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Brian J. Bowe

*Western Washington University*, [brianj.bowe@wwu.edu](mailto:brianj.bowe@wwu.edu)

Jennifer Hoewe

*University of Alabama - Tuscaloosa*

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# Clash of Coverage: Cultural Framing in U.S. Newspaper Reporting on the 2011 Protests in Bahrain

By Brian J. Bowe and Jennifer Hoewe | [brianjbowe@yahoo.com](mailto:brianjbowe@yahoo.com), [jennifer.hoewe@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.hoewe@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations paradigm was established after the Cold War to explain an emerging new world order and was utilized in the cultural framing hypothesis' explanation of U.S. news coverage of conflicts. Through content analysis of three major U.S. newspapers' coverage of the 2011 protests in Bahrain, this study uses the cultural framing hypothesis to determine if a clash of civilizations shaped news stories. The results largely support the hypothesis and Huntington's paradigm.*

Reading news stories and seeing images from the Middle East in early 2011, it is hard not to draw comparisons to Eastern Europe circa 1989. As repressive regimes in the Arab World - Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia - faced unprecedented public protests, it seemed natural to compare those ongoing events to previously repressed people dancing atop the Berlin Wall and the ousting of longtime despots like Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu. Making the comparison more theoretically compelling, the demise of the Cold War paradigm which stated that the world was separated by military conflict between wealthy nations and poorer nations brought a new paradigm in the form of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations. Controversially, Huntington argued that the future would be characterized by conflict not between nations but between civilizations.

While his thesis has been widely rejected in academic circles, it retains a great deal of currency in news media analyses — a finding confirmed by Bantimaroudis and Kampanellou's work (2009) which resulted in the cultural framing hypothesis: Media promote Huntington's clash of civilizations in their reporting on conflict situations.

As citizens in the Middle East protested in the face of repression and lack of economic opportunity, the question arises whether these people are being covered by the news media in a manner congruent with Huntington's paradigm as seen through the cultural framing hypothesis: News coverage of the protests in the Arab World may be illustrating Huntington's clash in civilizations - Western thought versus non-Western thought. The rising conflict in Bahrain offers a useful case study.

## Background on Bahrain

The small archipelago nation of Bahrain gained its independence from Britain in 1971. The nation remains under the control of the al-Khalifa monarchy which first came to power after defeating the Persians in 1783 (CIA, 2011). The current monarch, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, has ruled since 1999.

While the governing elite is Sunni, between 400,000 and 500,000 of Bahrain's population is Shiite, which represents between 65 and 75 percent of Bahrain's native population. This statistic makes Bahrain one of only four countries in the world with majority Shia population (Pew, 2009). Minority rule underlies some of the current protests, with Freedom House (2010a) reporting that "fear of growing Shiite political power has increased tensions between the Shiites and the ruling Sunni minority over the last few years, sparking periodic government crackdowns."

The Bahraini government has introduced periodic economic and political reforms since King Hamad's ascension to the throne in an attempt to improve relations with the Shia. However, tensions increased in 2009 after the arrests of leaders of the Shiite political party Haq. The

government also ordered the blocking of some websites and closed a newspaper (Freedom House, 2010a). Shia political parties participated in legislative elections in 2010, and one of them, Al Wifaq, won the largest number of seats (CIA, 2011). Arrests of human rights activists, bloggers, members of the political opposition, and religious minorities accompanied those elections.

While Bahrain is one of the most affluent Arab nations, a 2010 survey showed 45 percent of the youth population believed it was a bad time to find a job, and 33 percent believed that the largest barrier to finding employment was that good jobs are only given to people with connections (Silatech, 2010). According to another survey in 2010, 41 percent of Bahraini adults reported occasions the previous year when they were unable to afford adequate housing for themselves or their families (Gallup, 2010). In response, the government announced \$1 billion for housing.

Nevertheless, much of the Shia population began protesting in early 2011 against the inadequacy of the monarchy's contributions to its people. Demonstrations began on February 14. Four days later, five people were killed by police in a raid on protestors at Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout. Currently, Freedom House ranks Bahrain as "Not Free" on its Freedom of the Press and Freedom in the World indexes (2010b, 2010c).

### **Clash of Civilizations and the Cultural Framing Hypothesis**

Introduced in a 1993 Foreign Affairs article, Huntington's clash of civilizations paradigm continues to be used as a framework to describe post Cold War global conflict. In that article, Huntington (1993a) posited that religion, history, language, and tradition differentiate civilizations from one another, creating deep divisions of increasing importance after the Cold War. He suggested that "the fault lines of civilizations are the battle lines of the future." Thus, the United States should respond to conflicts by forging alliances with similar cultures and working to spread its values to other cultures. With so-called "alien civilizations," Huntington wrote that the West "must be accommodating if possible, but confrontational if necessary."

This paradigm was developed shortly after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. It gained currency among policymakers and the news media, Seib (2004) noted, because those forces were unsure of the future context of the world order. Such an adversarial arrangement of "us" vs. "them" established itself in public discourse because that mentality was "tidy and easy to understand" (p. 72). As Ibrahim (2010) suggested, the Cold War, like the Islamic world after September 11, 2001, was portrayed in media coverage as a menace to the American way of life. Ibrahim claimed also that the Cold War was an important example of journalists' adopting government-led policies without establishing an objective platform from which to examine them (p. 112).

Huntington's paradigm, however, had many critics. He responded by more definitively describing his world view: "Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for. And that is why the clash of civilizations is replacing the Cold War as the central phenomenon of global politics..." (1993b). Huntington acknowledged that his concept provided a simplified picture of reality, but faced with the end of the Cold War world view, he claimed there was a definite need for an updated model to establish order and understand the changes in politics worldwide (1993b).

As Bantimaroudis and Kampanellou (2009) noted, the clash of civilizations is sometimes used to interpret global conflicts to the exclusion of other explanations. While Huntington's idea has been roundly criticized academically (Said, 2001) and his thesis has been rejected by empirical research (Fox, 2001; 2002; Imai, 2006), it remains a frequently used framework by

the mainstream media for interpreting global conflict (Bantimaroudis & Kampanellou, 2009). As Abrahamian (2003) pointed out, paradigms are not necessarily analogous to conventional wisdom. However, he noted that Huntington's paradigm became attractive for news media coverage because of its usability in the analysis of international relations without discussing politics, particularly concerning Palestine and Arab nationalism in general (p. 529).

Research by Bantimaroudis and Kampanellou (2009) examined the usefulness of Huntington's clash of civilizations paradigm in analyzing media texts. They identified cultural micro-frames resulting from Huntington's work, examined their use within newspapers over a 27-year period, and found the news media utilized the ideology promoted in Huntington's theory. These findings are consistent with the cultural framing hypothesis that the news media uphold the clash of civilizations model.

While the Bahrain protests presented an internal struggle between members of the same Islamic civilization as defined by Huntington, the question remains whether U.S. news media re-contextualized it within the clash of civilizations framework, again proving the cultural framing hypothesis.

### **Framing Global Conflict**

When scholars refer to Huntington's clash of civilizations as a "media cliché" (Bantimaroudis and Kampanellou, 2009, p. 186) or "journalistic shorthand" (Seib, 2004, p. 76), they examine how that worldview is used as a framing device in media coverage. This study seeks to identify which frames were used when reporting on the conflict in Bahrain to determine whether they support the cultural framing hypothesis. Reese, Gandy, and Grant (2001, p. 11) identified frames as organizing structures that are socially valid and enduring. Frames help individuals create a structured environment to better understand the world. Organizing the world into civilizations that are able to clash with one another is one way to structure or frame human experience in journalistic texts.

The most popular conceptual definition of framing (Weaver, 2007) is the one posited by Entman (1993) which states that the framing process involves selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text to provide a problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, or solution (p. 52). Entman described how framing occurred using the Cold War paradigm: "The Cold War frame highlighted certain foreign events — say, civil wars — as problems, identified their source (communist rebels), offered moral judgments (atheistic aggression) and commended particular solutions (U.S. support for the other side)" (p. 52).

In an analysis of politically motivated protest, framing can influence public opinion. Examining the effects of frames presented by the news media, de Vreese (2004) concluded that the media can shape public opinion by using frames emphasizing specific facts or values within a news story. Pan and Kosicki (2001) also found that reporters can be subjective in their interpretation of news events, which may influence audience perceptions.

This study looks at how three prominent newspapers covered the Bahrain conflicts in early 2011. Content analysis provides the structure upon which the cultural framing hypothesis derived from Huntington's clash of civilizations can be further proved or disproved.

### **Research Questions**

The length and placement of news stories about Bahrain are important in determining their importance in the publication.

*RQ1: What were the lengths and dispersions of the articles about Bahrain?*

Use of sources helps establish the fairness of each news story. Both sides (protesters and government supporters) should be found in a news story. This is especially important in determining the transfer of Huntington's theory to present-day news coverage of a non United States conflict. The protesters are rallying for more freedoms, some of which resemble freedoms available in the US. Thus, the protesters represent the more-Westernized source in this context. The Bahraini government, on the other hand, represents the non-Westernized source. Ascertaining the number of words allotted to each side shows how much each side was represented.

*RQ2: How were sources used in the coverage of Bahrain? Was a particular side of the case (protesters or individuals supporting the government) dominant?*

Frames within each story help establish the picture of Bahrain, its citizens, and its government reported to the public.

*RQ3: What frames were used in the coverage of Bahrain?*

### **Methodology**

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the news media coverage of Bahrain in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post. These newspapers were selected based on their reach to a large number of news consumers as well as their influence on the national and international news agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 12). According to BurrellsLuce (2010), a company that tracks newspaper circulation figures, they represent four of the five most circulated daily U.S. newspapers: New York Times – 951,063; Los Angeles Times – 616,606; Washington Post – 578,482.

The time period examined was from January 1, 2011 - the year in which protests began - through March 10, 2011. Articles were located through searches in Lexis-Nexis for "Bahrain" in headlines and leads of the stories. This study includes a census of all news stories about the conflict in Bahrain published in print editions and on websites (excluding duplicate stories). Opinion pieces were eliminated from the search results.

The authors addressed the first research question by coding each article for the following variables: name of newspaper, article headline, date, word count, and placement within the newspaper (provided by Lexis-Nexis).

Use of sources, the second research question, was analyzed by identifying which sides were represented in each article (protesters or government supporters). For example, sources categorized for the protesters were people described as or using words against the Bahraini government. Sources categorized as government supporters were representatives of the Bahraini government and those who showed public support for the government. The number of words quoted or paraphrased from these sources was counted.

The third research question was addressed by examining the frames in each news story identified during the coding process. Frames included slightly against the government of Bahrain, strongly against the government of Bahrain, strongly for the government of Bahrain, slightly against the United States' involvement in Bahrain, and slightly in favor of the United States' involvement in Bahrain.

## Results

The search produced a total of 34 news stories published in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post with Bahrain in the headline or lead from January 1 - March 10, 2011. The New York Times published 15 stories, 44.1 percent of the total. The Los Angeles Times published seven stories (20.6 percent), and the Washington Post published 12 (35.3 percent). The majority of stories were 500 - 1,500 words long (88.2 percent).

	New York Times	Pct. <sup>1</sup>	L.A. Times	Pct.	Wash. Post	Pct.	Total	Pct.
<b>Total Number of Stories</b>	15	44.1%	7	20.6%	12	35.3%	34	100.0%
<b>Length<sup>2</sup></b>								
1-500	0	0.0%	1	14.3%	1	8.3%	2	5.9%
501-1,000	6	40.0%	4	57.1%	8	66.7%	18	52.9%
1,001-1,500	8	53.3%	1	14.3%	3	25.0%	12	35.3%
1,501+	1	6.7%	1	14.3%	0	0.0%	2	5.9%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages were calculated based on the total numbers of stories from each respective newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> Length values represent the number of words in each story.

Out of 34 stories, 27 (79.4 percent) represented at least one side of the Bahrain conflict (protesters or government supporters). In the 27 stories, 14 (51.9 percent) represented both sides of the conflict.

Twenty-three stories (67.6 percent) included words quoted or paraphrased from protesters, and 18 stories (52.9 percent) included words quoted or paraphrased from government supporters. In the New York Times, 11 stories (73.3 percent) used sources representing the protesters, and 10 stories (66.7 percent) used sources representing government supporters. The Los Angeles Times published four stories (57.1 percent) that devoted space to the protesters and three stories (42.9 percent) that gave space to government supporters. The Washington Post quoted or paraphrased a source for the protesters in eight stories (66.7 percent) and pro government sources in five stories (41.7 percent).

	New York Times	Pct. <sup>1</sup>	L.A. Times	Pct.	Wash. Post	Pct.	Total	Pct.
<b>Sources<sup>2</sup></b>								
Protesters	11	73.3%	4	57.1%	8	66.7%	23	67.6%
Govt. Supporters	10	66.7%	3	42.9%	5	41.7%	18	52.9%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages were calculated based on the total number of stories from each respective newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> One story may contain both sources.

A total of 3,042 words was used to quote or paraphrase sources representing protesters and government supporters. Words from protesters totaled 1,953 (64.2 percent), and words from government supporters totaled 1,089 (35.8 percent). The New York Times devoted 1,068 words (54.9 percent) to the protesters and 879 words (45.1 percent) to those in favor of the government. The Los Angeles Times devoted 353 words (80.4 percent) to the protesters and 86 words (19.6 percent) to government supporters. The Washington Post gave 532 quoted or paraphrased words (81.1 percent) to the protesters and 124 words (18.9 percent) for the pro government voices.

**Table 3. Words Given Sides of Bahrain Conflict**

	New York Times	Pct. <sup>1</sup>	L.A. Times	Pct.	Wash. Post	Pct.	Total	Pct.
<b>Sources</b>								
Protesters	1,068	54.9%	353	80.4%	532	81.1%	1,953	64.2%
Govt. Supporters	879	45.1%	86	19.6%	124	18.9%	1,089	35.8%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages were calculated based on the number of words given both sides in each respective newspaper.

The frames identified included slightly against the government of Bahrain, strongly against the government of Bahrain, strongly in favor of the government of Bahrain, slightly against the United States' involvement in Bahrain, and slightly in favor of the United States' involvement in Bahrain. Eight stories (23.5 percent) used a frame slightly against the government in Bahrain. Five stories (14.7 percent) were framed strongly against the Bahrain government. Thus, 13 stories (38.2 percent) were framed against the government. One story (2.9 percent) was framed strongly in favor of the Bahrain government.

Six stories (17.6 percent) were framed slightly against the United States' involvement in the conflict in Bahrain. Two stories (5.9 percent) were framed slightly in favor of the United States' involvement in Bahrain.

The New York Times published four stories (26.7 percent) using a frame slightly against the Bahraini government, and four (26.7 percent) using a frame strongly against the Bahraini government. One story (6.7 percent) used a frame strongly in favor of the government. Two stories (13.3 percent) used a frame slightly against the United States' involvement in Bahrain, and one story (6.7 percent) slightly in favor. The Los Angeles Times used three frames, the fewest of those identified. One story (14.3 percent) used a frame slightly against the government, one (14.3 percent) used a frame strongly against the government, and one (14.3 percent) used a frame slightly against the United States' involvement in the conflict in Bahrain. Three stories (25.0 percent) in the Washington Post used a frame slightly against the Bahraini government. Three other stories (25.0 percent) used a frame slightly against the United States' involvement in Bahrain, and one (8.3 percent) used a frame slightly in favor of United States' involvement in the Bahrain conflict.

**Table 4. Frames Identified**

	New York Times	Pct. <sup>1</sup>	L.A. Times	Pct.	Wash. Post	Pct.	Total	Pct.
<b>Frames<sup>2</sup></b>								
Slightly against Bahrain government	4	26.7%	1	14.3%	3	25.0%	8	23.5%
Strongly against Bahrain government	4	26.7%	1	14.3%	0	0.0%	5	14.7%
Strongly in favor of Bahrain government	1	6.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	2.9%
Slightly against U.S.'s involvement	2	13.3%	1	14.3%	3	25.0%	6	17.6%
Slightly in favor of U.S.'s involvement	1	6.7%	0	0.0%	1	8.3%	2	5.9%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages were calculated based on the total number of stories from each respective newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> Stories may have more than one frame or no frames.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Over a 69-day period, the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post published 34 news stories with Bahrain in the headline or lead. Each story addressed the ongoing conflict. To answer the first research question, the vast majority of these stories were printed in the front "A" sections, and most were from 500 - 1,500 words.



Addressing the second research question, use of sources was analyzed. More stories used protesters as sources (67.6 percent) than individuals supporting the government (52.9 percent). In fact, five more stories (out of 34 total) were published that used protesters as sources. This suggests a lack of fairness in news coverage of the conflict in Bahrain.

A closer examination of source use made this imbalance more apparent. An analysis of the words quoted or paraphrased by both sides of the conflict revealed substantially more words - almost 900 - allotted to protesters. This pattern of bias toward the protesters was shared by all three publications. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post published more stories that used protesters as sources than government supporters. The numbers of words from these sources was more aligned with bias toward the protesters in the Los Angeles Times and Washington Post. Both used protesters as sources more than 80 percent of the time.

The third research question sought to identify frames used to shape these stories. Five frames were identified: slightly against the government of Bahrain, strongly against the government of Bahrain, strongly in favor of the government of Bahrain, slightly against the United States' involvement in Bahrain, and slightly in favor of the United States' involvement in Bahrain. Each frame was used at least once in the 34 news stories.

The two frames against the Bahraini government appeared in 38.2 percent of news stories about the conflict. Only one story was published using the frame in favor of the Bahrain government. Most startlingly, more than half of the stories in the New York Times were framed against the government. This is another indicator of these publications' bias toward the protesters.

Two more frames emerged in the analysis. Eight stories used a frame biased either toward or against the United States. Six were slightly against the United States, and two were slightly in favor. Each newspaper published at least one such story, and each published more stories with a frame against the United States than stories with a frame in favor of it.

The qualitative nature of this study was beneficial in identifying other patterns in news coverage of the conflict in Bahrain. The New York Times ended seven of its 15 stories with paragraphs that favored the protesters, usually quotations that tended to evoke sympathy from the reader. For example, a story on the front page of the New York Times on February 20, 2011, entitled "Protesters take Bahrain square as forces leave," ended with a quotation from a protester: "This is Bahrain; people are willing to be killed. The government can't control this, and they know it. Today, the people are happy." This type of ending tends to sway readers' opinions in favor of the protesters and their goals.

The analysis also found that 10 of 12 stories in the Washington Post about the conflict in Bahrain were focused on the United States' involvement. This was not the case in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times. Such evidence points to a Westernized perspective in the Washington Post's coverage of the conflict.

The findings relating to the theoretical scope of this study are largely congruent with the cultural framing hypothesis. The three newspapers framed their coverage in favor of the protesters who were lobbying for freedoms familiar to those in the United States. Moreover, the Washington Post in particular drew attention to the United States' involvement in Bahrain in more than 83 percent of its news stories. Two possible causes:

- 1) Journalists or editors attempting to localize an international story and/or
- 2) Journalists or editors allowing a Westernized perspective to frame news stories. In the second case, news consumers may have inadvertently received biased information about the conflicts in Bahrain, potentially shaping their opinions and public opinion about the situation (Altheide, 1991;

Blumler & Gurevitch, 1982; Curran, Gurevitch, & Woollacott, 1982; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Wanta & Hu, 1993).

More simply, the cultural framing hypothesis was supported by the sources used, the number of words allotted sources, and most of the frames utilized. However, the cultural framing hypothesis was partially disproved by some of the frames in these news stories. Eight of the 34 stories addressed the United States' involvement in the Bahraini conflicts, but six were framed slightly against the United States. This result is inconsistent with a pro-Western perspective, but this finding could be interpreted in two ways: 1) Focus on the United States illustrates ethnocentricity and, thus, cultural bias or 2) Since some of the focus on the United States is negative, the stories lacked cultural bias toward the United States.

Therefore, the study's results indicate a continued clash between the non-Western world and the U.S. - at least in U.S. news media's coverage. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post's reporting on the conflict in Bahrain provides evidence of cultural conflict in the coverage of world political events.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Reese, Gandy, and Grant (2001) identified limitations of both qualitative and quantitative framing studies. Since this study was based on qualitative analysis, future researchers should consider the framing of the Bahrain protests - alone or with the other protest movements in the Middle East - in a quantitative fashion to look for broader trends in the coverage.

Moreover, future research should include analysis of television and radio news media to see if the patterns found in this study of print media are common across news media. These studies could be qualitative or quantitative to provide more data on U.S. news media coverage of the conflicts in Bahrain.

Scholars should analyze news coverage of ongoing conflicts in the Arab World in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Such analyses would provide world context for the cultural framing hypothesis - as it relates to Huntington's clash of civilizations - to be further proved or disproved.

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