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# The impact of the media on the War of Afghanistan

From a Western and Middle Eastern  
perspective

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## **Resumen**

El objetivo principal de este trabajo de investigación es evaluar el impacto que tienen los medios de comunicación en moldear la opinión y la manera en la que las personas perciben los acontecimientos internacionales. Más específicamente la manera en la que los gobiernos con la ayuda de los medios de comunicación fueron capaces de influenciar la percepción de los ciudadanos en el conflicto de Afganistán de una manera favorable a sus intereses.

**Palabras clave:** Afganistán, Guerra Estados Unidos, medios de comunicación, 11S, Talibán, terrorismo.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this research paper is to understand the way in which the media shapes people's understanding and opinions of international events. But more specifically the way in which the governments with the help of media outlets, were able to shape people's perceptions on the conflict of Afghanistan in a way which was favourable to their interests.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, US-led war, media outlets, 9/11, Taliban, terrorism.

## 1. Introduction

The country of Afghanistan is located at the heart of Central and Southern Asia. Among its neighbouring countries we find Iran and Pakistan to the south, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north (Salvat, 2003). In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Afghanistan became the hub of contact between different cultures, such as the Persian and the Kushan empire, and was home to beliefs such as Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism (Salvat, 2003). It was not until 900 C.E. that most of the population became Muslim (Azad, 2017). On a more recent note, the history of the country of Afghanistan experienced great change under imperial British and tzarist Russian intervention in 1837, in what is known as the ‘Great Game’ (Salvat, 2003). In the 19th century, Russia and British India established a buffer state in the country, which by adopting McLachlan’s definition could be understood as ‘a neutral state lying between two others, serving to render less possible hostilities between them’ (McLachlan, 2007) which ended in 1947. However, even if the control of the powers came to an end, the sphere of influence lived on. The Soviet intervention in the country entailed providing development assistance so that Afghanistan remained economically independent from the West (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012), and as a way to exploit its natural resources, as well as a means to target the hearts and minds of the Afghan population (Montgomery & Rondinelli, 2007) (Egnell, 2010). Furthermore, it was only during the 1960s and 1970s that the U.S. started providing aid-assistance, counterbalancing the pattern of Afghan-Soviet bilateral co-operation (McLachlan, 2007).

On Christmas Eve 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). This was a remarkable turning point in history that not only had an impact on the history of the Asian country, as the consequences still persist to the present day (McLachlan, 2007), but it also influenced the rest of the 20th century and the 21st century (Knappenberger, 2021). The social and land reforms introduced by the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) after they rose to power in 1987 were strongly rejected by the Afghan population, specially by the devout Muslims tribal leaders who opted for an arms struggle against the reforms (Smith, 2013). Thus, in view of the deteriorating situation of the Afghan communist government, the Soviet Union decided to intervene militarily in December of 1979 and imposed a new government (Salvat, 2003). President Carter described this invasion as ‘the gravest threat to world peace since the Second World War’ (Smith, 2013) (Getler, 1980). The insurgency against the Soviet

regime was led by student resistance groups under the *mujahideen* name, also referred to as “holy warriors” (Britannica, 2022), who were backed by the governments in Pakistan and the United States (Salvat, 2003). Both Britain and the United States on the one hand provided military training and arm supplies to combat the Soviet communists (Coll, 2005) (Jahn, 2020), and on the other hand, took this situation as an opportunity to derive propaganda in third-world countries displaying the ‘cynical imperial behaviour’ of the Soviets (Mallaby, 1979)<sup>1</sup> (Smith, 2013). Finally, after the Geneva Accord, the Soviet Army withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, and so did the Western troops (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). What they left behind was a country with no political settlement, which consequently quickly descended into civil war that facilitated the emergence of the Islamist extremist group, the Taliban (Salvat, 2003). By definition, Taliban means “students” in Pashto, the language spoken by the Pashtun people who live in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, as well as in Western Pakistan (Brown, 2019). They were pious Muslims that aimed to create an Islamic state. Moreover, with the support of Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan, the Taliban took control of the power and established a theocratic regime, imposing an extreme interpretation of the Islamic Law, *Sharia* (Salvat, 2003). This form of Islamic fundamentalism, trampled on women’s rights, allowed beatings and public executions to become events in everyday life and modern pleasures like were banned (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007).

Nevertheless, it was not until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 that it became clear to Western forces that religious motivations were as powerful a tool as any to go to war (Knappenberger, 2021). And thus, Western powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom sent troops and warships to protect Saudi Arabia from Hussein’s desire to expand its control over the Arabian Peninsula, but most importantly over the world’s oil supplies (Knappenberger, 2021). The Western intervention could be considered to be a wake-up call for religious extremists such as Osama Bin Laden, who saw the USA’s involvement in Kuwait as no different than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Knappenberger, 2021). Consequently, urging ‘Muslims to kill Americans and Britons for the military strikes their countries carried out against Iraq’, as it is ‘the “duty of Muslims to confront, fight and kill” Britons and Americans’ (BinLaden, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives (TNA): FCO 37/2132: minute by Christopher Mallaby, 8 November 1979.

The course of terrorism, as it was known until the time, changed in 1993 when the parking of the World Trade Centre was bombed (Knappenberger, 2021). What was different about this attack, was the fact that it was designed to harm people on a larger scale to what had been seen before. Ramzi Yousef, the instigator behind the bombing in the parking lot of the World Trade Centre, aiming however to bring down the whole building, explicitly said 'if I had had more money, the World Trade Centre would no longer be standing' (Knappenberger, 2021). Moreover, according to the declassified Daily Brief received by the former American President, George W. Bush, in August 2001 it had been known that since 1997 Bin Laden had the intention of conducting a terrorist attack in the USA (CIA, 2001). In fact, in interviews Bin Laden had publicly celebrated Ramzi Yousef's attempt to destroy the World Trade Centre and had encouraged his acolytes to 'bring the fighting to America' (CIA, 2001).

It was not until the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the month of September of 2001 that the followers of Osama Bin Laden executed numerous attacks targeting the symbols of American power: the Pentagon which represented the military might, and the Twin Towers that represented the economic power of the U.S. (Knappenberger, 2021). 9/11, as the day became known, went down in history as one of the most consequential terrorist attacks to have ever taken place (Knappenberger, 2021). The attacks ended the lives of 2,997 people, out of which only 19 were hijackers (Finnis, 2021). September 11 changed the world, this day was a turning point in the lives of many people, not only those affected by the losses of 9/11, but also for the whole of the American nation who saw the foundations of their security system, their peace as well as the foundations of American democracy shattered into pieces. Evidence gathered by the United States demonstrated how the attack had been carried out by al Qaeda, the terrorist group led by Bin Laden, and that the planning of the attack had only been made possible because the Taliban in Afghanistan had provided a safe haven for al Qaeda (Knappenberger, 2021). In response to the Taliban's refusal of extraditing Osama Bin Laden, the United States political response was quick: America was going to war. And as former NY Senator Hillary Clinton stated, 'Not only those who harbour terrorists but those who in anyway, provided any aid or comfort whatsoever (to the terrorists that carried out the attack), will now face the wrath of our country' (Knappenberger, 2021). Consequently, 25 days later the United States with the support of NATO and over 40 countries entered Afghanistan as a form of retaliation that lasted for 20 years (Connah, 2021). The support from NATO came through as following Article Five entails that an attack against the United States, entails an attack against all the allies (NATO, 2022).

And so, America's stance on Afghanistan shifted from an observer country with little to no intervention to authorising the use of force against those responsible for attacking the United States. The extensive measures to combat terrorism entailed air strikes on al Qaeda and the Taliban, invading the Afghan nation, spying on U.S. citizens without a court order and the creation of a detention camp in Guantanamo Bay which was used to house terrorists suspected of carrying out the September 11 attacks (CFR, 2022). It was in that moment, that a badly shaken nation came together in a spirit of sadness and patriotism to combat the threat of terrorism at home (Hartig & Doherty, 2021).

## 2. Motivations and reasons for research

The fundamental reason behind this research paper is to understand the impact media news stories have in shaping the way citizens perceive the world around them. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to show how the storytelling and the framing techniques of media help shape and influence many international events. The writer believes it is her duty to understand the complexity of the world from different perspectives in order to fully inform herself on. The writer hypothesizes that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was supported by citizens in Western countries, due to the successful backing of the media, as the media is a tool used by governments to shape and to obtain civilian support on their policy decisions. The dissertation will focus on the story telling and framing used to justify America's longest war from the perspective of two different regions, it will also analyse the role journalism plays in conflict and diplomacy. Moreover, the author also hypothesizes that religion, specifically the differences between the Christian and Muslim rite, played an important role in the narrative used by news agencies to justify the invasion of Afghanistan.

For this final project, the author will centre her attention on print media such as The New York Times or The Guardian Newspaper and news magazines as the primary sources of information, placing a special emphasis on the 9/11 attacks and the years that followed the event. The research paper will focus on how the events that took place after 9/11 were framed and subsequently it will talk about the framing and storytelling to justify the military intervention of Afghanistan. The author will consequently use the help of international media from countries such as the United Kingdom but specially of the United States to portray the Western point of view of the conflict. On the other hand, to exemplify the situation in Afghanistan, I will depict the media from Middle Eastern countries such as Afghanistan or Pakistan to portray their perspective on the matter.

A very interest and eye-opening book, which accurately reflects the reality of Afghanistan is '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' by Khalid Hosseini. This book narrates the Afghan conflict from the perspective of two women who were brought together by loss and war (Hosseini, 2007). Not only is this book eye opening to a reality where women were constantly subjugated to the male sex, but most importantly, the novel introduced me to



the mercenary Taliban group and the ways in which politics and religion heavily shaped their lives.

And once again, the story was repeated: the Western troops fled the country in the summer of 2021, with the subsequent rise to power of the Islamist militia. New stories were flooded with information of the way the Taliban had entered the country and the impact their governance would have on the country and its citizens. And thus, after a few weeks of providing detailed information on the matter, the war had faded from the headlines and the media agencies changed their interests to another topic, leaving behind and forgetting what seemed like a country that was crumbling into pieces. It is because of this subsequent lack of information that understanding why the media only portrays information of countries on certain occasions and comprehend what is the reasoning behind the subsequent fading of headlines, is presented as a relevant and meaningful topic to be analysed.

### 3. Theoretical framework

*“Humans are the only species that lives in a world erected by the stories they tell. The storytelling process used to be handcrafted, homemade, and community inspired. Now it is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process” (Gerbner G. , 1998).*

The role the media has in shaping the conceptions and opinions of the public is a theme that has been of great interest to scholars, and consequently several theories on the matter have been developed.

#### 3.1 Cultivation Theory

The first theory to be introduced is known as ‘Cultivation Theory’ (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). The model supports the idea that the mainstream media (such as television) is the main source from which the average citizen obtains information on world events. In fact, the theory takes into account the role television has in society. Since the 1950s and 1960s, from a young age children are brought up watching TV. Even before they can read or have formed opinions on what they liked and did not, they are exposed to television (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). And thus, popular media is “primarily responsible for our perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of day-to-day norms and reality” (Infante, A., & Womack, 1997). In addition, in his book, George Gerbner even equated television to being a “key member of the family, the one who tells the most stories most of the time” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, p.14). It could be hypothesised therefore, that the more people are exposed to television, the more their opinions will reflect the dominant narrative of the television network.

This theory focuses mostly on a highly sociocultural phenomenon (television), as it was developed at a time where TV was the dominant storytelling medium. Therefore, the notion can not be applicable to newspaper agencies (Shrum, 2017). Additionally, Gerbner underlined television as “the dominant socializing force in America”, as television has been the media network that is most accessible and available than any other (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Watching television does not require any skills, like using a computer or reading a newspaper does. In addition, it does not entail an added cost like going to the cinema or buying a magazine does. Finally, it runs almost continuously and can be watched from the comfort of one’s home (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). In order to develop ‘Cultivation Theory’, scholars analysed the structure of the messages broadcasted in

television and established that even if it was not apparent to the eye, the topics covered were far from diverse. In fact, violence was disproportionately enacted on the elder, children and minorities (Shrum, 2017), which can lead to a second hypothesis; that the victimization of these three groups is not only a mechanism that appeals to the emotions, but it is also a manner in which to create empathy from viewers. In addition, the impact of television coverage would have double its effect if the viewer’s life experiences resonate with the events broadcasted (Shrum, 2017).

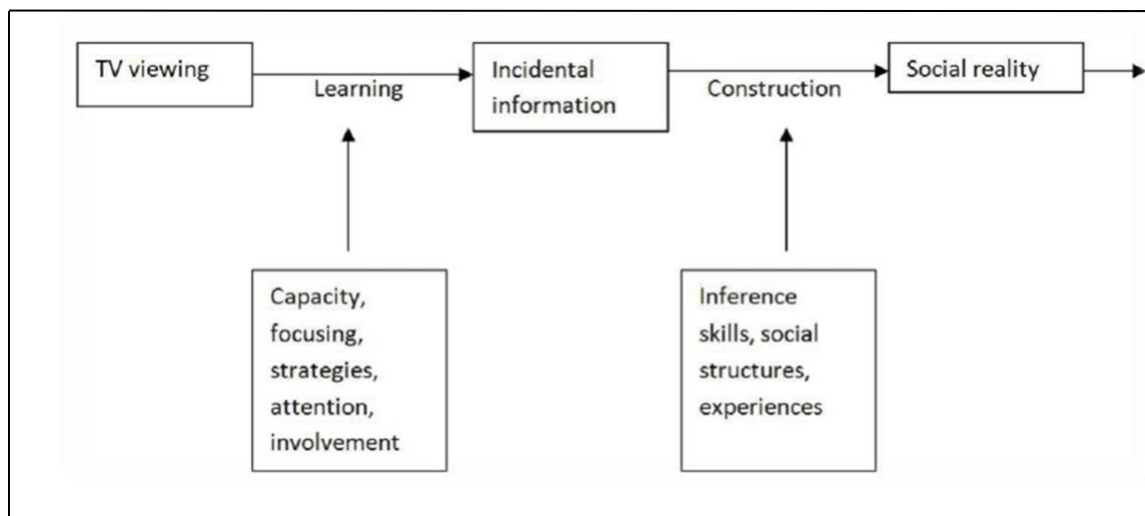


Figure 1: Cultivation Theory Overview, Hawkins and Pingree (1982)

### 3.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Another theory that explains the influence of the media is the ‘Agenda-Setting Theory’, that was created by scholars Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs in 1972 (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). This principle defends the idea that news outlets decide what gets reported and what does not, as well as how many times an event is mentioned, therefore, they have an overarching impact on determining and influencing what the reader or viewer might think is important (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This idea is summarized by Bernard Cohen, “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963). If an event is covered with a lot of frequency, the audience will regard the issue as more important than others, this cognitive process is known as “accessibility” (Falcone, 2018). The principle of accessibility thus establishes the idea that the regularity in which a phenomenon is covered, the bigger the presence the event will have in the imaginary of the audience, as well as in their memories. The ‘Agenda-Setting Theory’ could also be linked

to the notion that the main goal of newspaper agencies is to sell as many paper or virtual copies to ensure economic success. And thus, as some events are more appealing to the masses, they will report exhilarating topics on a broader scale, regardless of their importance or relevance in the international arena. Moreover, media agencies tend to be partly owned by very powerful figures, such would be the case of *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Post*, which are all owned by the media mogul Rupert Murdoch (Investopedia, 2021). This entails, that the political and economic agendas of a small number of owners will impact the way the stories are being covered, either by supressing evidence, sowing endless confusion or even by spreading misinformation (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Governmental Agenda can be linked to the Agenda-Setting Theory. John W. Kingdon defines it as “the list of subjects and problems to which government officials, and people outside of government, but who are closely connected to those in power, are paying some serious attention to at any given time” (Kingdon J. W., 1984). During times of crisis, journalist tend to cite government officials in foreign policy stories as they are considered the more accurate sources, and thus government officials can control how the issue is initially framed to the public.

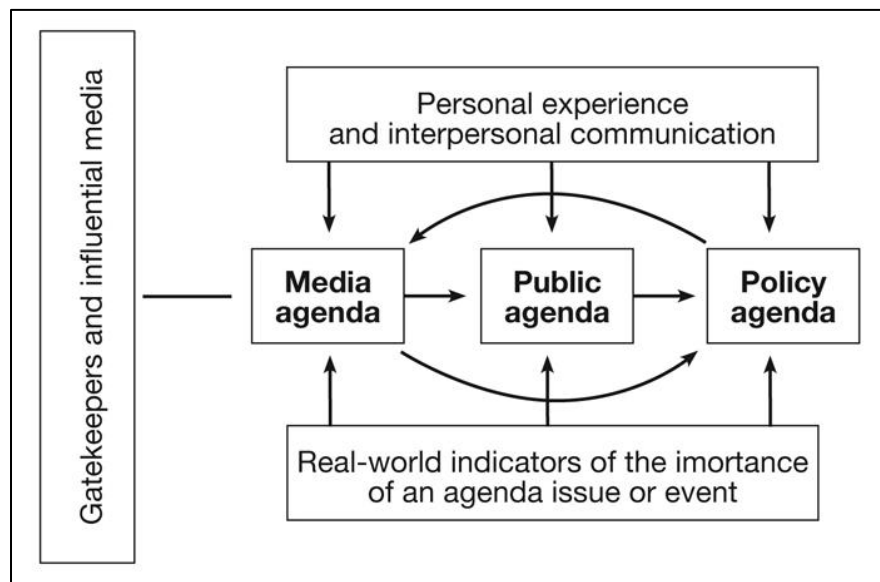


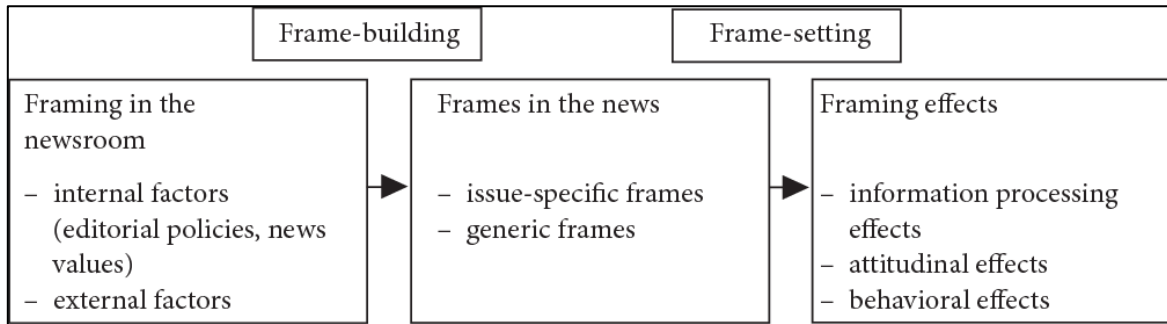
Figure 2: Agenda-Setting Theory, Bradley Wilson (2022)

### 3.3 Framing Theory

The third theory which is of great importance to this research paper is the 'Framing Theory' which was first postulated in 1972 by Gregory Bateson (Arowolo, 2017). It creates a connection with the 'Agenda-Setting Theory' in the way that it focuses on the manner in which media outlets draw the public's eye to certain events, consequently creating a field of meaning (Arowolo, 2017). Frames are both mental images, which could be understood as the picture people have in their heads of a certain event, and social norms that are entrenched in discourses, moral judgements or cultural norms (Brown, 2019). They allow for readers to quickly interpret, categorize and evaluate issues without having to do construct an elaborate analysis (Autesserre, 2009). 'Framing Theory' supports the idea that the way a piece of news is presented to the audience ("the frame") influences the opinions people make towards that piece of information and how it is processed (Arowolo, 2017). Moreover, the model suggests that frames are willingly designed by reporters, journalists, and editors to link stories to a bigger picture and to establish what could be understood as the 'common sense' (Arowolo, 2017). As Entman states, "these links are difficult to fully detect, because many of the framing devices can appear as 'natural' unremarkable choices of words or images" (Entman, 1991, p. 6) and thus, narratives should be compared in order to fully identify the bigger picture.

In addition, Entman distinguishes five different ways in which news stories are framed: conflict, personalism, consequence, morality and responsibility (Entman, 1991). For instance, in the context of 9/11 personalism frame is used to portray the thousands of testimonies of those who lost loved ones in the attacks, as well as the concern of the political Establishment towards the chaos and the multiple threats the U.S. was undergoing. In this essay, the frame of conflict was used to show two contrasting sides of the aftermath of September 11: those responsible and those who suffered the consequences of the attacks. Finally, responsibility used by the media is linked to the idea that the only solution to counterbalancing the 9/11 attacks was 'the war on terror'.

In addition, at times of war or conflict, the U.S. tends to use a security frame to create a cultural logic to the American public. After 9/11 and during 'the war of terror', the security frame was used to justify the armed conflict, where the cause was terrorism, the moral conclusion was to act against the perpetrators of evil and the only possible remedy was to go to war (Brown, 2019). Creating a dichotomous frame were the only solution to recover peace in the United States was to go to war.



*Figure 3: News Framing Theory, Vreese, C.H. (2005)*

## 4 State of play

### The aftermath of 9/11

September 11, 2001 was a tragic day for many. The date marks a turning point in history, as it was the day when the United States left its isolationism tactic in order to pursue a highly international agenda (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). Moreover, after 9/11 it became evident that the United States had created a false sense of security, as hijackings and terrorism had been taking place in the Western world since the 1990s (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). Following Goldstein's and Pevehouse's definition, terrorism can be described as 'a calculated use of violence to create media attention, it targets civilians deliberately and indiscriminately and thus amplifying its psychological effect on large populations' (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007).

During the days that followed the 9/11 attacks, fear, sorrow, grief and anger were the common sentiments shared by the majority of the population in the United States. Thus, it did not come as a surprise when George W. Bush declared "war on terrorism" (Knappenberger, 2021), a path towards revenge that would last for over twenty years. The United States aimed to exert its power over Afghanistan in order to disrupt the Taliban rule, as they had sheltered and supported the terrorist network, al Qaeda (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). George W. Bush's response to the 2001 terrorist attacks quickly obtained the support of other international players, as they all shared the conviction that the Taliban regime posed a threat to international stability (Paterson, 2010). Even Russia, with its longlisting rivalry against the U.S., showed solidarity to the cause (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). It provided information from its Intelligence Department to the U.S. forces, it supported the westerner-influenced Northern Alliance and allowed for the use of its airbases in post-Soviet Central Asian Republics by the United States and other coalition forces (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). The bombings in Afghanistan started on the 7th of October 2001 and they were successful in ousting the Taliban regime from Kabul and destroying the pillars of al Qaeda (Salvat, 2003). Nevertheless, it was not until the 13th of November of 2001 that the Northern Alliance (a military group that fought against the Taliban regime and was backed by the U.S., Israel or India, among other states) gained control of the capital. Finally, in December 2001, an interim government backed by the

Western powers, was established in Afghanistan. It was chaired by Hamid Karzai (Brown, 2019).

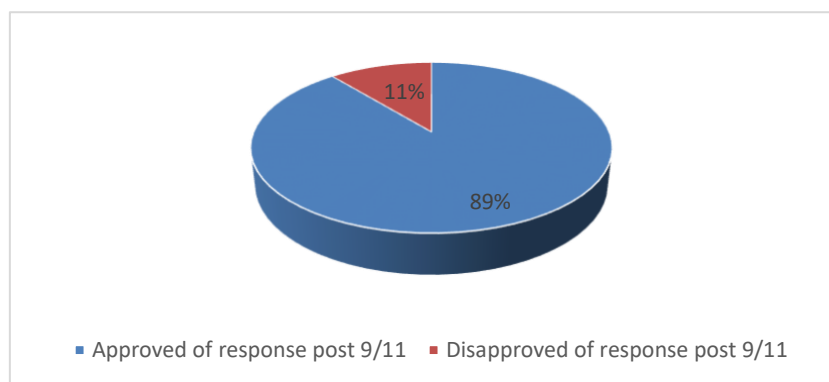
As a follow up to the events that were taking place, journalists from both sides of the conflict were writing articles on the situation. It is important to keep in mind that when journalists and editors cover international events, they strive for impartiality, however they cannot always do so in an unbiased and objective way (Brown, 2019). According to media sociologist, Michael Schudson, it is under three circumstances that reporters are inclined to abandon neutral broadcasting in domestic news: tragedy, public anger and great threat, all of which were present during and in the aftermath of 9/11 (Schudson, 2003).

#### 4.1 The Western perspective

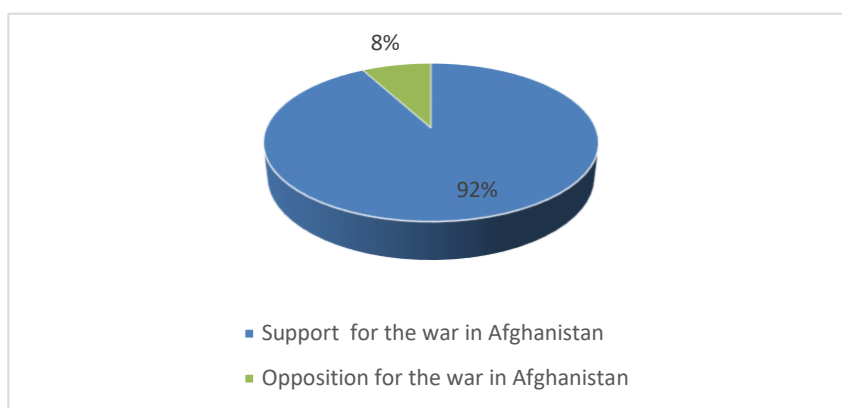
The media in the Western World, but especially in the United States follows an antagonistic discourse between those who are ‘good’ (the Western powers, but more particularly the United States political Establishment), and those who are framed as ‘evil’ (foreign powers, normally those who oppose to democratic regimes, or those who do not share the same values as America does, namely what would then be categorized as the ‘axis of evil’). And thus following the 9/11 catastrophe, the evil from where all the bad emanated were those found in Afghanistan: the Taliban and al Qaeda. This tactic was made evident roughly 9 days after the attacks, on September 20, 2001, when Bush presented a dichotomous discourse “You are either with *us*, or you are with *the terrorists*” (Bush G. W., 2001). Furthermore, Scholar Herbert Gans uncovered that U.S. news are characterized for putting the United States at the centre of the world and thus focusing mainly on their national interests, which are firmly influenced by the White House (Gans, 2001). Likewise, another study also unveiled that U.S. foreign news coverage has helped shape the public’s perceptions of foreign affairs and the image they have of countries overseas (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Moreover, even former President Barack Obama admitted in 2016 that because most foreign correspondents are stationed in Washington D.C. and not in foreign bureaus, what they are reporting tends to be shaped by the government’s policies (Samuels, 2016). This state made by the former President clearly demonstrates the huge impact Agenda Setting in news agencies and consequently in shaping the world’s perception to the public.



On September 11, 2001, journalists acted as war correspondents reporting as the attacks were taking place (Brown, 2019). They performed as a conduit between the people and the events, broadcasting live on active trauma and on the threats of more incidents occurring (Brown, 2019). The reporters became the main source of information for which Americans and the world could make sense of the devastation that was happening. The day after the attacks, newspapers were flooded with information of the events, in fact, 9/11 appeared as the cover story of 190 newspapers in the U.S. (Grusin & Utt, 2005). However, reporting on the 2001 attacks was not one isolated event, because since then, terrorism subsequently became part of U.S. news, skyrocketing to 656 percent from September 2001 to September 2002 (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). As people became more aware and thus more informed on terrorism, it became the perfect scenario for George W. Bush to declare ‘war on terrorism’. His discourse carried a paternalistic frame as he was providing the answer people were long hoping for: safety and revenge. Nevertheless, what acts as one person’s mechanism towards freedom is also another’s mechanism towards experiencing war and threat (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). A poll carried out by Gallup on November 16, 2001, found that 89 percent of American citizens favoured the President’s response after 9/11 (Newport, 2001). Moreover, the same survey also confirmed that 92 percent of U.S. citizens were in favour of the war (Newport, 2001). Therefore, it can be concluded that in fact, the narrative used by the Bush administration with the help of media outlets was successful in legitimising ‘the war on terror’.



*Figure 4: Approval rate of the response after 9/11 in 2001. Source: Own compilation*



*Figure 5: Public perception towards the war in Afghanistan in 2001. Source: Own compilation*

In order to further amplify their discourse that going to war was the only solution, the Bush Administration advocated for two main narratives: one that was democratic and a second one that was humanitarian.

*a. The Democratic Narrative*

During times of crisis, reporters become co-dependent on the information they receive from the executive branch, and thus, in the context of the 9/11 attacks, media amplified the U.S. government's narrative, which consequently led to selling the policies of the government (Brown, 2019). In order to construct an image of the world to the American population, which reinforced the American worldview, above all, they emphasized on the security and humanitarian frame (Brown, 2019). The discourse followed by George W. Bush after September 11, was concentrated around the idea that through war in Afghanistan, he would be fighting towards 'democracy, human rights and self-determination' abroad (Bush G. W., 2013). Furthermore, in order to appeal to the emotions of the U.S. population and consequently legitimize 'the war of terror', Bush constantly stated in the speeches he gave the word 'terror', invoking the memory of the September 11 attacks (DiMaggio, 2015). According to the American journalist Sidney Blumenthal, on a discourse carried out by the former president on March 20, 2006 in Cleveland, he mentioned the word 'terror' at least 54 times (DiMaggio, 2015) as a way to reinforce his message, as well as to 'arouse the public passions and hopes' (Kingdon J. , 2002).

### *b. The Humanitarian Narrative*

In regards to the humanitarian frame used by Bush to justify the US-led war, he projected the military intervention as the way to free the Afghan people from the ‘abhorrent values of the Taliban’ (Brown, 2019), which were largely frowned upon by the American population, thus as a way to ensure a better life and a better future to the Asian population (Brown, 2019). The narrative used by the Bush administration focused on the Taliban policies which denied girls access to education, women’s access to jobs outside the household or healthcare (Berry, 2003). In fact, Bush’s wife, Laura Bush, took the national dislike towards the Taliban repressive gender politics as an opportunity to deliver a national radio message. It was in the weekly radio address normally delivered by President Bush, where she tried to raise awareness on the situation that women were experiencing as a consequence of the “misogynist and incredibly repressive Taliban regime” (Elsayed, 2016). She explained how girls were forced out of school and women were prohibited from leaving the house unaccompanied of male presence unless they wanted to get beaten (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2007). She mentioned the way in which women had increasingly become victims of gang rapes and how forced underage marriages had become more common (Berry, 2003). Women were showcased as ‘helpless victims’ in the hands of the fundamentalist rule (Elsayed, 2016). And thus, in order to drum up support, the war took a feminist narrative "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Bush L. , 2001). Consequently, this feminist approach can be linked to the morality frame proposed by Entman, in the way that the Western public which already saw the female sex as equal, should not accept the fact that women in other parts of the world were unfairly treated as second class citizens.

## **4.2 The Middle Eastern perspective**

When the Taliban rose to power, they enacted the Sharia Law, where music was banned, and the few television channels that emerged up until 1996 disappeared (Brown, 2019). Radio on the other hand, became controlled by the Taliban and the state-run radio was renamed Radio Shariat (consequently creating a connection with the Sharia Law). It broadcasted regular recitations of the Holy Koran as well as it informed on the daily government activities carried out by the Taliban (Brown, 2019). Moreover, it also included a ban on any kind of reportage that would offend Islam or where the portrayed subjects would dishonour the Muslim religion or weaken the army, and consequently if any reporter offended the above, they would be suspended and maybe even be persecuted (Widiastuti

& Sulaiman, 2003). When the 9/11 attacks took place, the Afghan people knew little about what had happened. While a small minority listened to BBC radio or Voice of America and thus were informed, the majority of the population which turned on the radio in service of the Taliban, received only subtle explanations of the events (Bearak, 2001). Once the events became more notorious, the Taliban Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil organized a press conference where he rejected the idea that neither the Taliban or Bin Laden had the power to execute such a complex attack "We don't foresee an attack against us because there is no reason for it" (Bearak, 2001). Less than a month after that statement, the Taliban regime had fallen in the hands of the United States and its NATO partners. Even when they were ousted from Afghanistan, the Taliban continued airing on Radio Shariat throughout the months of October and early November. Subsequently, on 13 November 2001, Radio Shariat went back to its original name, Radio Television Afghanistan (Brown, 2019). Not only did it broadcast verses from the Koran, but for the first time in five years it also retransmitted music, and women were allowed back in the radio station. Additionally, the language spoken in the radio switched from the Pashto, the preferred language of the Taliban, to that favoured by the Northern Alliance, Dari (Brown, 2019).

The arrival of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan opened a new scenario for the media space in the country. The U.S. news professionals helped guide as well as set the agenda for the Afghan media to follow, and thus, according to Freedom House press since 2001 and until 2021, Afghan news media became technically free (Brown, 2019). Not only in the political sphere, but in order to create a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century Afghanistan, transitional democracy in the media was necessary (Brown, 2019). Hence in the Constitution freedom of speech was introduced, public discourse was encouraged, and censorship was prohibited thus guaranteeing citizens the right to obtain information. Nonetheless, the first democratically elected president expelled an American journalist for his reporting (Brown, 2019). Even if at first it was very difficult for journalists in Afghanistan to move away from the social tradition of having an authoritarian style of reportage, as years went by, the press started adopting more Western-like form of reportage which encouraged freedom of speech in all its forms.

Moreover, along with providing aid to modernize the media, contract hospitals, schools and roads, as well as establish an arm force, once the Taliban were ousted from Afghanistan, the Bush administration created a Western-like central government. In 2001, there was an

increasing global support towards democratizing states, accordingly Bush embraced the idea that imposing democracy in Afghanistan would help counter terrorism in the region (Connah, 2021). George W. Bush promised to bring ‘true peace in the region’, because as he stated: “Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government” (Crawford, 2021). Consequently, Hamid Karzai was installed as the President of the country in 2001. He was an ethnic Pashtun that was pro-Western, which was seen by the Americans as an olive branch to the Pashtun people who might have felt resentment towards the U.S. backed victory of the Northern Alliance and the Tajik people against the Taliban (Risen, 2021). In addition, another reason which explained Karzai was selected as a viable solution for power, was because the Western power believed that following the assassination of Karzai’s father in the hands of the Taliban, they knew he would not align with them or their political agenda.

Nonetheless, by 2002, regional governors and warlords started taking control of local media stations. They took this opportunity as a way in which they could further achieve their political agendas, or where they would enhance their individual brands. Soon enough, the Afghan media space was controlled by many benefactors such as Afghan, Western, Iranian or Pakistani government officials, warlords, and even Taliban or other extremist groups. Each media aimed to reflect the agendas of the benefactors, consequently, the media in Afghanistan became very fragmented in ethno-linguistic portions. This was a result of the fact that the Afghan public was more likely to believe what was told by people from they would identify with (Fraenkel, Himelfarb, & Schoemaker, 2010).

*a. Ethnic divide*

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban leadership quickly fled to the Afghan neighbouring country, Pakistan, where they found a safe haven. This could be linked to an issue that the American and Western powers largely overlooked, the ethnic divide. In a country that has been internally weakened for decades by the presence of external forces such as the Soviet Union and the Western powers, the different ethnic tribes provide a sense of identity to the Afghan community. On the one hand, the Taliban were Pashtun, which is by far the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, representing more than 40 percent of the population (Risen, 2021). And on the other hand, the Afghan militia which supported the American forces as well as the Northern Alliance were the Tajik population, who were also Shia Muslims, and who only represented a quarter of the Afghan people (Risen, 2021).

Belonging to one ethnicity or another normally set people apart in one side of the conflict or another. As the Taliban were Pashtun, that enabled them to not only maintain support and influence in the rural southern areas of Afghanistan, but it also allowed them to obtain harbour in Pakistan (Risen, 2021). In addition, it opened up the possibility to recruit new members from the more than one million mainly Pashtun Afghan refugees that lived on the Afghan and Pakistani border which had been established by the British powers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Risen, 2021). Moreover, research supports the fact that the Taliban were backed by Pakistan. In fact, many officers of the Pakistani Intelligence Agency (the Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI) were sympathetic with Pashtun people and with the Taliban and thus gave them backing (Risen, 2021). In contrast, another Afghan neighbouring country, Iran, had seen the rise to power of the Taliban in the 1990s as a threat. The origin of the Iranian rejection towards the Taliban fundamentalist government has its origins in religion, as Iran is predominantly Shia Muslim, while the Taliban are mostly Sunni. In addition, back in the 1990s, the Taliban persecuted the Hazara minority group, which is predominantly Shia (Risen, 2021). And thus, before the American invasion of Afghanistan, the Government Officials of both countries met up in Geneva to discuss a possible collaboration against the common enemy, the Taliban. However, in 2002 former President George W. Bush included Iran to the “axis of evil”, matching it along countries like Iraq and North Korea (Risen, 2021). For this reason, Iran backed its support to the American Administration and started not only offering assistance to the Taliban, but likewise started backing the uprising against American powers in Iraq.

*b. Drone strikes*

Drone strikes consist of attacks through air, by unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones used for surveillance and for dropping bombs, firing missiles or crashing into targets (Agence France-Presse, 2017). Right after September 11, Afghanistan became a common scenario where drone attack systems were carried out by the United States. Drone strikes are used as they lower the risk of injury and death to the military personnel, however, not only were they effective in killing members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban but they also led to countless civilian casualties (Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, 2022). The United States, under the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), relied on mobile phone numbers to track and target terrorists, which sometimes lead to either tracking the wrong person or for the intended target being killed alongside a group of civilians (Risen, 2021). This backfired in an increased resentment of the Afghan population towards the American Government, as

they felt helpless under what seemed like an invisible threat that they could not fight against (Risen, 2021). Nonetheless, it took the CIA, and the U.S. military forces years to figure out they were sometimes being manipulated on the targets they were given. As at times, those who were feeding them information on the U.S. enemies, were actually fulfilling their own personal interests. Either by convincing the Americans that they needed to hunt their local rivals or by having their rivals sent to Guantánamo Prison (Risen, 2021).

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 2015 and 2020, the U.S. launched more than 13,000 drone strikes, killing up to 10,000 people (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2020). The drone attacks spiked in September of 2019, with an estimate of more than 1,110 strikes (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2020).

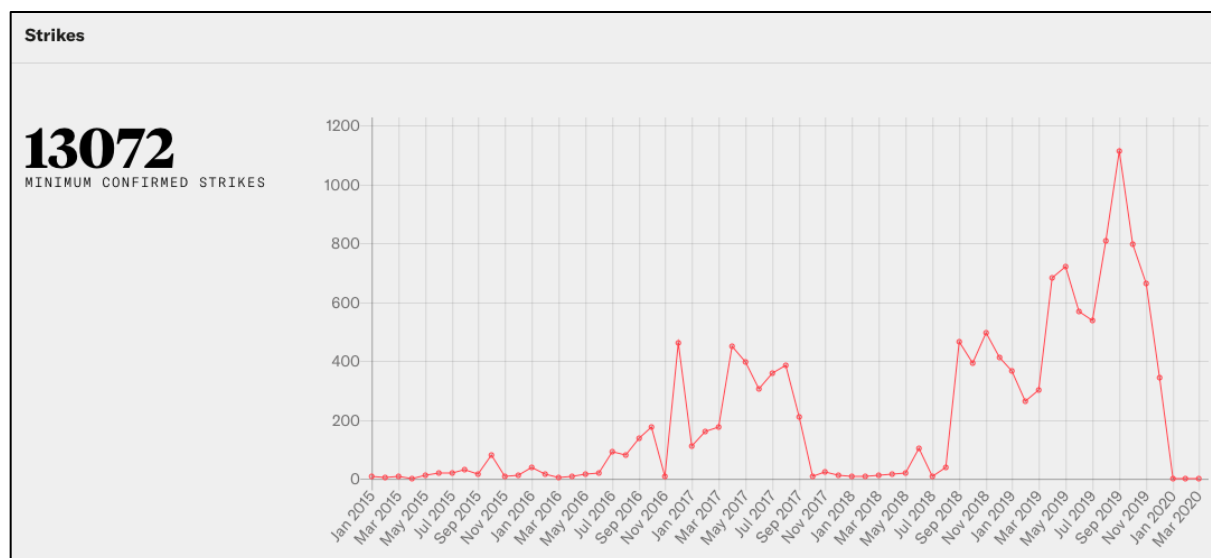


Figure 6: Drone Strikes in Afghanistan from 2015-2020, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, (2020).

*c. Anti-imperialistic narrative*

After the U.S. invasion, two opposing perceptions arose regarding the U.S. and Western troops' presence in Afghanistan. On the one hand, some people saw their presence in the region as an excuse for the West to further pursue their own geopolitical interests (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). While on the other hand, Western presence in the Afghan country was perceived as the perfect opportunity to contain the Taliban in both Afghanistan as well as in the neighbouring countries (Dörre & Kraudzun, 2012). As mentioned beforehand, as a result to trying to kill possible terrorists, sometimes civilians were killed.

And thus, as a result of the civilian casualties (which were described by the U.S. as mistakes) and the suffering which arose from them, it created a sense of community in Muslims around the world against the perpetrators of those mistakes, consequently winning in recruitments to the Taliban and al Qaeda cause (Brown, 2019).

*d. The lack of narrative*

By 2002, the Bush administration started believing that the Taliban were no longer a priority concern, as they seemingly were in retreat, and thus, decided to expand the ‘war on terror’ beyond the Afghani boarder. Consequently, the American government, the public as well as the media attention shifted towards Iraq. Most media networks withdrew from the Afghan country and started relying on parachute journalists. Parachute journalists are correspondents who are sent to report on countries where they have little to no knowledge or experience on, moreover, they normally cannot even speak or understand the language. As a consequence, their coverage tends to be very poor as they tend to rely on stereotypes to construct their stories (Aboughazala, 2021). Karzai expressed his aggravation towards this shift. Not just because the news portrayed a stereotypical point of view of Afghanistan being a violent and backwards nation, and of him being corrupt, but because when the government attention moved somewhere else, the Afghan people were left to confront the Taliban without the support of a Western power. In 2005, the U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan, Ronald Neuman, informed Washington that the Taliban were resurging again. Story which the U.S. media failed to investigate until it exploded (Brown, 2019). And it was not until the Taliban dragged U.S. and European soldiers’ into intensified conflict that Afghanistan entered the media and political agenda again and thus went back to people’s minds (Brown, 2019).



## 5 Methodology

This research paper has a quantitative and theoretical-descriptive character, as the research was carried out through the study of secondary sources. The theoretical framework and the state of play section consisted of examining existing research on the topic. Specifically, the focus will be on the framing as well as the agenda-setting techniques used by the media and the United States government to legitimize the ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan.

In order to conduct this research paper and more importantly, to obtain a broad and more documented point of view on the matter, the writer has focused on empirical data in the form of written as well as on visual media. Regarding written media, the writer has placed special focus on newspaper articles from sources such as *The Times News* newspaper, academic papers, and the data provided by the Pew Research Centre has been of great help in order to obtain a deeper understanding on the matter. The book “*Your country, our War*” has been of outmost relevance as it accurately captured the situation in Afghanistan from the local perspective and the perspective of the United States. Additionally, to adopt a more visual and emotional understanding on the issue, the writer will highlight the Netflix documentary “*The Turning Point: 9/11 and the war on terror*”. It is also very important to point out that in order to get a wider picture on the September 11 phenomenon, extensive research is needed.

A special focus was placed on American news agencies, specifically *The New York Times*, as the United States was the main benefactor as well as the country more affected and mostly influenced by the September 11 attacks. Additionally, due to the importance the ‘war on terror’ had on the political and security agenda of the U.S. government, the topic was widely discussed on the media, which makes the press in the North American country an extensive source from which to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. Moreover, Afghan officials and the Afghan press would speak of the West and the United States as synonyms, therefore there is a blurred line between the impact the different NATO countries had on Afghanistan. It is also very important to keep in mind that when conducting this research paper, it has been challenging to find information from a Middle Eastern perspective as a very large percentage of the information came from Western sources that only portrayed the situation from a Western perspective. It could be hypothesised therefore that a more Middle Eastern perspective on the matter, would be

written in a language that is neither in Spanish nor in English. In addition, due to the fact that the 9/11 attacks took place almost 21 years ago, most of the information on the War of Afghanistan was based on current events and not what happened prior to ten years ago.

Another problem the author experienced when carrying out the research for this dissertation was the fact that there is a lot of information based on conspiracy theories, founded mainly on a web of schemes against the United States political apparatus. The conspiracy theories tackled upon the topic that it was not al Qaeda, under Osama Bin Laden who had carried out the 9/11 attacks, but that in fact it had been the United States Government under the request of George Bush who had done so. Subsequently, the conspiracies followed the rhetoric that were it not for the September 11 attacks, that the U.S. would have never had the legitimacy to invade Afghanistan with the support of all NATO allies and its citizens. In addition, when doing research for this essay, there was an overwhelming amount of information to review not only due to the fact that the conflict had been ongoing for twenty years but also because the conflict of Afghanistan has been of great impact to the public worldwide. Furthermore, another difficulty was the large quantity of one-sided information online, as well the lack of news articles which portrayed the point of view of the war in Afghanistan or its neighbouring countries. Moreover, the compilation of information by Western media outlets often face multiple constraints and limitations on the newsgathering process. The ethnocentric reporting by U.S. news agencies can be justified by the fact that generally U.S. news has an American public in mind, and thus portrays the United States as the most significant actor in global issues (Brown, 2019), which does not provide the whole picture on international events.

The quantitative data used supports the idea that journalism works as a soft-power, and thus has the power to influence and shape people's perceptions of the world around them. With quantitative data, the writer analyses the way in which the framing and agenda-setting used by media outlets in the Western world, but specially in the United States, were very effective in legitimizing and in creating support for the 'war on terror'.

## 6 Analysis

The September 11 attacks had an immense impact on the media worldwide, it could even be considered that they were the most consequential terrorist attacks to take place in the history of mankind (Brown, 2019). The uncertainty of the event, made for a large demand of information to be created, and thus on the 12<sup>th</sup> September of 2001, newspaper stands were filled with information on the matter. On the day after the attacks, 190 American newspapers featured the event on the front page (Brown, 2019). This was replicable in other Western countries such as Spain, where the nine main newspapers in the country portrayed the incident (20 minutos, 2006). In fact, the event obtained such a degree of importance that 119 daily newspapers in the United States included additional issues explaining in detail the course of events as well as the possible economic, political, and sociocultural impacts the event could have on the United States (Brown, 2019).



Figure 7: The New York Times Archives front page after 9/11, (The New York Times, 2001)

For the ten days that followed the attacks, Americans became flooded with information on Afghanistan, 9/11, as well as on al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The main source from which 90 percent of Americans obtained information was television, which in fact supports the cultivation theory (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). This is due to the fact that at the time of the events, television was the dominant news source for the average American citizen, additionally, television allows for a large quantity of information to be delivered, in a way that unlike newspapers does not seem dense. Moreover, as television portrays visual content, it allows for a wider and more impactful emotional frame to be created. In the aftermath of the attack, 81 percent of Americans admitted to keeping either the radio or the television on in waking hours to keep up with updates (Brown, 2019). Moreover, according to Pew Research Centre following the attacks 46 percent of Americans started reading newspapers more carefully, in order to not miss out on important events and information (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). In order to increase the impact of the message, and to create a frame which would later be very easy to identify by the population, the public were bombarded with words such as ‘terror’, ‘enemy’ or ‘war’. And as terrorism entered the imaginary of the American population, news agencies started reporting on the topic on a regular basis. News coverage on topics regarding terrorism steeply rose in the matter of twelve months: going from 178 news stories between September 2000 and 2001, to 1,345 news from the 9/11 attacks until the month of September of the following year (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). As news coverage increased, so did the perception of threat. In fact, 75 percent of those surveyed were scared by what they read or heard, however that did not stop them from consuming the media (Brown, 2019). By constantly showing images and information of the attacks, the feeling of being under threat was reiterated. Which consequently was created into a frame of meaning, employing common symbols and language so that when the public was shown images of the attacks, it would relate to the image the media had already created.



Figure 8: 9/11 anniversary: how the Guardian reported the attacks, The Guardian (MacAskill, 2011)

The national scenario after September 11, created an overgrowing sentiment of unity amongst the American population. This sense of unity can be justified by the fact that every last person in the country had been impacted by the vicious terrorist actions. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre after 9/11, amongst 92 percent of those surveyed agreed they felt sad when watching news coverage on the attacks (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). They felt enraged too. In fact, even three weeks after the attacks, 87 percent of Americans expressed they were still angry by the terrorist's fatality that had taken place on the Twin Towers and the World Trade Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). This situation opened up the perfect scenario for the American political establishment and the press to construct the perception that terrorism was a global trend on the rise, thus if a solution was not found (attacking those who had perpetrated the attacks) the problem would increase. Moreover, outside the borders of the United States, countries allied in support for the devastating events. *Le Monde's* front the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2001, best displays this sense of solidarity to

the United States with a headline in French which can be translated into “We are all American now” (Bergen, 2022).



Figure 9: Le Monde shows support after the 9/11 attacks, (Twitter, 2015)

As a consequence of this narrative, any action that would limit the threat of terrorism within the American borders was justified and even encouraged. By January 2002, 83 percent of Americans thought “defending the country from future terrorist attacks” was of utmost importance (Hartig & Doherty, 2021), and thus government policy should focus on implementing measures that would ensure the safety of the American citizens within the nations’ borders. In fact, since the attacks, both American Republicans and Democrats have viewed terrorism as a ‘top priority’.

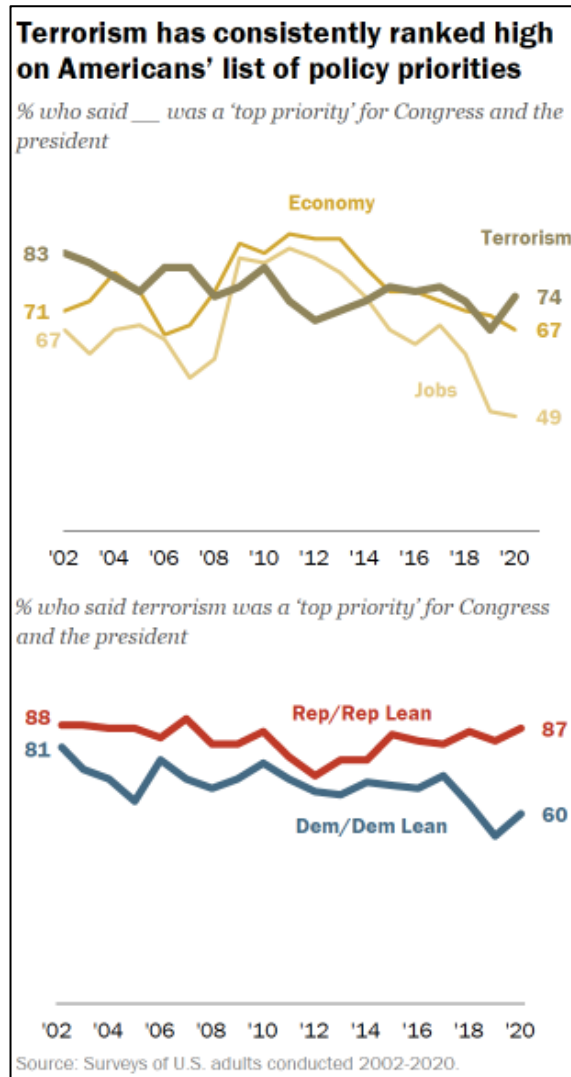


Figure 10: *Terrorism has ranked high on Americans' list of policy priorities*, Pew Research Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021)

When covering foreign news, the U.S. press tends to align with government officials so as to advance and protect the interests of the country. After September 11, the interests of the government were clear: they were not going to stand by seeing how their security system had been shattered and do nothing about it, to which the only viable solution was going to war. The frames used by the American media helped further progress the antagonistic discourse used by the American government which differentiated those who were evil and those who were good. As a general norm, the American media portrays the countries that go to war as violent, undemocratic, and irrational, but this time around, the U.S. military intervention was portrayed as rational, as it went along with fulfilling the interests of the nation or even the interests of the whole democratic world, whose values

were at stake. Thus, the media created a frame which promoted the political agenda of the Bush administration, and due to the high demand for information on the 9/11 attacks, it allowed for the message to be more effective. It is not just that news agencies were only trying to influence the public to approve the policies of the government, but in fact due to the psychological stress, anger and sadness the American population was under, revenge seemed like a viable response. Moreover, military intervention experienced a skyrocketing level of support. In addition, former President George W. Bush explained why the American intervention was the right thing to do for the Afghans, as it would “open up the possibility for them to experience a better life within democracy” (Brown, 2019). By mid-September 2001, 77 percent of American citizens approved military action “to retaliate against those responsible for the harm caused by the terrorist attacks, even if it meant that the U.S. armed forces would suffer thousand casualties” (Hartig & Doherty, 2021).

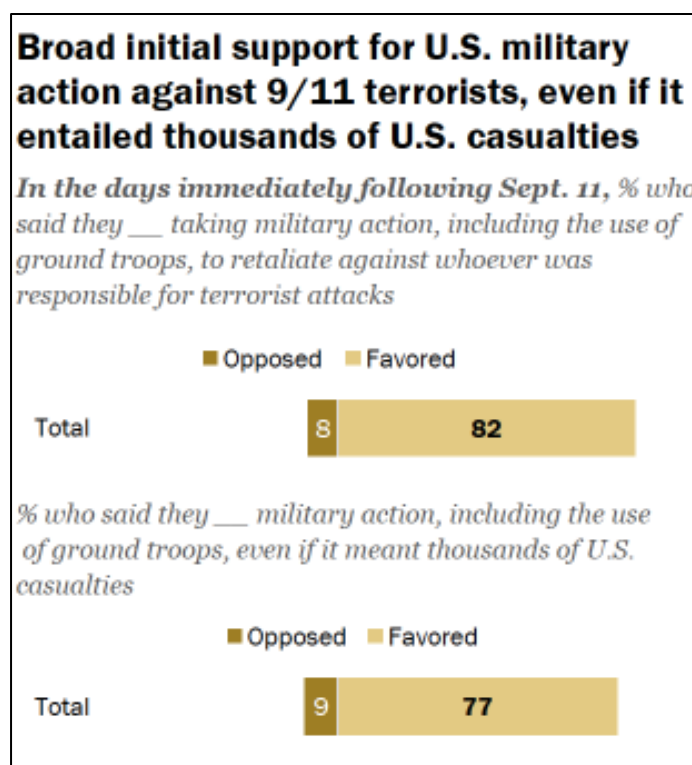


Figure 11: Overall support for military intervention after September 11, Pew Research Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021)

Additionally, in order to further obtain the American citizen’s backing in the military intervention in Afghanistan, Bush explained how the attacks were not just a direct response to September 11, but that in fact, the intervention would also be a chance for the Afghan



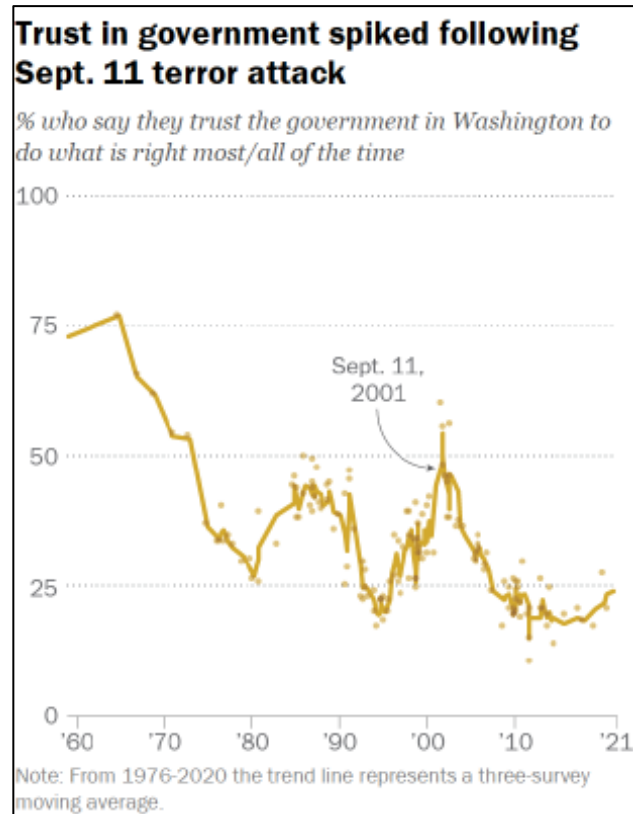
population to get freed from the dire Taliban regime. The fact that the Taliban went against Western values by denying girls access to education or by conducting public executions, made it very easy for the media to erect a frame of meaning portraying the Taliban and al Qaeda as the enemy. The narrative used by the Bush administration placed especial importance on the intensifying human rights violations that had been carried out by the ‘misogynistic regime’, which included torture, mass killings, abductions, and rape (Amnesty International, 2001) (Berry, 2003). With the frames used by the media and the subsequent mental pictures that had been created, it was not difficult for the U.S. news agencies and the government to obtain support on the decision to use military force in Afghanistan.

Throughout the 20th century, governments became more concerned than ever before with their popularity, as thus support from their electors became a manner in which politicians saw legitimacy in their actions. The nation-wide response to the military intervention of Afghanistan was well received by the American population, creating a sense of almost nationwide patriotism. As a result, 79 percent of households started displaying the American flag in their homes (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). This sense of patriotism that emerged from the loss and terror that was caused by the attacks, was encouraged by the Bush in the way where he portrayed the United States as being superior to other nations (Brown, 2019). In fact, the U.S.-led war narrative, perfectly went along with the notion American citizens have that portrays the United States as ‘the world’s hero, in a world that needs to be saved’ (Wasburn, 2002) as if the Americans retaliated to al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, the rest of the world would not have to suffer the consequences of their inhumane and violent deeds. Not only did Bush stress on the idea that it would only be through his actions in Afghanistan that he could protect freedom and ensure safety for Americans, but the Bush administration also alleged that through the American intervention they would also be “promoting democracy and human rights” (DiMaggio, 2015) in Afghanistan and in the long run in the Middle East as well (Bush G. W., 2001).



*Figure 12: 9/11 anniversary: how the Guardian reported the attacks, The Guardian (MacAskill, 2011)*

According to the Pew Research Centre, after the September 11 attacks, Bush's job approval rapidly grew by a 35 percent in a matter of just three weeks (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). That is to say that by late September of 2001, 86 percent of adults in the United States, including 96 percent of Republicans and even 78 percent of Democrats approved the job George W. Bush was doing as President (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). Additionally, the overall trust in the government institutions also saw a popularity increase, reaching figures which had not been surpassed in the three decades prior. Even if the rates of approval of both George W. Bush and the political institutions never achieved such positive percentages as in the aftermath of September 11, the government was successful in advancing its policies against Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Additionally, even if the effects of the war were not as successful in achieving peace and creating a stable and democratic government in the Afghan country, after the 9/11 attacks, going to war in Afghanistan was seen as the only viable solution to preventing more terror from happening in the United States.



*Figure 13: Overall trust in government after September 11 terror attacks, Pew Research Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021)*

In a country like the United States, where religion is not only immersed in society, but in politics as well, a big percentage of the American population turned to religion to overcome the overwhelming impact of the September 11 attacks. In addition, there was also a general notion in the United States that President George W. Bush, was chosen by God to ‘lead a global war of good against all evil’ hence giving the ‘war on terror’ a religious justification in the eyes of a devastated nation (Jacobson, 2010). This scenario created a dichotomous perspective in the fact that the Muslim religion, which was the one followed by al Qaeda and the Taliban, was negatively portrayed by the media, thus creating an anti-Muslim sentiment nationwide. In fact, a 2017 survey found that almost 50 percent of adults believed Islam was ‘not a part of American society’ (Lipka, 2017). Moreover, another study conducted by the Pew Research Centre found that between 2007 till 2017, Muslims had experienced public discrimination, just for the fact that they were followers of Islam (Lipka, 2017). Nonetheless, by establishing this dichotomous perspective the Bush administration and the media were trying to create a frame in the minds of American

citizens to justify and legitimize warfare with the Muslim believers in Afghanistan. Because if the public saw Muslims in a negative manner, then any kind of violent action against them would be justified and maybe even encouraged, because following the frame created by the media ‘Muslims were evil’, ‘Muslims were engaged in extremist activities’ and thirdly ‘Muslim followers had brought horror into the American nation’. As a consequence, Islam and the Middle Eastern region started getting associated to violence.

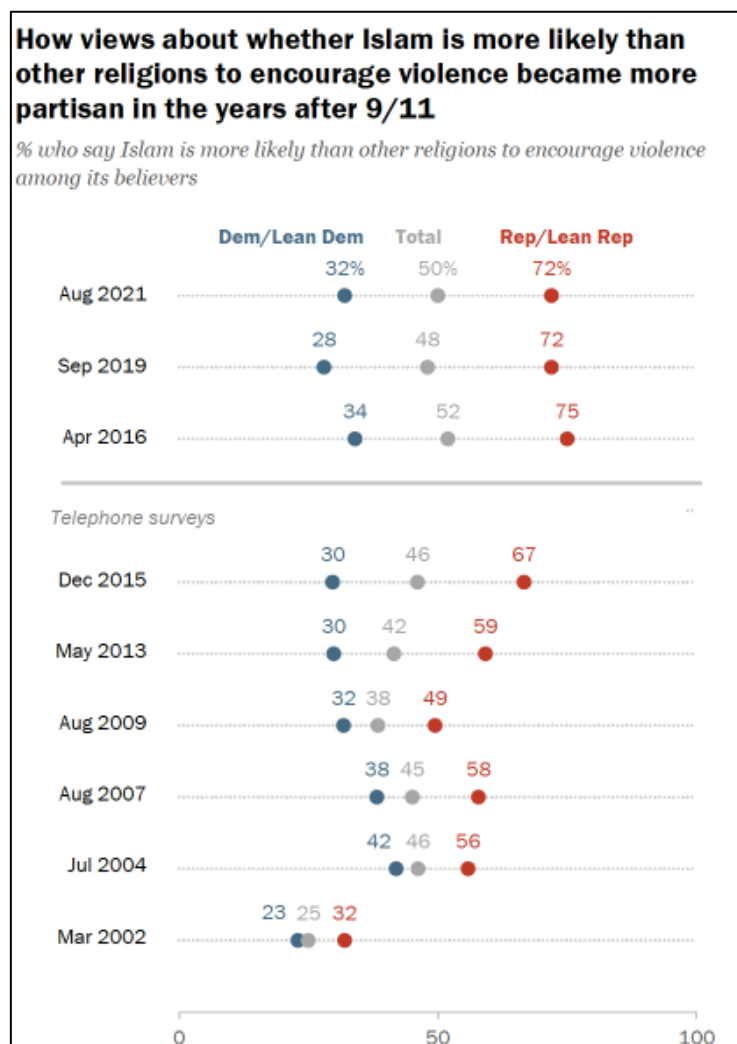


Figure 14: Islam being more likely than other religions to incite violence, Pew Research Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021)

Moreover, it was not just the American or Western public who had an opinion on the conflict, but in the Middle East, there was also a big regard on the matter. The American invasion in Afghanistan effected the country as a whole, however the response was divided between those who opposed to it and those that favoured the American intervention. As

New York Times reporter David Rhode explained, when the Taliban were ousted from power, most people in Afghanistan were happy that they had fallen (Brown, 2019). As Afghans no longer had to live in the closed society that had been imposed by the fundamentalist Taliban, and the brutality under which Afghans had lived, no longer prevailed. They were content with the new situation, as it opened up a new scenario filled with new possibilities. In contrast to when the Taliban or the Mujahedeen were in power, where the media was controlled by them, in order to further amplify their messages and to increase the support for their regimes, when the Americans started democratizing the country, the media was partly freed from such reporting repression. Thus, the media became a symbol of liberation for the Afghan population who finally saw their opinions voiced.

As mentioned beforehand, there was a large part of the Afghan population that was happy that the Taliban regime had been overthrown. During the fundamentalist regime, civilization had decimated: there were few institutions or schools, there was little electricity or infrastructure in the country, human rights were constantly being transgressed and overall Afghans were scared. As David Rhode explained “it (when the Taliban were ousted from power) was a very emotional time. There was an atmosphere of hope and optimism” (Brown, 2019). Rhode also clarified how the Afghan population had an exaggerated expectation of the benefits and improvements the Western powers would bring into the country. This aspect was also shared by the American population, from which 31 percent believed the results of the military operations would only take a couple months (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). Even the first democratically elected president, Hamid Karzai, in a speech called out for the Afghan population to support the American intervention: “In this critical time, let us come together and be brothers and sisters. Let us be good to each other and compassionate” (Brown, 2019).

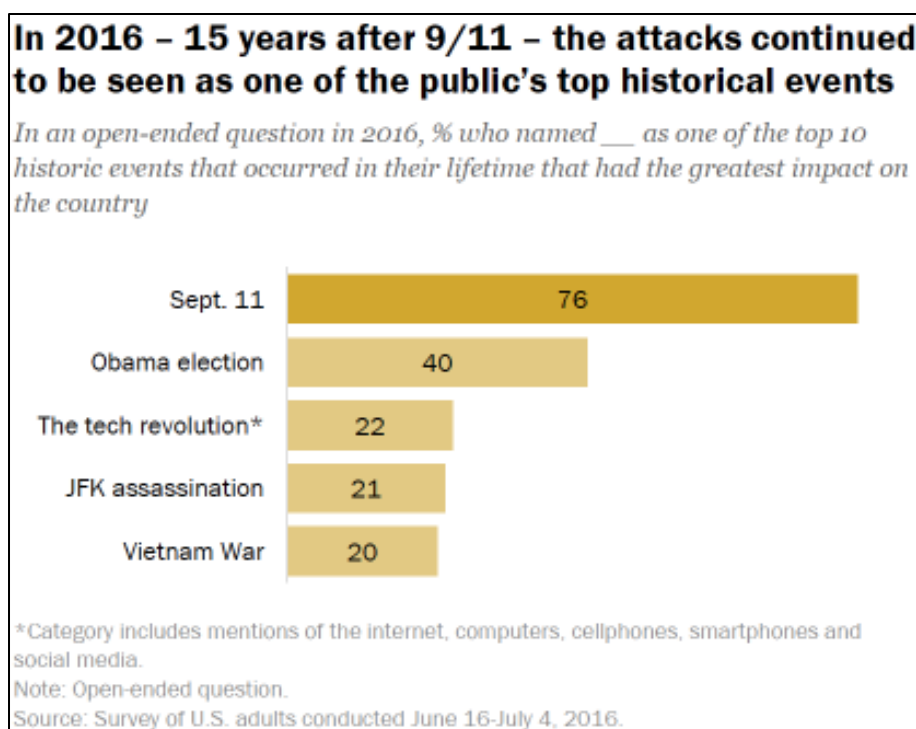
Contrastingly, a portion of Afghans frowned upon the American intervention. The narrative which prevailed was centred on an anti-imperialistic point of view, which portrayed that the only reason the United States had sent troops to Afghanistan was to increase their scope of influence on the region. This feeling became more notorious after the invasion to the Afghan neighbouring country Iraq in 2003. Among the most notorious stances against the Western occupation of Afghanistan were demonstrated by the first democratically elected president in the country, Hamid Karzai. With the Obama Administration in government, tension between the U.S. and Afghanistan governments

became more evident. In fact, when the security situation did not improve and neither did the economy, or the infrastructure and the human rights situation for women was experiencing setbacks, Karzai openly voiced his distrust and discontent with the American political system. By 2016, he bluntly stated “the Americans, whose primary slogan is democracy, are making a sham of democracy in Afghanistan” (Mashal, 2016). Karzai believed that the U.S. had wanted to stay in Afghanistan to benefit from the fact that it bordered very powerful and influential countries such as Iran, China or Pakistan, as well as former Soviet Central Asian countries (Brown, 2019). In regard to the American news system, former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai was very critical of it in open forums and press releases. Continuously, he expressed his discontent for the way in which the Afghan country had been portrayed since 2003: as a backward, failed, and conflict-ridden nation (Mashal, 2016). In addition, Karzai continuously discussed the way in which Western media undermined the Afghan government, portraying it as a helpless victim “that would not survive were it not for the sustained financial and military American assistance” (Rubin & Shanker, 2013). Hence with this portrayal of vulnerability and dependency, the United States was undermining the Afghan people’s faith in their own government, consequently perpetuating a sense of neo-colonialism (Brown, 2019). Karzai even made the accusation that the news agencies in the United States were controlled by the government, and thus they were another tactic to further advancing the interests and the policies of the American government.

Moreover, even years after the security system in the United States was shattered by the attacks in the World Trade Centre and the Twin, the support for the military intervention the United States carried out as a response was overwhelming. A study conducted by the Pew Research Centre in early 2002, demonstrated that half a year after the 9/11 attacks, 83 percent of Americans approved of the military intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). Moreover, in 2006, still a large percentage of Americans (69 percent) believed going to war in Afghanistan was the right decision, and only two in ten believed it was a wrong move (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). Once the Taliban escaped the country and the main target, Osama Bin Laden was killed in the hands of American soldiers in 2011, it thus became unclear why the United States was staying in Afghanistan. Consequently, by 2011 the support for ‘the war on terror’ started plummeting. A month after the death of Bin Laden, 56 percent of Americans expressed their belief that the American troops should flee Afghanistan and return to the United States (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). A survey carried

out by Gallup in 2014, found out that almost half of the American population (49 percent) believed going to war was a mistake, by contrast, in 2002 only 2 percent supported that idea (Dugan, 2015).

Twenty years have gone by, and people still consider the 9/11 attacks as one of the most impactful events of their lives. A study conducted by Pew Research Centre in 2016, exposes American's perception of the 9/11 attacks 15 years after they occurred. 76 percent of the adults in the survey classified September 11 among one of the main historical events they experienced or will ever experience in their lifetime, even before the JFK assassination or Obama becoming the first black U.S. president (Hartig & Doherty, 2021). In addition, some of those surveyed even stated that the attacks had been the most important and impactful thing that took place in their lives in the year 2001.



*Figure 15: 15 years after September 11, the terror attacks continue to be considered one of the public's top historical events, Pew Research Centre (Hartig & Doherty, 2021)*

## 7 Conclusion

All in all, after carrying out the research for this research paper, it has become evident that indeed the United States benefited from the power of the media as a way to obtain civilian support in the US-led war. Nonetheless, it is also very important to keep in mind that the politically influenced agenda of the media only served as a boost to increase the support for a cause that already existed. As people not only wanted to seek revenge for a threat against the United States but in addition, they wanted to put an end to what seemed like an invisible threat that no one, not even the American Superpower, saw coming or could prevent.

In addition, in order to understand the full complexity of the event and its consequences it is important to keep in mind that in less than 90 minutes, the course of history changed for ever. The impact of the September 11 attacks still remains present more than 20 years later. Furthermore, what differentiates this historical event from many others before, is the fact that a country like the United States, that prides itself from being one of the most powerful countries in the world, and whose military body accounts for the largest employer in the world (Chang, 2015), as well as whose intelligence agencies have a lot of international recognition, was not able to prevent an event like the 9/11 from happening. Thus, opening the possibility that if it happened in the U.S., it could happen anywhere else. This narrative was used by news agencies to erect a frame of chaos and instability, where the only viable solution was that proposed by them and by the Bush administration.

The thing that helped further advance the narrative used by the media and consequently the agenda of the Government was the fact that the feeling of chaos, insecurity and impotence were overwhelming the whole Western world, but specially the American population. In a time where threat was seen in every corner, the public could only rely on a source of power like the government and the media. And whatever was portrayed as a source that would bring peace and stability was blindly seen as a good solution. Because in fact, security works as a double-edged sword, in the way that it creates distrust to what seems unfamiliar, but it also creates a bond of trust in those who are seen as the protectors. This created the perfect scenario for people to trusts everything that was shown to them. In addition, as the scope of knowledge on the conflict in Afghanistan was limited to what was portrayed to them by the media or government officials, the public had no choice but to believe in that information.



It could also be concluded that in fact, the antagonistic discourse placed on the Muslim believers was created as a way to further justify the war in Afghanistan. Additionally, in a country like the United States, that had just suffered from the worst attacks it had ever experienced nationally, the distrust levels in the population increased, and so did their fear and vulnerability. Thus, the narrative used by the media to justify the war inflicted on the Muslim country, created a frame where all Islamic believers were ignorantly placed in the same group, as if they were all posed a threat to the American security system.

By taking into consideration all three communication theories previously explained, it could be concluded that the role of media agencies is far more important than what meets the eye. In fact, it is the media's role to shape an image of the world to a large majority of the public. Following the theories proposed, media outlets can be considered as gatekeepers who purposely collect, 'organize and present the ideas, events and topics they cover' (Mass Communication Theory, 2017). It could be thus believed that what is not mentioned by television, it simply does not exist to a large percentage of the population. Through the narration of the stories, television helps inform the meaning of what the public thinks, says and does (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Therefore, it is not just that media networks have an impact in shaping people's opinions and perceptions of events, but it is also in their scope of power to determine what is of utmost importance, as well as what actually is newsworthy and what is not.

Finally, I believe to further advance the research on this topic, it would be of utmost importance to obtain the perspective from different points of view. Furthermore, this research paper is mostly written from a Western point of view, because even if I have tried to portray the most objectivity possible, I already have a built-in world view which is highly influenced by my surroundings and my inherently national bias. In addition, as it was already mentioned in this dissertation, the large majority of the data I was able to find carries a Western point of view.

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