tipo «nosotros contra ellos», lo que aumentó la ansiedad pública y normalizó las intervenciones militares como respuesta principal al conflicto. Además, el estudio identifica un patrón significativo de «recorte de la agenda», en el que la omisión deliberada de contextos y voces reforzó el analfabetismo intercultural. Al dar prioridad al miedo por encima de la precisión y la comprensión cultural, los medios de comunicación no proporcionaron el espacio público necesario para la deliberación, lo que demostró en última instancia que, sin la integración de estrategias de alfabetización mediática e informacional, la sinergia entre las agendas políticas y mediáticas seguirá marginando las alternativas pacíficas y reforzando la polarización política global.

Palabras clave: alfabetización mediática e informacional; paz inclusiva; entendimiento global; alfabetización mediática crítica; agenda de la prensa

1. Introduction

Given the importance of media and information literacy for educational development in the twenty-first century and within the context of universities, this article advocates a balanced approach that equips university students with the necessary techniques, strategies and skills for building inclusive peace and knowledge societies, while also introducing them to the fascinating world of theory and research.

As freedom of expression and access to reliable information are the cornerstones of democratic stability, MIL provides the analytical tools required to understand the structural conditions under which these freedoms operate. Comprehension of the mechanisms of news construction, the hierarchy of news values, and the detection of media bias is essential for the empowerment

of younger generations, as these skills help them appreciate the role of scientific research in countering disinformation and advancing a culture of peace.

This study's theoretical framework is rooted in the Agenda-Setting Theory first conceptualized by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Their research demonstrated that media selection of news items does not necessarily tell people *what* to think, but rather *what to think about*, by elevating the importance of specific issues. Over the decades, this field has evolved to include "second-level" agenda-setting, or framing, which examines how media organizations suggest how the public should interpret these issues (Takeshita, 1997; McCombs, 2005).

Furthermore, recent scholarship has highlighted the phenomenon of Intermedia Agenda-Setting, where the political elite and mainstream news outlets influence each other in a closed loop. As noted by Harder et al. (2017), this synergy can lead to the marginalization of alternative perspectives, making Media and Information Literacy (MIL) a vital tool for deconstructing dominant narratives. These theoretical underpinnings help explain how "agenda-cutting"—the deliberate omission of certain facts—functions as a tool for political manipulation, particularly in international reporting.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research design, primarily utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological framework. Following Van Dijk (2001), this method allows for systematic exploration of how power dynamics and political ideologies are embedded within media narratives. The research focuses on a case study analysis of the "War on Terror," chosen for its relevance in demonstrating the convergence between political agendas and news production. To ensure analytical rigor, the study examines the interaction between first-level agenda-setting (issue salience) and second-level framing (the selective presentation of attributes). Specifically, the analysis is structured around three key operational axes: (1) identification of media bias through textual analysis of binary oppositions, (2) investigation of "agenda-cutting" as a mechanism for excluding alternative peaceful perspectives, and (3) evaluation of the effects of cross-cultural illiteracy on public opinion. By triangulating these elements, the methodology deconstructs the cognitive processes through which media professionals and political elites shape social attitudes, thereby providing a robust basis for the proposed recommendations on Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

3. Evolving Conception of Media and Information Literacy

3.1. *Unifying Notions of Media and Information Literacy*

Due to the evolving demands of the digital age and the convergence of communications, UNESCO has recently blended three areas of media and informa-

tion studies that used to be distinct—media literacy, information literacy and digital literacy—under one umbrella term of media and information literacy. This involves moving beyond these concepts as separate fields towards a unified notion that embodies all three forms of literacy, expanding both the scope and reach of media and information literacy as a combined set of competencies, ethical values, skills and knowledge to maximize the benefits of media, information and digital ecosystems and build resilience to the challenges they pose:

There is a growing consensus on the need to promote UNESCO's concept of media and information literacy, or MIL—an umbrella term that encompasses various and evolving competencies required to navigate today's increasingly complex communications environment. MIL empowers citizens with critical thinking and other necessary competencies to enable their informed and ethical engagement with the integration of content, institutions providing content (and providing opportunities to produce and share own content), and digital technologies. MIL further aims to support users' purposeful and creative use of digital technology, and enhance knowledge of rights online, such as privacy rights, and ethical issues concerning access to and use of information. In this way, MIL contributes to fostering intercultural dialogue, gender equality, access to information, freedom of expression, and peace and sustainable development in an increasingly digital society. The competencies acquired through media and information literacy can equip citizens with critical thinking skills enabling them to demand high-quality and rights-respecting services from all content providers. (UNESCO, 2021: 21)

Drawing from the literature on media literacy and information literacy (Sayers, 2006; Horton, 2007; Ó Dochartaigh, 2007; Armstrong, 2008; UNESCO, 2011; Tuominen & Kotilainen, 2012; Nfissi & Chouit, 2016; Chouit, 2021a; UNESCO, 2021), as well as from our own research and teaching experience, we present the following synthesis to define MIL as the ability to: (1) accurately identify information needs; (2) develop appropriate search strategies to meet these needs; (3) efficiently locate both online and offline media and information sources; (4) access media and information sources in a timely fashion; (5) classify these media and information sources; (6) critically analyse media and information arguments and decipher communication strategies; (7) evaluate the pertinence, reliability, and quality of media and information content; (8) store and document the relevant information; (9) synthesize this information and use it effectively, ethically and creatively; (10) create media and information content and communicate it effectively according to the context, audience, and goals, and make this process rewarding for academic, social, and professional development.

3.2. Basic Components of Media and Information Literacy

Media and information literacy can therefore be summarized as the ability to access, interpret, evaluate, and use media and information content effective-

ly, ethically, and creatively in a variety of forms, including the use of information and communication technologies. This entails the ability to make informed decisions by applying critical thinking, rational analysis, emotional intelligence, and constructive scepticism (Infante, 1988; UNESCO, 2011; UNESCO, 2021; Chouit, 2021b). A good starting point is to always ask questions before deciding what to accept and what to reject. These questions seek answers as to the type of message, as well as its producer, target audience, appeals, embedded values, interpretations (reading between the lines and identifying hidden messages, identifying alternate interpretations, discriminating between fact and opinion), sidedness, quality of argumentation, credibility of information, and detection of disinformation (Mills, 2000; Larson, 2001; Rayner, Wall & Kruger, 2004; Burton, 2005; Pape & Featherstone, 2005; Friedman, 2005; Ó Dochartaigh, 2007; Ogle, Klemp & McBride, 2007; Chouit, 2021a).

MIL is a fundamental aspect of democratization and active citizenship as it helps individuals develop reflective thinking, achieve their full potential, and enhance their participation in society (UNESCO, 2022). MIL is hence an essential tool for facilitating intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. We should be able to relate media and information to particular social and cultural contexts, and we should also be able to make appropriate use of cross-cultural communication to this effect (UNESCO, 2021; Chouit, 2025). Most modern-day social ills have cultural dimensions, hence an understanding of co-cultures both at home and abroad is a key literacy skill in the 21st Century. Belief in cultural diversity, constructive dialogue and peace communication is essential for building a world that is based on mutual understanding and mutual respect. This article's case study illustrates the detrimental effects of cross-cultural illiteracy and how it can exacerbate tensions and lead to war and hatred.

Having introduced what we consider to be the guiding principles of media and information literacy for undergraduate students, we now explore specific theories of media and communication in order to enable students to understand the nature and functions of mass communication and to sharpen their defences against media bias and disinformation.

3.3. Advanced Media and Information Literacy through Theory and Research: The Relationship between News Agenda, Political Agenda and Public Opinion

News literacy is a key component of media and information literacy because it helps students understand how media professionals decide what should be part of the news agenda and what should not. Such skills help them to become discerning citizens who are actively engaged with society at both local and global levels.

This section examines the Agenda-Setting Theory in relation to the political agenda and public opinion. We adopt a Critical Discourse Analysis per-

spective, highlighting the effects and limitations of this theory, and how media professionals' choices as to what is considered newsworthy can have subtle cognitive effects on audiences and shape their attitudes and behaviours.

The so-called "War on Terror" is taken as a case study to illustrate the manipulative power of both news agenda-setting and news agenda-cutting, as well as the serious effects of cross-cultural illiteracy.

4. The Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory maintains that in its everyday surveillance of events, the press determines which issues enter the news agenda and the prominence they receive, according to prevailing news values (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wilson, 1992; Takeshita, 1997; Defleur & Dennis, 2002; McCombs, 2005). By selecting certain topics for coverage while excluding others, media professionals shape both what the public is exposed to and the relative order of importance assigned to those issues.

4.1. Effects of the Agenda-Setting Theory

The main effects of News Agenda-Setting are as follows:

First, media professionals control access to information (Wilson, 1992: 18) by only telling audiences what they deem important for them to know. This might have serious implications when the public interest and watchdog functions of the press are downplayed by market or political considerations (Mutu & Chouit, 2024).

Second, they prioritize certain events, people and ideas over others and therefore assign to them greater prominence in their coverage. One serious implication of this subtle process is that people tend to perceive the issues presented by news media as more important (Defleur & Dennis, 2002).

Third, the media decide not only *what* to cover but also *how* to cover it. They stress certain angles, views, approaches and accounts to the detriment of others, thus depriving audiences of a comprehensive picture of events, situations and policies, making it harder for them to form sound judgments. By raising awareness of the importance of certain issues, these become part of the public agenda, which, in turn, impacts public opinion and decision-making. As Heath and Bryan (1992: 281) explain: "the media 'cue' the public as to which news items are deemed most important. Such cues include the frequency with which the item is repeated, the prominence with which items are displayed, the length or time allotted for the item, and the framing (in what context and on what occasion the media give attention to an item)."

Fourth, important events are sometimes not reported at all, or only partially reported. This is known as Agenda-Cutting and entails the intentional manipulation of information, a form of disinformation. While identifying how "news can be manipulated," Larson (2001: 309-310) maintains that "one

way gatekeepers distort the news is by simply ignoring it ... News can be biased by simply taking things out of context or by misquoting a source.” Other methods this author cites include “favouring the sponsor,” placing “pseudo-events” on the news agenda, and presenting “biased news” (pp. 309-310). Hence, Agenda-Setting and Agenda-Cutting are closely interrelated and should be examined together.

The theorists of the Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) famously stated that the “mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.” However, agenda-cutting adds the subtle level of telling audiences “what not to think about.” This leads to serious implications, mainly that citizens are deprived of their right of access to accurate and complete information that helps them to make sense of the world and make informed decisions. This is especially so when the untold part of the story or unreported stories may be more important than what does get reported. Also, when important news is excluded, audiences are denied the opportunity to “think” about societal and global affairs. Students should therefore diversify their sources of information to bridge information gaps, and thus become well-informed citizens who are resilient to limitations on how they perceive and interpret the world.

Fifth, media content is prepared by professional communicators with the specific intention of influencing how audiences make sense of the world and interpret events and policies. Such shaping of audiences’ frames of reference, attitudes and behaviours is of particular relevance to the political agenda because audiences depend largely on mass media to understand and take action on political issues (Kosicki, 2002).

This process of news-making starts at the level of “news values,” which influence agenda-setting, as explained below.

4.2. News Values

The criteria that impact the selection of the news agenda should also be taken into consideration. So-called ‘news values’ include: timeliness, relevance, impact, proximity, clarity, controversy, prominence, currency, oddity, negativity, entertainment, and news organizations’ own agendas. To demystify these factors, which are used on a daily basis to inform the news agenda, we should stress that there is nothing rational or objective about them. They are used by news professionals to frame stories in appealing and persuasive ways to their audiences. Jarman and McClune (2007: 22) rightly stated that news values are “neither natural nor neutral”:

[N]ews values are, in fact, professionally and socially/culturally derived and framed. They are constructions. Furthermore, as Anderson (1997) indicates, they operate at every level within the news production process, not simply at the point of selection of an event but also in the shaping of the text through which that event will be portrayed.

If news values are, essentially, constructions, the news stories flowing from the operation of these news values are also constructions. The media do not simply mirror reality. Chandler (1994) surprises us, perhaps, when he asserts 'news programmes ... appear to be the most real and least mediated programmes on TV' yet they are 'as much of a construction as drama'. Nonetheless it *is* the case that all news journalism involves the process of, quite literally, 'making' news.

Allan (2004: 58) goes further in explaining the craft of making news by establishing a link between news values, framing of news stories, and ideology:

News accounts, then, may be deconstructed in ideological terms so as to elucidate how these news values help to rule in certain types of events as 'news-worthy' while, at the same time, ruling out alternative types. At the heart of these processes of inclusion and exclusion are certain 'principles of organization' or 'frames' (Goffman, 1974) which work to impose order on the multiple happenings of the social world so as to render them into a series of meaningful events. Precisely how a particular news event is 'framed' by the journalist claiming to be providing an 'objective' or 'balanced' account thus takes on a distinct ideological significance. Gitlin (1980) extends this ethnomethodological notion of 'frame' to argue for a consideration of how the daily routines of journalism strive to *naturalize* the social world in accordance with certain discursive conventions. News frames, he argues, make the world beyond direct experience look natural; they are 'principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters'. (Gitlin, 1980: 6)

This leads to the ineluctable conclusion that when media professionals set the news agenda, they only allow access to information about the world through their own lenses, convictions and perceptions of reality. We shall now illustrate all these ideas in the context of what former United States President George W. Bush termed the "War on Terror" and how the US press advocated the Bush Doctrine.

4.3. *War on Terror and American Media*

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the American press strongly influenced public opinion by promoting a culture of war and heightening support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. There was widespread consensus in the American media that the appropriate response to the 9/11 attacks should be military. In his book *The Pen and the Sword*, Calvin F. Exoo states the following (2010: 45-46):

In the nation's leading newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, a total of 46 op-ed pieces discussed responses to 9/11 in the three weeks after the attacks. Forty-four of those urged a military response while two sought non-military solutions (Rendall, 2001). On television, the move from

shock to fury to war was quick and decisive. On September 12, CNN's logo for 9/11 was "America Under Attack". Two days later, it was "America at War". These declarations of war were well in front of the U.S. government, which did not begin the bombing of Afghanistan until October 7, 2001.

In his address to Congress and the American nation on September 20, 2001, Bush declared the following: "On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country (...). *Our war on terror* begins with Al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated". On October 7, 2001, the United States, with its ally the United Kingdom, launched air strikes on Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom. And in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, Bush clearly stated that: "Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction", using the term "evil" to refer to Iraq, Iran and North Korea:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, Bush directly pinpointed Saddam Hussein as the major threat:

Our nation and the world must learn the lessons of the Korean peninsula and not allow an even greater threat to rise up in Iraq. A brutal dictator, with a history of reckless aggression, with ties to terrorism, with great potential wealth will not be permitted to dominate a vital region and threaten the United States.

Twelve years ago, Saddam Hussein faced the prospect of being the last casualty in a war he had started and lost. To spare himself, he agreed to disarm all weapons of mass destruction.

For the next 12 years, he systematically violated that agreement. He pursued chemical, biological and nuclear weapons even while inspectors were in his country.

Nothing to date has restrained him from his pursuit of these weapons: not economic sanctions, not isolation from the civilized world, not even cruise missile strikes on his military facilities.

By highlighting the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to American national security and world peace, Bush was mobilising public support for the invasion of Iraq on the basis of "pre-emptive war", also known as the "Bush Doctrine". This doctrine is outlined in the following extract from the *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*:

The main principle of the Bush Doctrine is the use of preventive military force against new threats of terrorism and rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Doctrine also includes the principle of unilateralism, or the willingness to act alone if necessary, and a strong belief that the U.S. strategy of opening societies to democracy will bring peace and stability throughout the world.

Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 was the realization of the Bush Doctrine. The United States and its allies invaded Iraq on the presumption of its possession of WMD. But there were no such weapons in Iraq. That argument was fabricated by the Bush administration to justify seizure of the natural resources in the Gulf region, mainly oil (Exoo, 2010: 24-25). Nevertheless, the Bush administration readily announced that Iraq “possessed” WMD. The American press propagated this information, covering it around the clock and deepening fear and anxiety in American citizens, thereby preparing the ground for Bush to invade Iraq. The least that can be said in this regard is that the American press did not do its job of verifying the information before circulating it:

An intensive search of Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion turned up no signs of WMD nor any evidence of an Iraqi nuclear programme. Claims that Saddam was in league with al- Qaeda also have never been substantiated. With a violent insurgency undermining U.S. efforts in Iraq, the Bush administration came under fire about the veracity of its stated motives for invading. Administration officials, however, pointed to the toppling of Saddam to justify their policy of pre-emption. They labelled the invasion of Iraq as the first step in a process of promoting democratic change in the Middle East. (Haley, 2005)

Note that the names of both expeditions to Afghanistan and to Iraq contain the word “freedom”: “Operation Enduring Freedom” and “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” The idea was to emphasize in the minds of Americans and all citizens of the world that the values of “freedom” and “democracy” were in danger and it was the United States’ duty to resolve the matter. Drissia Chouit (2025) notes “the centrality of language and communication in building peace or instigating conflicts” (p. 299), highlighting that “being aware that words have an impactful weight helps us to be careful about the words we use and to be attentive to the wordings used by others. In fact, words can lead to positive change or be at the origin of tensions and conflicts” (p. 301). She draws particular attention to how:

The way we name people, places, things and events impacts our perceptions and attitudes, the way we think about those people and places, and the way we treat them. Language can be used to polarize people and nations (Paolucci, 2009; Weber, 2009), separating them into either good or evil, civilized or uncivilized, ethnically superior or ethnically inferior, human beings or

dehumanized animals (Steuter and Willis, 2009), or those who are created to rule and those who are created to be ruled. Such biased categorizations and labelling of people and nations instigate defensive attitudes that lead to social unrest, conflicts, and wars (McSweeney, 1999). (p. 301)

The 9/11 attacks contributed to a new hegemonic ideology largely propagated by the American media (Estes, 2005; Amoureux, 2008; Mueller, 2008; Schaefer, 2009; Steuter & Wills, 2009; Reese & Lewis, 2009; Weber, 2009; Exoo, 2010), placing the Global War on Terror as the priority on the American public agenda and making the United States the unilateral guardian of freedom, human rights and peace in the world. This unilateral perspective “is not in accordance with international law or the use of force as in the United Nations Charter, which asserts that states can legally order preemptive strikes only when faced with an imminent threat” (*Encyclopedia of United States National Security*, 2005). On the other hand, claims of using force to establish democratic societies in foreign countries are clearly not tenable.

Critics of the administration’s policies say that the idea of promoting democracy is simply a way to justify the invasion in the absence of evidence of Iraqi WMD or terrorist connections. They argue that, despite the U.S. call for greater freedom in the Middle East, its allies such as Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia are some of the least democratic and most authoritarian states in the region. These critics also challenge the notion that democracy can be forced on a country from outside, and that western-style democracy is the most appropriate form of government for all societies. (Haley, 2005)

This illustrates how “the careful use of language is a powerful yet subtle tool in organized disinformation, used to manipulate public opinion and behaviours” (Chouit, 2025: 305). The first Iraq War provides a striking example of state-sponsored disinformation (Robins, 1996; McSweeney, 1999; Kanjirathinkal & Hickey, 1992; Beier, 2003; Chouit, 2021a), maliciously leveraging this linguistic communication strategy to dupe audiences and construct supportive public opinion:

[This war] was also referred to as a “clean war”, using “smart bombs” (Beier, 2003) and conducting “surgical operations” (Robins 1996) to construct a favourable public opinion (Kanjirathinkal and Hickey 1992), by making people believe that there were no or minimal civilian or U.S. Army casualties because “smart bombs” attacked military targets with high precision, described to be like a surgical operation. (Chouit, 2025: 305)

The main question concerns the function of the American media as a “Fourth Estate”: Why was it downplayed in favour of official statements? (Paololucci, 2009; Exoo, 2010; Chouit, 2021a, Chouit, 2025). David Dadge raises some highly pertinent questions in his book *The War in Iraq and Why the Media Failed Us?*: “How did the faulty messages about Iraq get through

without the Bush administration's assertions being tested? Where was the balance and context in the media's reporting that should have helped shape the debate in late 2002 and early 2003? Why did the watchdog fail to bark as the United States prepared to go to war? (2006:3)." He rightly pointed to the failure of the American media to tell the truth and its implications on public conception:

Instead of questioning the assertions about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), especially Iraq's alleged nuclear weapons programme, and Saddam Hussein's links with al-Qaeda and the September 11 attacks, the media, as a whole, appeared silent on these issues. They often failed to remind their audiences that statements made by senior officials of the Bush administration were hotly contested, or a matter of conjecture. Even those media organizations that did question these views often reported them in such a way that they gave credence to the Bush administration's views, while downplaying the views of those who disagreed. The consequence of this failure was a confusion in the American public's understanding of the Iraq war. (...)

If the polls point to misconceptions, they also highlight the media's failure to provide the truth to the public. While the Bush administration gained considerably from the belief that Iraq had WMD and was involved in the September 11 attacks, it is the media that helped communicate this impression to the public. After all, it is mostly through the medium of television, internet, and newspapers that the policies of government are delivered. (Ibid, pp. 1-2).

In the foreword to the same book, Danny Schechter explained how this happened: "The war coverage had a template guiding it. Make a claim. Reinforce it with experts, usually the same ones over and over again. Marginalize all dissent. Narrow the range of debate. Use emotive language inciting fears. Make the only option 'us' versus 'them' (Ibid, xii)." This also explains how the Bush administration "worked hard—and with the connivance and complicity of many in the media, it must be noted—to transform the historic concept of the 'Fourth Estate' into what war commander Tommy Franks called a 'fourth front' in his war plan (Ibid, x)." This correlates with what Exoo describes as "the transformation of 21st-century American imperialism into the story of a benevolent America, trying its best to defend the world from tyrants and terrorists. If George Gerbner is correct, and 'we live in a world created by the stories we tell', then we need to get our stories right." (2010: 35)

Moreover, the coverage in the American press of the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq presented Bush as a hero in the struggle between good and evil, a fervent defender of democracy and human rights worldwide, and a liberator of humanity from terrorism and dictators:

George W. Bush in particular, as head of state, was unconditionally lionized by the media as few presidents have ever been. "War Has Made Bush a First-

Rate Commander in Chief,” pronounced Hearst Newspapers (11/25/01). “Global Spotlight Falls on Bush, and He Shines,” trumpeted the *Los Angeles Times* (10/23/01). “Surer Voice, Wider Vision,” proclaimed *The New York Times* article, redolent with praise: “forceful . . . plain speaking . . . eloquence . . . engaged and activist . . . full throated . . . strode into the . . . House . . . as one of the most popular presidents in modern history . . . sustained applause . . . the tableau was that of a celebration of a war hero” (1/30/02). (...) These characterizations—of a president we’ve since come to see as mortal after all—might seem amusing in retrospect. But they helped set the stage for the uncritical acceptance, by press and public alike, of President Bush’s message as he led the nation down the path to dubious battle. (Exoo, 2010: 46-47)

Furthermore, Islam was used as a scapegoat to justify American military actions. Information was distorted, using politically regulated and emotionally charged language that made a colonialist distinction between the civilized and the uncivilized worlds. Portraying the conflict as a fight between good and evil ensured that audiences took the perspective that Islam is a global threat. As Exoo rightly stated, “instead of stories that opened Americans’ minds to Muslim opinion, the news was filled with stories that closed minds, fostered ignorance, and stoked the fires of fear and hatred.” (2010: 45).

Following the end of the Cold War, there was an urgent need for America to find a new enemy because its economy and political leadership cannot survive without having somebody to fight. Islam filled that void (McSweeney, 1999). By fostering extreme fear and anxiety in American citizens, the Bush administration not only secured their support until the end of the war, but also maximized their profit. Because they knew that fear sells well, and that Islam sells well too.

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the “War on Terror” reveals systematic alignment between political directives and media output, confirming the efficiency of agenda-setting in shaping public perception during international crises. The findings demonstrate that the news agenda was largely subordinated to official government narratives, creating a “top-down” information flow whereby the media adopted political terminology, including the “War on Terror” itself, to transform a political construct into a perceived social reality. This process was reinforced by the use of binary framing, which reduced complex geopolitical issues to simplified “us versus them” dichotomies, thus heightening public anxiety and normalizing military intervention as the primary response to conflict. Furthermore, the study identifies a significant pattern of “agenda-cutting,” where the deliberate omission of historical context and diverse cultural perspectives led to a state of cross-cultural illiteracy. By prioritizing a culture of fear over nuanced understanding, the media failed to provide the necessary public sphere for deliberation, ultimately showing that without

the integration of Media and Information Literacy strategies, the synergy between political and media agendas will continue to marginalize peaceful alternatives and reinforce social polarization worldwide.

6. Conclusion

This study's findings underscore how the tripartite relationship between the news agenda, political agenda, and public opinion is not only a theoretical construct but a powerful mechanism that can either foster global peace or exacerbate international conflicts. The "War on Terror" case study illustrates that when media professionals abandon their role as critical gatekeepers and adopt political narratives without scrutiny, the result is a significant decline in cross-cultural literacy and an increase in social anxiety. This research confirms that "agenda-setting" is often accompanied by "agenda-cutting," a process that silences alternative perspectives necessary for building inclusive peace and global understanding. The dominance of the political agenda over the news agenda shows that the American press is no longer representative of the convictions of the founding fathers of the United States, among them Thomas Jefferson who once famously said: "If I had to choose between a government without newspapers and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter."

To counter these detrimental effects, we recommend a paradigm shift in university curricula through the systematic adoption of Media and Information Literacy. Students should be endowed with higher-order critical thinking skills that will equip them with the analytical tools to detect media bias and disinformation and to understand the structural influences behind news production. Furthermore, news media organizations must reclaim their ethical responsibility as watchdogs of the public interest and prioritize a culture of peace and mutual understanding over hate and conflict.

In conclusion, the enhancement of MIL is not just an educational goal but a fundamental prerequisite for democracy and global stability. By bridging the gap between scientific research and pedagogical practice, we can empower future generations to navigate the complex information landscape and contribute to a more peaceful and empathetic world.

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