Aljazeera.net and BBC.CO.UK: Media Framing of the Darfur Humanitarian Crisis

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Introduction

As the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide was marked, similar events were unfolding in Sudan. In fact, since February 2003, the Darfur region of western Sudan, Africa, has been in a humanitarian crisis that has generated significant international media coverage. This situation, which has been described as being anything from a low-keyed internal conflict to outright, systematic genocide, has occurred within the context of the overall Sudanese conflict that is currently stabilizing. This study focuses specifically on the crisis within the Darfur region of Sudan.

The Darfur crisis began in February 2003 when a group of civilians rose up against the Sudanese government, citing dissatisfaction with federal governance and policy. Since that time the situation has escalated, with various factions forming and taking action; the Sudanese government has taken a role within the conflict as well. Widespread deaths have occurred as well as the forced displacement of thousands of civilians. The numbers of the dead and the displaced are currently still speculative only as the Sudanese government continues to restrict outsider access to the Darfur region.

The goal of this study was to examine and compare media coverage of the above-described crisis in Darfur. More specifically, the study was designed to look at the framing techniques that different media employed to present the conflict. The authors of this study believe that a framing study of a crisis that may qualify as genocide is important in terms of potential contributions to media studies. It has also been suggested that media framing studies are important because they aid in the understanding of communication effects and can potentially provide suggestions for communication
practitioners (Tankard 2001). However, the authors also believe that this study is important for humanitarian reasons as well due to the fact that media coverage has played a significant role in the unfolding of other similar situations by affecting public response and public will, including but not limited to the genocide that occurred in Rwanda during the 1990s.

One component of this study compared the online news versions of Aljazeera and the BBC; this paper reflects the findings of this aspect of the study. Aljazeera and the BBC were chosen for several reasons. First, both are regional news sources that have international audiences, and both are considered to be leaders in terms of global news coverage. Additionally, they both utilize numerous bureaus and correspondents across the globe for the specific purpose of providing international news coverage. Secondly, Aljazeera and the BBC both originate in regions that are very different in terms of their political, social and economic paradigms, which could potentially result in interesting findings regarding the comparative analysis aspect of this study. And finally, both media provide an online version that is available in English. This factor, which was essential for pragmatic reasons, imposes some limitations to the study due to the possibility that some information may be lost or altered during the translation process.

Literature Review

It has been observed that every humanitarian crisis has its own unique characteristics and contextual circumstances (Wright 2004). While this is accurate, there
are trends within media coverage of crises that can be identified, analyzed and compared. For example, critical assessments of news coverage have revealed interesting patterns of ideological dissemination in the coverage of genocide or possible genocide. Specifically, analysis of the coverage of the near-genocide situation in occupied East Timor from 1975-1980 revealed that the *Globe & Mail* affirmed Canadian ideology through headlines and story content. This study thus confirmed the predictions of the “propaganda model” as defined by Edward S. Harman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Klaehn 2002).

Other trends that can be identified include issue formulation patterns. Communication research has also shown that the media effectively define the issues that become public focus (Wanta 1997). According to framing theory, the media plays an additional role in framing news by making certain elements of the story more salient than others and thus putting a “spin” on these events (Entman 1991). More specifically framing has been defined as “the central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). Framing has also been described as selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman 1993). Specifically regarding news coverage, James Tankard concludes that framing consists of deliberate selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration by the news organization (Tankard 1997).

Other media studies have shown that word choice can prevent or enhance articulation of the stories of victims of internal conflict that is being reported internationally (Aqtash 2004). Helen M. Hintjens focused specifically on the international media coverage of the genocide in Rwanda and found that although the
international media described the conflict as “ethnic” or “tribal” hatred, it was later determined that the killings were in actuality systematic, planned and genocidal (Hintnens 2001). She also concluded that accurate representations of Rwanda history were difficult to find and that instead she often found a “mixture of fact and fiction designed to offer each community retrospective validation of its own interpretation” (2001). She concluded that events were filtered and then interpreted, making it difficult to discover the truth about Rwanda. Similar difficulties are presenting themselves today in regards to international media coverage of the conflict in Darfur, Sudan.

These difficulties are addressed in this framing study, resulting in an intersection of media, audiences, cultural context and political perspective. However, in reflection of the current global discourse on compassion and human suffering, this study will also include the perspective of humanitarian organizations in an attempt to describe the reality of the situation in Darfur and compare this to the coverage provided by Aljazeera and the BBC (Hoijer 2004).

The authors of this study did anticipate finding differences in coverage between Aljazeera.net and the BBC.CO.UK due to the political, social and economic disparities between the media organizations and the targeted audiences. However, it was also acknowledged that these differences might be limited. As Lisbeth Clausen argues, “Processes of globalization through international news mediation cause neither total homogenization nor total heterogenization of world-views” (as cited in Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams and Trammell, 2005).
Research Questions

This study sought to discover the differences between the framing of the situation in Darfur in the online media outlets Aljazeera.net and BBC.CO.UK; correlations with specific stages of the conflict were also included as part of the research objective. More specifically, the following data questions were applied to the articles that dated between January 2003 and February 2005: article size in terms of words; author citation; news agency citation; visual prominence (i.e. number of photos or graphics); type of article; word choice; focal frame; causes cited; blame cited; remedies cited; quoted participants; and emotional intensity. The study also sought to explain why Aljazeera and the BBC may have framed the situation differently.

Research method

Historically many framing studies have been primarily composed of qualitative, textual analyses that were subjective in that the process revolved around the findings of one individual (Tankard 2001). In an attempt to avoid subjectivity but still retain the richness of a textual analysis, this study included both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. This multi-method approach required the utilization of more than one individual for the execution of the quantitative research, which was intended to reduce the possibility of subjectivity within the findings.

After selecting Aljazeera.net and BBC.CO.UK, parameters were set to the study regarding the dates of the articles to be included for analysis. January 1, 2003, was chosen as the earliest parameter due to the fact that it is generally accepted that the conflict in Darfur began in February 2003; therefore, selecting the prior month as the
opening parameter ensured that no pertinent articles were excluded. The closing parameter of February 28, 2005, was selected for pragmatic reasons as the study was being conducted during the Spring of 2005.

These parameters resulted in a population of 169 articles for Aljazeera.net and 398 articles for the BBC.CO.UK. Probability sampling was then employed in order to reduce the size of the population. Specifically the equal probability of selection method was utilized, which is designed so that each member of a population has an equal chance of being selected into the sample (Babbie 2004). This method also prevents conscious and unconscious sampling bias in the selections of the study population. This method was operationalized through the systematic selection of every other article that was posted on the medium’s website. Once the study population was selected, any articles that did not address the situation in Darfur as the primary focus of the article were excluded from the study. This process combined with the probability sampling resulted in a final study population of 76 articles from Aljazeera and 175 articles from the BBC.

At this point ten percent of the articles were coded by the research team according to the formulated code book, and the results were analyzed for coder reliability; the results showed intercoder reliability to be over 90 percent.

Once intercoder reliability was established, the remaining articles were coded for content analysis purposes. These results will be presented in a later section of this paper. Additionally, the qualitative method of textual analysis was also employed by each member of the coding team on an individual basis. These results will also be included in a later section of this paper.
The quantitative component of this paper was empirical in its approach to content analysis. This reduced the subjectivity of the results and thereby increased the reliability of the study. It also resulted in a study that is replicable, which also works toward increasing reliability.

The content analysis portion of this study was accomplished through the identification of framing mechanisms. As cited earlier, these mechanisms for identifying framing included article size in terms of words; author citation; news agency citation; visual prominence; type of article; word choice; focal frame; causes cited; blame cited; remedies cited; quoted participants; and emotional intensity. The focus of this method was not to determine any specific agenda, as has been common in framing studies in the past, but rather to identify how the Darfur situation was portrayed by Aljazeera and the BBC (Tankard 2001). This approach was designed to identify not only what was included but what was excluded as well. The design also included precise definitions for each frame and a systematic procedure for identification. Specifically this was accomplished by making an explicit list of frames; developing lists of key words or other indicators for each frame; using the frames as categories for content analysis; and using human coders to code according to these categories (Tankard 2001).

The qualitative component of this study involved textual analysis. The first step was identifying the genre of text that was under analysis to determine modality. The genre of both Aljazeera and the BBC was identified as news, which is generally interpreted as being strongly related to reality. This served to not only confirm the validity of comparing the coverage of Aljazeera and the BBC with the reports that humanitarian organizations have made regarding Darfur, but to identify modality as well.
News texts typically are high in modality, providing information that can be used in practical terms (i.e. to make a decision about the situation in Darfur) (McKee 2003). This provided context for the execution of the textual analysis.

Next the researcher applied qualitative inquiry to the content of the articles. This was accomplished by asking questions such as “What kinds of things are going on here? What are the forms of this phenomenon? What variations do we find in this phenomenon?” (according to J. Lofland as cited in Lindlof 2002). Thus the inquiry included both empirical and descriptive elements that are similar to interpretivism; it was creative, intuitive, and improvisational as well as systematic in its execution (Lindlof 2002). Logic was combined with attention to detail to make interpretive observations regarding the content of the articles found at Aljazeera.net and BBC.CO.UK. In summary, the textual analysis was a slow process of consensus building (McKee 2003).

Quantitative findings

The statistical data gathered for the purposes of this study revealed more than the differences between Aljazeera and the BBC’s news coverage; the statistics also revealed significant similarities in the way the two media framed the situation.

In terms of similar framing techniques, both Aljazeera and the BBC posted articles of similar length in terms of words per article. Aljazeera averaged 434.13 words per article while the BBC averaged 476.58 words per article; this reflects a difference in article length of less than 10 percent. Aljazeera and the BBC were also similar in terms of the subjects chosen for photos included with the articles; both media chose to show images of refugees more often than any other category of identifiable photo subjects.
The focus of the articles was also similar in both Aljazeera and the BBC. By collapsing categories, both media chose either conduct or conduct/remedy as the focus for the majority of the articles covering Darfur (66 percent for Aljazeera and 63 percent for the BBC). Likewise, both Aljazeera and the BBC made few references to the cause of the conflict (20 percent for Aljazeera and 18 percent for the BBC). However, both media did on occasion blame the Sudanese government as being the cause of the conflict, and they cited this cause at very similar rates: 16 percent for Aljazeera and 14 percent for the BBC (although this was the exception, because as stated earlier, they both focused very little on cause).

The BBC and Aljazeera also showed similarities in who they portrayed as being responsible for ending the conflict. Both cited the combined category most often, indicating that the crisis should be resolved through joint efforts of a variety of forces, potentially including the U.N., the A.U., and both foreign and domestic involvement. However, Aljazeera also frequently cited the Sudan government or the A.U. as being singularly responsible for ending the crisis, which differed from BBC coverage.

In spite of these significant similarities, there were interesting differences in the framing strategies of these two media. One area of difference related to the sources that were directly quoted in the articles; the BBC quoted non-government organizations (NGOs) at twice the rate of Aljazeera (11 percent for the BBC and 22 percent for Aljazeera). Another difference was found in the fact that the BBC included feature articles as well as hard news articles about the situation in Darfur while Aljazeera posted hard news articles only. Visual prominence was also different between the media, with
the BBC including almost 50 percent more visual elements per article than Aljazeera. Blame was also attributed differently, with the BBC blaming the Sudanese government and the militia most frequently, and Aljazeera blaming the rebels most frequently.

Additionally, there were considerable differences in article intensity between Aljazeera and the BBC. Approximately 21 percent of Aljazeera’s articles received a high intensity ranking while over 41 percent of the BBC’s articles received a high intensity ranking. Therefore, the BBC’s high intensity percentage was double that of Aljazeera’s percentage.

Qualitative findings

Although both Aljazeera and the BBC did not cite cause frequently, they did so occasionally and with interesting differences. When Aljazeera.net attributed cause, it occasionally cited years of conflict between nomads and farmers over scarce resources in the western arid region as the primary reason for the conflict. Aljazeera.net also provided details about this dynamic, explaining the land issue was between nomadic tribes who wished to graze their animals on land which local farmers claimed ownership of. The BBC did not provide such details, and when attributing cause it cited generic terms such as racial or ethnicity issues or governmental inequity without providing supporting information.

Another difference found in the framing was that Aljazeera.net did on rare occasion blame the U.K. for the situation in Darfur by mentioning the problems that the former colonial power created in Sudan before relinquishing control. On the other hand, the BBC was more willing to paint a negative picture of the Sudanese government,
relating stories such as the government closing down refugee camps or denying humanitarian groups access to the region.

One of the most significant textual analysis observations involves the differences in the use of the terms “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” by Aljazeera.net and the BBC. When the BBC utilized these terms, they were often descriptive in nature and were often used in quotes of either officials or NGOs. Aljazeera.net, however, frequently used the term to deny or dismiss its validity (i.e. calling it “alleged genocide”), or to categorize it as a “label” or “tag” that had been imposed on Sudan by outsiders. This observation is significant because it has direct ramifications on the quantitative findings regarding article intensity.

In this study, article intensity was determined by the number of times that graphic terms such as “genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” “rape,” “atrocities,” etc. were used in an article. If no such terms were used, the article received a low ranking regarding intensity. If one to two terms were used, the article received a medium ranking. If three or more terms were used, the article received a high intensity ranking. This means that some of the Aljazeera.net articles received a higher intensity ranking than was appropriate because although the terms “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing” may have been included in some articles, they were not necessarily used to heighten the intensity of the coverage; in fact, the terms were sometimes used to lessen the intensity by denying or dismissing the terms. Therefore, the differences in the intensity of the coverage between Aljazeera and the BBC was actually more disparate than the quantitative numbers show.
Reasons behind the findings

The fact that many of the framing elements of the coverage of Darfur were similar between Aljazeera and the BBC is not surprising when the context of the two media organizations is considered.

The BBC

The BBC is a public-sector, taxpayer-funded news corporation based in the U.K. that has been independent for over 80 years. It is recognized internationally as a reliable source of balanced news reporting regarding regional and global issues. However, the BBC has not been known for breaking its own stories. This is due to the culture within the BBC that is dominated by middle managers who are conservative in terms of risk. This situation is compounded by the fact that the BBC is a virtual newsgathering empire with numerous correspondents facing ever-increasing amounts of air-time or web-space to fill; this makes it difficult for correspondents to pursue challenging stories (Liddle 2003). These dynamics have resulted in the BBC failing to break many stories on its own. This weakness was recognized by Richard Sambrook, BBC’s Head of News, who recently made one million pounds available to BBC programs for the funding of original or investigative journalism. This has resulted in the recent generation of original stories and awards for BBC journalists as well (Liddle 2003). However, despite the BBC’s independence, its ties to the government are undeniable as the corporation has been regulated by government-appointed governors during its entire history. Therefore, U.K. policies are an important component of the context within which the BBC operates.
The Conservative party currently wields significant power within the U.K. and has voiced concern that the BBC is biased against the party. This has led to a political dispute that is currently threatening the future independence of the BBC as well as its license fee; this party is also pushing for the privatization of the broadcaster. The Tories also have a free-market inclination, which serves to further pressure the BBC to privatize. While these governmental ties are indisputable, it should be noted that the BBC has in the past freely criticized U.K. policy and officials and continues to do so today, particularly in its coverage of the Iraq war. Some analysts maintain that this friction between the BBC and the U.K. government and party officials is the dominant reason why the future of the BBC is uncertain at this point in time (Liddle 2003).

Regarding internal organization, the BBC remodeled its structure in 1998 to resemble large American media companies; thus scattered employees were relocated in one central location, which had significant impact on the journalistic routines of the organization. Journalists who were formerly dedicated to one outlet were integrated into a range of programs. The philosophy behind the centralization of the BBC is to leverage content as much as possible across a variety of platforms (Economist August 29, 1998).

*Aljazeera*

Aljazeera is organizationally similar to the BBC in significant ways. Like the BBC, Aljazeera aims to be an independent news provider, but also like the BBC, Aljazeera has ties to the government of the national system in which it operates. In fact, Aljazeera’s ties are in some ways stronger than the BBC’s due to the fact that the media company is financially funded by the emir of Qatar. However, Aljazeera prides itself on
its independence, claiming on its website aljazeera.net that it is “free from the shackles of censorship and government control.”

Like the BBC, Aljazeera freely criticizes government officials in its region, including the government of its sponsor, Qatar. Also similar to the BBC, Aljazeera has managed to create notable friction with the governments in its region, effectively “rattling the Arab world” (El-Nawawy 2002).

One of the most important ways in which Aljazeera mirrors the BBC is in its internal structure. According to Aljazeera, this has been an intentional policy since the inception of the company. This is due to the fact that Aljazeera was launched out of the aftermath of a cancelled contract between Saudi-owned Orbit Radio and Television Service and the Arabic television division of the BBC. The dispute, which was based on disagreements over editorial independence, resulted in terminated employment for the BBC’s Arabic TV service editorial staff. Aljazeera was conceived during this tumultuous time and swiftly recruited the newly-unemployed BBC staff members. This group of former BBC employees worked to create the formulation and direction of Aljazeera, causing Aljazeera to inherit the BBC’s “editorial spirit, freedom, and style” (El-Nawawy 2002).

Aljazeera is also influenced by Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the emir of Qatar who sponsors Aljazeera financially and politically. His interest in the free flow of information may be due in part to the fact that the emir was educated in the U.K. and graduated from the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst in 1971” (El-Nawawy 2002).
Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani has introduced ideas of democracy and freedom of information within his emirate, which results in a national system that is, in some ways, similar to the national system in which the BBC operates. However, significant political differences remain between Qatar and the U.K., not the least of which is the fact that the overwhelming majority of Qatar’s citizens follow Islam, the official religion of the state. Qatar’s economy also differs from the U.K.’s in that oil accounts for more than 90 percent of exports and government income (El-Nawawy 2002).

Therefore, despite the many similarities in the organizational elements of Aljazeera.net and the BBC.CO.UK, the national context in which they operate remains influential. It has been observed that by default, the media are influenced by the political, economic and social context of the national system they operate in (de Beer and Merrill 2004).

Summary of similarities

Thus it is clear that for a number of reasons the BBC and Aljazeera operate in ways that are strikingly similar. Their shared commitment to independence, the acknowledged corporate organizational patterning that has occurred, and the fact that many of Aljazeera’s employees are former BBC employees combine together to create two media that share common practices and approaches. Furthermore, because neither medium is funded commercially, both are probably less likely to be limited by commercial influences. These factors most likely explain the considerable similarities in the way these two media framed Darfur in terms of article length, focus (conduct or conduct/remedies), exclusion of cause, an occasional willingness to implicate the
Sudanese government, and citing combined international and national efforts as the best means of ending the crisis.

Summary of differences

However, despite the numerous similarities in the coverage of Darfur, there are important differences that should not be ignored. The quantitative analysis revealed two striking differences that in fact may be correlated. The BBC quotes NGOs at a rate that doubled Aljazeera’s rate. This may be due to the fact that the majority of NGOs originate in the West where they obtain funding through institutions such as the World Bank or the World Council of Churches. More specifically, several NGOs are based in London, including Oxfam, which the BBC frequently used as a source for quotes in the articles included in this study. Furthermore, the BBC included feature articles that were comprised of diary entries of an Oxfam worker who was on the ground in Darfur. This can be read as evidence of the BBC’s confidence in NGO reporting.

Thus the reason for a higher rate of NGO quotes may be due to the simple factor of geographical proximity. These quotes then served to increase the intensity rating of the BBC articles because the majority of the NGOs are describing the Darfur situation as continued violations of human rights, frequently using graphic terms such as atrocity, rape, killing, etc. Geographical proximity also may have resulted in BBC journalists having easier access to NGO data, thus serving to increase the intensity of their articles. Also the factor of relationships must not be overlooked; geographical proximity of the NGOs and the BBC journalists has likely resulted in the fostering of professional
relationships that has resulted in the BBC journalists being more confident in the conclusions of the NGOs regarding the situation in Darfur.

The qualitative analysis revealed other differences. For example, this analysis pointed out that Aljazeera was more likely to cite disputes over land and difficulties between the intersection of nomads and farmers as a reason for the cause of the dispute. This may be caused by geographic proximity as well due to the fact that the Aljazeera staff includes more people who are intimately familiar with the history and internal challenges that are unique to the Middle East. The BBC may have used only generic terms to explain the cause simply because they lack the familiarity with the regional culture that Aljazeera employees have.

Another difference that the textual analysis revealed was that Aljazeera did (although rarely) blame the U.K.’s former policies as a former colonial power in Sudan as being a part of the cause of the conflict. This difference results for obvious reasons: countries on the African continent have struggled with the aftermath of culturally-insensitive policies or decisions that the former colonial power established. Aljazeera employees are more likely to be familiar with these struggles and therefore include them in their analysis. Likewise, the BBC criticized the Sudanese government in terms that were stronger than Aljazeera’s terms. This may reflect a former colonial power doubting the ability of the replacement state to govern well.

Finally, as discussed earlier, the BBC was more likely to use the term “genocide” to describe the situation whereas Aljazeera was more likely to use the term as an imposed label on the conflict or to refute the validity of the term in the Darfur context. Again the BBC may have used the term more frequently due to the access its journalists had to
NGO employees and data. Aljazeera may have avoided the term due to self-protectionism. However, this seems inconsistent with historical Aljazeera coverage that has not avoided criticizing Middle Eastern governments.

The reality

According to the consensus of the majority of the website postings of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam, the situation in Darfur reflects a continuation of human rights abuses. It is estimated that two million people are living in refugee camps after having been driven from their homes by violence or the threat of violence. It is also estimated that approximately 70,000 people have lost their lives directly due to the violence; however, some NGOs are reporting that analysts are cautioning that the number may be four or five times larger. Additionally it is estimated that 180,000 people have died from hunger or disease caused by the conflict.

The NGOs are uniformly reporting that the crisis began in the context of a military campaign against two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. They assert that Sudanese government forces and government-backed militias have committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region. They report that these forces have systematically targeted civilian communities, killing, looting, raping, forcibly displacing villagers and destroying villages. They also note that the opposing force, the rebels, have abducted civilians, attacked government institutions and been responsible for the death and injuries of civilians. They also report that the Sudanese government is preventing humanitarian
organizations from having access to the region and that only 10 percent of the aid has been delivered to the refugees.

Limitations and future research

This study has a number of limitations. As indicated earlier, one of the limits is due to the fact that one of the online news sources that was analyzed, Aljazeera.net, is a reflection of a translation into English and therefore may not adequately represent the original Arabic text.

The study was also limited due to the fact that the crisis is still unresolved and access to the area remains difficult, which prevents a definitive conclusion of genocide and makes definitive numbers in terms of the displaced and the dead impossible at this time.

Furthermore, the conclusions of the textual analysis component of this study are subjective and speculative, undeniably altered by the researcher’s personal perspectives in spite of steps taken to counter such inherent biases.

Regarding future study, it may be helpful to replicate another study after the Darfur crisis has been resolved in order to analyze the coverage of the event as a whole rather than as a part. It might also be helpful to analyze the timeline of the coverage to see if any future patterns emerge as significant trends have not yet materialized.

It might also be fruitful to investigate the connection between genocide and national debt. According to the IMF’s website, imf.org, Sudan is part of a grouping of heavily indebted poor countries. According to World Bank figures, Sudan’s total debt is $16.9 billion (2,131 percent of the country’s export earnings). The burden of unpayable
debt tends to take money from health, education and other social sectors. This financial pressure may be resulting in national instability, elevated internal conflict, and increased occurrences of genocide.
References


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