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What is This?
Images of liberation? Visual framing, humanitarianism and British press photography during the 2003 Iraq invasion

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Abstract
Although the 2003 Iraq invasion was not wholly framed as a ‘humanitarian intervention’, the rhetoric of bringing liberation, democratization and human rights to the Iraqi people was widely advanced by the coalition and supporters as a legitimating reason for war. This article assesses the role played by press photography in legitimizing or challenging this crucial framing during the invasion across a range of UK national newspapers. Privileging visual content in research design, the study presents selected results from a comprehensive content and framing analysis of press photography during the invasion period (March–April 2003), specifically examining the prominence and treatment of photographs in the humanitarian-related visual coverage, along with the accompanying words used to define, support or detract from the events depicted. While finding that the rationale of humanitarianism generally played well for the coalition during this study period, this article explores the problematic nature of the narrative of liberation.

Keywords
humanism, humanitarian, Iraq war, photography, photojournalism, visual framing

In today’s ‘mediatized’ conflicts, the war image is routinely characterized as a strategically directed ‘weapon’ or symbolic tool, with the power to engage attention, influence opinions and move emotions across the variances of media platforms and for disparate global audiences (Cottle, 2006; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010; Parry, 2010a). But, as David Perlmutter notes, the question to keep in mind is ‘to what end any vision of war presents itself, that is, who claims what about what aspect of realism’ (1999: 164).
Selected visions of war are produced, circulated and viewed within specific historical, cultural and political circumstances, and via diverse media outlets which themselves tend to carry their own identifiable properties of genre, style and political partisanship. The present study considers the ‘framings’ of the war photograph, drawing on a survey and analysis of a broad selection of ‘quality’, mid-market and tabloid national newspapers in the UK (The Sun, Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, The Independent, The Guardian, Daily Telegraph and The Times). In this instance, the initial invasion phase of the Iraq conflict in March and April 2003 provides the case study – a significant and illuminating case for reasons outlined below.

The particular contribution of this article is premised on two interrelated arguments: that news photography deserves more than a secondary or cursory examination when approaching the reporting of war in the field of political communication; and that the ‘humanitarian motivation’ framing offers a particularly telling and constructive example for critical reflection, due both to its ‘oxymoronic’ properties (Der Derian, 2009) and to the intersections with liberal humanist traditions of photojournalism, by which practitioners believe they can change the world through the power of compassionate imagery. There is perhaps a corresponding concern that we too, as media analysts, can be swayed by the desire to imbue images with innate powers as ‘weapons’ or ‘tools’, rather than appreciating, at the very least, the immediate contexts of publication and reading (see Campbell, 2007: 362). Thus, the present article draws on empirical findings from a comprehensive content and visual framing analysis of British press photography from the time of the 2003 Iraq invasion, in order to explore the interrelated notions of humanitarian warfare and photographic humanism.

The invasion of Iraq in early 2003 provides a compelling case study, certainly in the British context: due both to the all-encompassing media coverage at the start of the military operations, and to the stark divisions in public opinion regarding the necessity and nature of the war – divisions that continue to reverberate in British political culture and beyond. With mass public dissent in evidence at large demonstrations against the war, the US–UK coalition sought to engage mainstream media in the battle for moral and political legitimacy. During the early stages of major military interventions, as extensive media operations are launched alongside military planning, shared media–military interests in a ‘good’ war narrative for ‘our troops’ can lead to the press becoming ‘part of the PR strategy’ (Moorcroft and Taylor, 2008: 230). Daniel Hallin and Todd Gitlin observe that maintaining ‘the ties of sentiment’ between soldiers and the home front has appeared to be the ‘primary role’ of wartime media in the Anglo-American world (1994: 161). The extent to which the US and UK news media ‘echoed’ coalition framings of the Iraq war has received extensive examination elsewhere (Bennett et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2010), while retrospective self-criticism has noted that, both in the run-up to war and during it, reporting was ‘not as rigorous as it should have been’, in the words of New York Times editors (Editors, 2004). In the present article, it is the specific news framings of liberation and humanitarian ‘rescue’, as realized in the photographic portrayals of local people and their encounters with military invaders/liberators, that present pertinent examples for critical examination. The following section provides the setting and explanation for this twofold investigation.
Humanitarianism and humanist photography in the news

In outlining his ‘doctrine of the international community’ in April 1999, following NATO’s intervention into Kosovo, Tony Blair encapsulated the humanitarian-led discourse that had shaped the western interventions of the 1990s and would continue to feature in the rationales for the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts in the 21st century (Blair, 1999). As Žižek contends, the justification of the war with Iraq in 2003 was characterized by inconsistency due to there being ‘too many reasons for the war’ (2004: 2, original emphasis). Coalition leaders justified the war with Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein had failed to comply with UN resolutions to disarm his ‘weapons of mass destruction’ (WMDs frame) and, by the US administration in particular, on the grounds that that the Iraqi regime had links with terrorism (‘War on Terror’ frame). The US administration’s neoconservative-inspired ‘pre-emption doctrine’ (or ‘Bush doctrine’) had been hardened in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and claimed the right to act unilaterally where the US identified a threat (Kellner, 2005: 54).

Although the ‘Bush doctrine’ seemed an ill-fit with the internationalist and moralistic values of the ‘Blair doctrine’, the amalgamation of George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ with humanitarian ideals of liberation formed the bedrock of the coalition rationale for war. Around the time of the invasion, American and British coalition leaders favoured talk of liberation and democracy over the issues of WMD disarmament: Philip Hammond found that ‘just over 75 per cent of their reported statements claimed this justification for war’ (2007a: 196). For example, US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, characterized the war as ‘an act of humanity’ (25 March), while Blair assured the Iraqi people that their ‘commitment to the post-Saddam humanitarian effort will be total’ (20 March). Indeed, the US administration dubbed the invasion plans ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’.

Echoing the coalition statements, the legitimating ‘humanitarian motivation’ frame was also found to be the most successfully deployed rationale in British news discourse: both in terms of prominence and in generally supportive coverage; on television and in print media (Hammond, 2007a: 205; Lewis et al., 2006: 190; Robinson et al., 2010: 170; Tumber and Palmer, 2004: 110). The cultural and historical resonance of the ‘evil dictatorship’ of Saddam Hussein meant that this was not a difficult frame to invoke; there was a ready-made media template dusted off from the 1991 Gulf War (Kellner, 1992). Additionally, Bush’s declaration of war coincided with the 15-year anniversary of the Halabja chemical attack, ordered by the Hussein regime. The photographs of the dead families, certainly in the form they were re-presented in the newspapers, served to re-ignite collective memories of an earlier atrocity that the coalition were only too willing to memorialize at this particular time.1

The traditions of photojournalism are also worthy of mention in this context. In their role as enabling the mass ‘witness’ of conflicts, press photographers routinely balance expectations of dramatic realism and originality against ethical reflections on privacy and respect for human subjects (Howe, 2002). Historically, and with particular reference to conflict imagery, photographs from the Spanish Civil War and Second World War especially brought home to audiences the brutal consequences for civilians, as they attempted to escape the destruction of their homes and, most shockingly, as victims of the Holocaust (Brothers, 1997; Zelizer, 1998). However, the liberal humanist traditions
associated with early photojournalism and documentary photography have come under attack for perceived failures in both the preferred visual depiction of human subjects and the wider contextual framing in the news media’s picturing of the ‘distant/suffering other’. The universalist message of liberal humanism is undercut, argue its critics, by the fact that powerless subjects (‘them’) are routinely photographed and viewed by the socially powerful (‘us’) (Rosler, 1989: 307). The concern is that, under the premise of invoking compassion and concern, photographs of non-combatants in distant conflicts can perform as effective political props, even serving to legitimate the necessity for war.

Writing on the representations of civilians during the 1999 Kosovo conflict, Wendy Kozol critiqued the overly familiar and simplistic ‘narrative of victims, aggressors, and rescuers’: ‘Photographs of Kosovar refugees fall easily into generic conventions that for much of the twentieth century have mobilized support for one side in a conflict by using images of mothers and children as metonyms for the innocent victims’ (2004: 5). Photography’s contradictions and ambiguities, its inability to explain or inform, its beautifying of a socially divided and suffering world, have fuelled harsh appraisals in oft-cited articles and books from the 1970s onwards (e.g. Campbell, 2003; Sekula, 1982; Solomon-Godeau, 1991; Sontag, 1979; Tagg, 1988). A more recent ‘turn’ to embrace the democratic, progressive potentials of photographic witnessing has seen Susie Linfield castigating this long-standing ‘tsunami of too-easy scorn’ (2010: 10), arguing that ‘photography has been central to fostering the idea, if not yet the reality, that barbarous assaults are no longer the private property of the states that commit them’ (2010: 47; see also Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, for their significant contribution to the debate). In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), Ariella Azoulay poses a reformulation of the concept of citizenship, with the photographic act – between photographer, photographed person and spectator – forming a community of citizens, constituted, not by a nation-state or sovereign power, but in the shared ‘recognition that what they are witnessing is intolerable’ (2008: 18). Debates on visual rhetoric, aesthetics and the politics of representation continue to coalesce around photographic practices as the digital era sees ever-expanding uses for photography in public and private spaces: ‘Everyone and everything is liable to become a photograph’ (Azoulay, 2008: 146). The rhetoric of humanitarian intervention, formulated around notions of a shared compassion and empathy for a distant other or ‘stranger’, appears to chime with the ideals of liberal humanism for which socially concerned photography has been alternately praised and scorned. In one sense, press photography, with its dual ties to a strong emotional appeal and an aesthetic of realism, appears to offer the ideal expressive form to promote a humanitarian-led intervention within a print news discourse; in another sense, the ongoing debates around the politics of witnessing offer a forewarning that inevitable contradictions and ambiguities are likely to ‘break out of the frame’ imposed by the official war narrative (Butler, 2009: 11).

**Notes on methodology: visual content and framing analysis**

‘Media frames are persistent patterns … of selection, emphasis, and exclusion’ (Gitlin, 1980: 7), in which certain aspects of reality are promoted over alternatives, proffering a favoured visualization and interpretation of people and events. Press photographs are particularly selective in nature, with a single image chosen as ‘emblematic’ for the news
story (Griffin, 2004: 383), based on decisions relating to aesthetic design, narrative fit, perceived impact and symbolism. While the traditional neglect of visuals in the area of political communication has been noted by other authors (Entman, 2004: 56; Hansen et al., 1998: 189), the past decade has seen considerable efforts to refine visual methodologies both in the area of ‘framing analysis’ (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2008) and other varied approaches that not only call for serious attention to visual elements within varied contexts of production and dissemination (Rose, 2001), but make the case for ‘multimodal’ or ‘mixed media’ appreciation of communicative practices and materials (Kress, 2010; Mitchell, 2005). Digital technologies also present new opportunities and challenges for researchers, with images easily copied, re-cropped and republished in many forms across media platforms (Keith et al., 2010). While the internet has changed how people access news images from around the world in recent years, it is worth pointing out that figures for Ofcom show that only 2 percent of respondents (aged 16+) named the internet as their main source of news in 2002, rising to 6 percent in 2006: for newspapers the share was 15 percent and 14 percent respectively (Ofcom, 2007: 17). This is a lower proportion than for television, but as Susan Sontag claims, the still photographic image arguably has the ‘deeper bite’, that is, it is more memorable and affecting than the fleeting images of the televisual flow (Sontag, 2003: 19). Sontag’s polemical position is partially supported by media effects research that credits photography with high memorability and influence on reader assessment of issues (Domke et al., 2002; Zillmann et al., 2001).

At the heart of the present study, then, is the supposition that favoured news framings and narratives about the war and its protagonists are powerfully performed, reflected and reinforced through the selective representation of certain events and people in news photographs, alongside the verbal framing indicated in the headline and caption. The ‘visual framing’ approach developed here researches the news photograph on three broad levels: first, at the compositional level (the content within the frame of the photograph); second, within its immediate news discourse context (the accompanying framing of caption, headline and layout); and, third, across the broader context of a chosen period of time and diversity of newspaper titles, in which certain themes and slants in coverage might be seen to cohere and gain momentum (the broader visual narrative) (Parry, 2009).

The present article is drawn from a larger study in which semiotic methods are integrated into a content and framing analysis of press photography in order to examine war imagery across a corpus of seven national newspapers in the UK (Sun, Mirror, Mail, Independent, Guardian, Times and Telegraph – inclusive of their Sunday equivalents). This sample of newspapers encompasses the diverse nature of the national press in the UK, comprising a mix of quality (broadsheet), mid-market and tabloid titles, with a range of positions of editorial support and opposition towards the war. The British media system, in which a competitive national market encourages a distinctive range of partisan loyalties and reporting styles (from tabloid populism to serious analysis), demands a comparative approach between news titles, in order to do full justice to the differences and complexities within the ‘national press’ (Goddard et al., 2008; Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 214).

One of the most controversial wars in the post-Cold War era for Britain, the 2003 Iraq invasion was exceptional in terms of the intensity of media coverage of a distant conflict,
with the surveyed sample providing almost 4400 Iraq-related images during a 33-day period (17 March–18 April 2003). On average, 19 photographs appeared daily across the Iraq news pages of each newspaper, supporting Barbie Zelizer’s claim that wartime reporting sees a ‘turn to the visual’ (2004: 115), and providing a substantial amount of visual content that merits close scholarly attention. The quantitative emphasis in the research, in which all relevant news photographs in the corpus are coded for their newspaper positioning and content, arguably follows from an assumption about the nature of media content: that the prominence and portrayal of actors and events in press photographs are worthy of serious empirical and interpretive study, and that they tell us something significant about the society which ‘produces and consumes’ such images (Brothers, 1997: 12). However, content and framing analysis can only admittedly offer a ‘partial account’ without additional research into production processes and media audiences (Campbell, 2007: 362).

The photographic content is approached bearing in mind what the selected visualizations of war might reveal about the practices, routines and values of news production. For example, the military–media strategy of ‘embedding’ reporters and photographers with coalition units during the invasion has already been credited with engendering certain styles of reporting and picturing of the war (Goddard et al., 2008; Griffin, 2004; Kennedy, 2008; Lewis et al., 2006; Pfau et al., 2004).

Differing in approach from other content analyses of UK media representation of this conflict (Lewis et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2010; Tumber and Palmer, 2004), the present study considers the news photograph as the primary unit for analysis. Similar visuals-led studies have examined US or European media outlets (e.g. Griffin, 2004; Konstantinidou, 2008; Tomanić Trivundža, 2004), or compared international titles (Fahmy, 2007; Fahmy and Kim, 2008), but no other study provides a comparable comprehensive and detailed examination of UK press photography. In following such a design, the study pointedly places the focus of research on the use of photographs as they are printed and textually embedded in the newspaper form, presenting a rigorous and nuanced approach to visual news framing. In contrast, content analyses of linguistic content rarely signpost their incompleteness in those cases where visual content and newspaper layout are excluded or de-emphasized. As Mitchell has argued, all media are ‘mixed’ and news photography is not experienced as a purely visual medium: the aim here is to emphasize the qualities of the visual elements within the ‘recipe’ of war reporting (2005: 260), during a period characterized by intense visuality.

In addition to coding for manifest visual elements (e.g. camera angle and distance; number/age/gender of subjects; photo size on page) and the surrounding text (headline/caption), each photograph could potentially be coded under one or more of the 10 inductive thematic ‘frames’ (e.g. Battle Progress, Civilian Casualties, War on Terror, WMD) where the subject matter is deemed relevant to that particular frame. This more subjective coding is based on the presence and treatment of key themes (in this case, ‘Humanitarian Motivations’ for war). For each instance where a thematic frame is linked to a photograph, a corresponding ‘tone’ code is allotted to reflect the ‘positive’, ‘negative’ or ‘mixed/neutral’ nature of the image-caption (from the perspective of the US–UK coalition), taking into account both visual and linguistic aspects. The ‘mixed/neutral’ category reflects an awareness that words and images are not necessarily ‘readable’ in
a coherent and unified manner; images can certainly be regarded as ambiguous when we attempt to make sense of their ‘message’, but, conversely, the wartime news context offers exceptional circumstances in which certain key images are selected for their particular expressive and symbolic qualities, and printed within evident news framing choices.

With these points in mind, this article examines the kinds of photographs prominent in the humanitarian-related visual coverage, and the surrounding language used to support, define or detract from the events depicted in the images. Using a combination of analytical procedures, to what degree can we gauge criticism or support for the coalition’s preferred narrative of liberation in the photographic representation of the war? Do familiar and recurring photographic tropes constitute or destabilize the simplistic binaries offered in the rhetoric of political leaders?

The next section first presents the aggregate results for the ‘humanitarian motivation’ frame, noting inter-newspaper differences in the visual framing of humanitarian issues, and with particular attention on the delivery of aid; the second section examines representations of local people and refugees, with reference to western press traditions in visually reporting the experience of conflict for non-combatants; third, a high-profile example of picturing ‘past brutalities’ demonstrates the problem of photography’s dual purpose as both rhetorical and evidential device in the national press.

**Findings and analysis**

*‘Hope is at hand’: picturing the coalition ‘liberate’ the Iraqi people*

Following ‘Battle Progress’ as the dominant overarching theme in photographic coverage (referred in 40.3 percent of all photographs) the ‘Humanitarian Motivation’ frame was the next most commonly referenced narrative frame. On average, across the entire sample of newspapers, 14.5 percent of all Iraq-related photographs were allotted a ‘humanitarian motivation’ frame code, with the *Telegraph* most likely to print images that referenced or depicted the sub-themes of aid delivery, liberation and celebration, refugees or hostile civilian reactions (20.7 percent of its photographs: while the *Mirror* printed the lowest proportion – 10.8 percent). Turning to the differences in framing ‘tone’ between newspapers (Table 1), the high-circulation and largely pro-war *Sun, Mail* and *Telegraph* offer largely supportive framing of this issue (90.3 percent, 77.8 percent and 71.9 percent respectively). There are only two papers that do not print a majority of ‘positively’ framed photos: the *Independent* and *Guardian* (37.6 percent and 36.6 percent). The *Mirror* and *Times* also appear less than convinced about the beneficial humanitarian gains for Iraqis in their selected visual and verbal framings (54.9 percent and 58.7 percent ‘positive’ respectively).

The two anti-war broadsheets, the *Independent* and *Guardian*, appear to be more sceptical, in proportional terms, than the tabloid *Mirror* concerning this issue, perhaps indicating that the ‘quality’ titles constructed a politicized ‘pictorial resistance’ (Campbell, 2003) through the critical framing of this substantive rationale for the war, rather than relying on the more visceral and distressing casualty imagery that the *Mirror* was found most likely to print (Parry, 2009: 165). The two anti-war broadsheets print similarly high
proportions of negatively framed pictures to the Mirror, but also print a substantial amount of ‘mixed’ or ambiguously framed photographs (30.7 percent in the Independent and 22.8 percent in the Guardian, compared to only 12.2 percent in the Mirror).

Jubilant encounters between Iraqi people and soldiers provided the most common type of depiction within this selection. The coalition had planned for images of celebrating Iraqis to be a key feature in the visualization of the war and believed in their power to perform a legitimating function, especially in countries where there was widespread opposition to the war (Tatham, 2006: 129–30). The pro-war press in Britain largely embraced and perpetuated the theme of the humanitarian motivations for war, with the Sun and Telegraph picturing and positively framing such related activities in over 14 percent of all their Iraq-related photographs. Under the headline ‘Liberators’, the Sun printed a close-up photograph of a smiling marine receiving a hug from an Iraqi with the caption: ‘Hero’s welcome … a jubilant Iraqi woman hugs US marine major David “Bull” Gurfein after his unit helped liberate the southern Iraqi town of Safwan yesterday. Scores of marines were embraced by emotional locals, many weeping tears of joy’ (22 March, p. 15). Such close-up intimacy was also captured in the Telegraph, with one photograph showing how ‘Trooper David Toughhill helps a young Iraqi girl to unwrap a sweet after Desert Rats restored water supplies near Azibir’ (3 April, p. 8). The pictured soldiers are named actors: their heroism, role in the liberation of a town and restoration of water supplies are emphasized without any distancing language or scepticism.

While positive portrayals dominate overall, the variations in the pictorial presentation and verbal framing of the coalition’s humanitarian motivations invite closer examination in order to investigate how this particular discourse was constructed and challenged in the UK national press. Unambiguously positive portrayals offer straightforward examples, but instances of destabilization and dissonance within the pictorial presentation allow us to explore the constraints and problems of this framing.

The photographers on the ground also captured clearly hostile reactions from the crowds, and the aid deliveries that were supposed to provide ideal photo opportunities could turn chaotic and counter-productive. While there were plenty of photographs that pictured grateful Iraqis receiving food parcels and water, a recurring type of imagery of aid delivery provided more unsettling portrayals. Under the headline ‘Aid rage: stampede for food shipments … as Iraqis scorn US “rescuers”’, the Mirror printed a

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photograph depicting men grasping for boxes of aid, handed out of the back of a truck (Figure 1). Underneath the main large picture, there is another smaller image showing the photographers and cameramen in position on top of the truck in order to obtain the primary photograph.

This extreme high angle places the Iraqis beneath our feet, scrambling for aid as we look down from a position of supreme safety, above the scrimage. This is an example of how a possibly convenient and useful camera positioning for the photographers contributes to a representation of the Iraqis’ plight in which we are cast as their superior saviours. These images are disconcerting: they are hardly positive portrayals of the humanitarian efforts of the coalition and neither do they humanize and dignify the Iraqis who are desperate for food after a full week of war. The *Mirror*’s second image throws the spotlight back onto the cameramen (and they are all men) with their armed marine escort. Also, the *Mirror*’s headline, mentioned above, questions the role of US ‘rescuers’, and presents an alternative point-of-view to the favoured form of representation through both visual and verbal framing choices. The *Independent* offers a similar *mise-en-scène* with the three levels of human activity displayed in a direct-angled shot: hands grasp from the bottom of the frame; boxes are distributed from the truck in the centre; and, above, cameramen capture their favoured shot. The caption reads: ‘“Embedded”
journalists were taken to record the delivery of food aid in south Iraq’ (31 March, p. 10). In iconological traditions, the relative height positions within the image can relate imaginatively to a cultural hierarchy and notions of power (Lutz and Collins, 1993: 204). Photographs such as this, while appearing to enact such differences, may be used to critique the usual god-like perspective offered in other newspapers’ photographs. By photographing the other photographers, this meta-coverage can demystify and expose the one-sided nature of the much-repeated viewpoints offered in other press photographs that do little to humanize Iraqis and even perpetuate colonial-era perceptions. The inclusion of such photographs can also lead us to reflect on our own positions as viewers of the spectacle of war that is presented to us in such prearranged photo-opportunities.

In other portrayals, there are ways in which the imagined audience/reader is perceptually aligned with the conquering soldiers, undoubtedly due in part to the military embedding of photographers. For example, the survey includes two pictures showing Iraqi children giving the signal of ‘thumbs up’ to the camera. The caption in the Guardian reads, ‘Iraqis greet soldiers from the Parachute Regiment at the village of Adday north of Basra yesterday’ (8 April, p. 4, my emphasis). The photographer’s vantage point explicitly overlaps and identifies with that of the ‘soldiers’, which in the newspaper context also overlaps with the reader’s gaze (see Lutz and Collins, 1993: 193). The Mail caption reads, ‘Taste of freedom: young Iraqis celebrate as the allied forces arrive in Umm Qasr’ under the assertive headline, ‘This war IS about good versus evil’ (24 March, p. 14). While it is no surprise that the British newspapers cover this international conflict in a manner that constitutes an imagined community and identity between readers and soldiers from the same country, the constraints of the photographs’ compositional point of view and the verbal captioning should invite keen critical appraisal when they appear to enact a one-sided position of ‘democratic imperialism’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007: 77). It is not a notion of accuracy or truthfulness which is questioned here, but the selective nature and encoding of preferred visual narratives within news discourse, in which ‘we’ are constituted as ‘rescuing’ the Iraqi people.

Refugees escaping to safety: ‘Iraqi guns raked the fleeing crowd’

Another key theme at this time was the un-heroic actions of Iraqi soldiers: firing on civilians, dressing in civilian clothes, even publicly hanging people who welcome coalition troops (‘A teenage girl waved at our troops … she was hanged within the hour’, Sun headline, 30 March, p. 11). The pro-war papers especially reverted to traditional types of refugee imagery to accompany this coverage. Under headlines such as ‘Iraqis fire on desperate crowds fleeing Basra’ (Times, 29 March, p. 5), the selected photographs include identifiable defining features of refugee depictions; with markers of destruction in the background (black smoke and a tank) and recognizably poor women and children walking with bundles of clothing carried by each family member. In a photo by Tony Nicoletti, captioned ‘A woman and her children fleeing Basra to find safety’, a young girl in the foreground looks directly at the photographer, as children and those ‘culturally defined as weak’ are particularly wont to do (Lutz and Collins, 1993: 199). The
reader is positioned here as the possible saviour that they are coming towards, or at least occupying a place where ‘safety’ may exist. In his research into fictional and documentary films, Terence Wright has written that refugee images often ‘evoke a familiar storyline’ which ‘frequently objectifies them, dismissing their historical, cultural and political circumstances’ (2008: 89, 99). As Wright notes, refugee pictures appear to have their roots in Christian iconography from the ‘Expulsion from the Garden of Eden’ to ‘The Flight into Egypt’ (2008: 89): their journey is presented here as moving away from the darkness behind them, toward the light of the coalition-led liberation.

In fact, one Observer caption alludes to the biblical reference: ‘An Iraqi girl carries her baby sister as her family join the exodus from the darkness that has settled over embattled Basra’ (30 March, p. 4: see Figure 2). The wide-angled photograph itself captures movement and distress in its strange off-balance angles and range of action captured in the distance, middle and foreground. The girl already has heavy responsibilities, carrying her younger sibling despite her own obvious youth, the conventional Madonna and Child representation given added pathos.

Two days earlier, the Telegraph had printed an expansive photograph across its front page, under the headline ‘Exodus of fear from Basra’ (28 March, photographer Eddie Mulholland). The centrally placed family come towards the camera in a donkey-cart, with crowds of people walking in the distance behind them and the black smoke and sandstorms adding a strange light quality – this is an epic and timeless portrayal with biblical overtones. The emphasis on children, passive victims and pastoralist or non-existent transport can be construed as contributing to a legitimization of superior western intervention (see Tominic Trivunđa, 2006: 33).

While the refugee images discussed here follow familiar patterns of representation, the accompanying words often deviate from the standard formula utilized for refugee reporting. Unlike the late 20th-century depictions of refugees in the UK press, in which those forced to leave their homes are pictured before the military involvement of the western powers and within a news discourse that constructs a moral imperative to intervene, here the refugees are fleeing cities and towns in which the coalition forces are already fighting. In the pro-war press, the reasoning given for their forced migration is not coalition bombing but the cruel tactics of the ‘diehards’ or the assumed threat of chemical attack.

It may well be the case that the people fleeing Basra reported to the press or military (or their translators) that they had been fired on by Iraqi soldiers, but the consistency of the message, in which coalition firepower is not mentioned, indicates that it is the ‘coalition voice’ rather than ‘refugee voice’ emphasized in the verbal framing. Indeed, this key message was repeatedly voiced by coalition spokespeople and widely reported at the time. Conversely, the lack of funding or planning for the aid effort is rarely mentioned in accompanying headlines or captions; neither is the fact that coalition bombing caused the disruption to water supplies in Basra. The concerns of the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, and the alternative framings they might offer, are largely ignored in all papers but the Guardian and Independent, and even these two newspapers mainly question the effectiveness of the coalition’s efforts rather than present a substantially alternative picturing and framing of the coalition’s humanitarian motivations.
During April 2003, as the coalition soldiers moved toward Baghdad, a recurring theme of coverage was the discovery of suspected sites of torture (‘Saddam’s torture chamber: meat hook in filthy cell’, Sun, 2 April, p. 8). A major ‘torture site’ discovery on 6 April garnered visually led coverage across all seven news titles and is discussed in further detail here.

Guardian photographer, Dan Chung’s photographs from the ‘execution factory’ (Mirror, p. 4) appeared in every newspaper in the sample. All seven newspapers were unanimous in their interpretation: the photographs provided evidence of systematic torture and were placed within the narrative of exposing past brutalities of the regime – only the Independent used the slight distancing of inverted commas in its headline, ‘UK forces discover macabre “mortuary”’. The British soldiers had discovered the warehouse at Zubayr in southern Iraq filled with empty wooden coffins and piles of bodily remains. Given the proven history of the regime’s brutalities and the oral testimonies of people searching for disappeared members of their family, it is not unexpected that this was treated as a mass torture site by the British discoverers and subsequently in the British press. The rows of coffins, photographs of the dead, skulls, and a possible execution site all provided compelling imagery, with British soldiers shown standing among them, posing in a manner similar to tourists at atrocity sites, looking at the camera pensively or at the objects themselves.

However, the next day the Mirror, Guardian and Independent each printed one small photograph again, this time accompanying refutations of the bleak claims made only the day before. The Iranian government had stepped in to claim that the bodies were actually
those of Iranian soldiers from the Iran–Iraq War and should be returned to Iran. Amidst the clamber to unearth either caches of chemical weapons or sites of torture, the coalition (and the press) jumped on this discovery and framed the ‘evidence’ to support their claims for liberation. The singling out of this incident is not intended to downplay the barbarities of the Iraq regime but to demonstrate how the photographs were mistakenly employed as evidence due to what the British military and the accompanying press overwhelmingly wanted them to show. Only by tripping over themselves in their rush to define the meanings of artefacts and photographs did the coverage expose a fissure in the visual performance of the liberation narrative. What the photographs apparently proved one day is refuted 24 hours later. However, it is likely that many readers did not notice the correction, or allow it to interfere with the initial translation of events – the original photo-features were arguably too compelling, gruesome and forceful, and, crucially, they provided a close narrative fit with the dominant framing of humanitarian-led liberation.

**Conclusions**

The above analysis of news photography has attempted to show how the selective and repetitive portrayals of events and people during wartime can contribute to dominant news framings on informational, affective and symbolic levels. In the early stages of the Iraq war, during a period of intense media visualization, the ‘humanitarian motivations’ of the coalition were largely pictured in supportive terms, at least in the high-circulation, pro-war press (*Sun*, *Mail*, *Telegraph*, *Times*), with the fall of the Saddam statue in Baghdad on 9 April 2003 providing the symbolic zenith of the liberation narrative. Across the sample of seven newspapers, 637 photographs were found to invoke the humanitarian motivation; this represented 14.5 percent of the 4389 Iraq-related images printed in the news pages during this 33-day period, depicting aid deliveries, refugees, suspected torture sites and scenes of ‘liberation’. In a sense, the coalition exploited the integral advantages of this framing connected to both the particular historical context and the traditions of press photography itself. The advantages can be summarized as: the consonance and resonance of the existing ‘humanitarian intervention’ rationale and widespread awareness of the Iraqi regime’s past brutalities; the liberal humanist tradition associated with photojournalism; and an interrelated favouring of medium-to-close-up ‘peopled’ photographs in the daily press, rather than that depicting weaponry or destruction.

Not all the photographic encounters depicted the Iraqi people as passive, weak, feminized victims, but then neither did they move far beyond their casting as generalized, unnamed archetypes, beneficiaries of coalition efforts to help them (with water and food deliveries, medical aid and exposure of past crimes). Indeed, Philip Hammond has pointed out the ‘narcissistic’ nature of both the ‘humanitarian military intervention’ and the ‘war on terrorism’ doctrines in that they are ‘primarily concerned with attempting to create an image of purposefulness’ (2007b: 59). The sleight of hand of the humanitarian discourse is that, by and large, it pursues a narrative based on nationalistic concerns (how we are saving them), pictured from the perspective of coalition soldiers, while purporting to promote values of universal humanism which takes on the most ‘uniquely evil’ human rights abusers from around the world (Blair cited in Steele, 2008: 18). In
This sense the humanist traditions of photojournalism are well suited to picturing conflicts planned around the rhetoric of humanitarianism, visualizing the ‘victims’ of aggression and their ‘rescuers’ in easily identifiable and morally attractive (albeit at times clichéd) imagery.

However, this article is also intended to demonstrate the limitations of the humanitarian warfare discourse, illustrated in the instances where the unsteady performance of this visual rhetoric occasionally exposes its contradictions; a ‘breaking’ of the conventional frame (Butler, 2009: 10) that reveals the ways in which visual news frames often re-affirm recognized values and interpretations. The mix of empirical and interpretive methods, quantitative and qualitative approaches, enables the identification of patterns of portrayal within specific news contexts, but also offers an examination of the ways in which cultural and political meanings are negotiated in the construction of news framings. In bringing together the often separate strands of research (in loose terms, photography criticism, political communication and war studies), the present article has attempted to build on the emerging methodologies of visual framing analysis, drawing on a contentious and significant case study of war reporting.

The legitimating function of the humanitarian-led framing of the initial invasion, when media coverage was most intense and supportive, is highly significant for the subsequent internecine strife in Iraq and for other future conflicts: the coalition superficially applied a sheen of humanitarianism rather than planning appropriately for the inevitable consequences of the conflict – the disruption of water supplies and electricity, looting and insecurity, the terror brought upon millions of people. Arguably the later picturing of the conflict in Iraq has contributed to the destabilization of the discourse of humanitarian warfare, particularly in the years since the initial invasion – most notably in the images of prisoner torture from Abu Ghraib, but also British soldiers beating rioters in Amara, ‘trophy’ videos on websites, and Saddam’s own capture and hanging (Matheson and Allan, 2009: 131–65). More recent events in the Middle East (including the ‘from-below’ surge for democratization in the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011), and the fast-evolving potentialities of the ‘new media ecology’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010), further elucidate the tragic misconceptions of the ‘from-above’ neoliberal project undertaken in the name of ‘Iraqi Freedom’. The ‘too many reasons’ approach to war in Iraq in 2003 appears to have shifted towards a hesitancy and incoherence in western powers’ rhetoric regarding the purpose of western intervention in Libya (at the time of writing in 2011). It is possible that the mediated experience of the Iraq war has, for good or bad, ‘killed off the 1990s notion of liberal intervention’ (Freedland, 2010), but we should remain watchful for ill-conceived narratives of ‘liberation’ and ‘rescue’ performed in mainstream press photography of present and future conflicts.

Notes

1. See the Mail (p. 8) or Telegraph (p. 6) on 17 March 2003, the Mirror on 18 March (pp. 12–13) for examples of the Halabja images. Chiming in with the coalition message that Saddam Hussein might launch chemical weapons against his own people or coalition soldiers at any time, the re-presentation of these archive images ramped up the evil nature of the Hussein regime without placing the attacks in a more meaningful historical context.
2. These abbreviations are now used throughout to indicate both daily and Sunday editions of each newspaper, unless otherwise stated. For example, Mail is used for both Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday. The Sunday sister paper for The Guardian is The Observer, and for The Sun, it is the News of the World. See Goddard et al. (2008: 14) for details of newspaper circulation figures and political orientations.

3. The tabloid title, the Mirror, printed the most Iraq-related photographs (over 24 per day on average), while the broadsheet Independent also printed around 23 photos/photo-collages daily. Prominent picturing of the war was not confined to the tabloid titles.

4. A full codebook is available from the author. Photographs were coded using a Microsoft Access database, and also stored digitally in an IMatch image database. This approach, in which the content analysis provides clear measures and values in support for the interpretive moves made in the admittedly more subjective framing stage of analysis, fulfills the criteria of providing an ‘explicit, codified and public’ research process (King et al., 1994: 8; see also Robinson, 2002: 138–9). See Parry (2009, 2010b) for further details on methodological design.

5. The Telegraph printed a cropped version of the photograph (by Gustavo Ferrari) on the same day on p. 3 under the headline ‘Hungry Iraqis scramble for first supplies of food’, and another similar image on p. 6, of people queuing for water.

6. The photographs featured in the Sun (p. 5), Mirror (pp. 4–5), Mail (pp. 4–5), Independent (p. 5), Guardian (p. 5), Times (p. 2), Telegraph (p. 6).

References


Freedland J (2010) Campbell may be a true believer, but Iraq has poisoned our faith in politics. The Guardian, 13 January, p. 29.


