VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in de Journalistiek

FROM WESTERN SOURCING AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES* TO A COSMOPOLITAN PAPER FOR THE FUTURE?

A quantitative study of "white" sourcing practices in *The New York Times'* coverage on the war in Afghanistan

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2021-2022

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Abstract

Within the domain of conflict reporting, (American) mainstream media tends to focus on official, 'elite' sources. However, these sources often promote a Western-biased view of events. This is what Dutch journalist Bette Dam experienced during her stay in Afghanistan. As a part of Dam's Ph.D., this thesis examines which sources *The New York Times*, one of the world's most powerful newspapers, has used for its coverage of the Afghanistan conflict. By analyzing sourcing practices in a corpus consisting of 690 articles from 2002 to 2021, this research unravels the focus on the dominant master narrative, which is the American War on Terror narrative. It shows how this macro-narrative is embraced and enforced by the strong focus on elite sources, and how suppressed narratives like false reporting phenomena and particularly the Taliban's attempts to surrender were neglected. In the end, we reflected upon different options for change in the future, which Dam will take into account during her conversations with *The New York Times.*

Keywords

Critical Media Studies – Taliban – Afghanistan – War on Terror – United States of America – 9/11 attacks – al-Qaeda – sourcing – peace and war journalism – journalistic bias – *The New York Times*

Kritische mediastudies – Taliban – Afghanistan – War on Terror – Verenigde Staten van Amerika – aanslagen op 11 september 2001 – al-Qaeda – bronnengebruik – vredes- en oorlogsjournalistiek – journalistieke bias – *The New York Times*

Persbericht

The New York Times: onafhankelijk journalistiek of instrument van het Amerikaanse War on Terror-narratief?

Door het dominante gebruik van westerse 'elitebronnen', zoals Amerikaanse overheidsbronnen, heeft The New York Times jarenlang belangrijke 'supressed narratives' gemist in zijn verslaggeving over Afghanistan. Dat blijkt uit onderzoek van Myrthe Timmermans. De masterstudente onderzocht welke bronnen het Amerikaanse medium gebruikte en welk narratief hierdoor domineerde. "Deze westerse bias in de mainstream media is een diepgeworteld probleem waar we vanaf moeten", aldus Timmermans.

In het kader van het doctoraatsonderzoek van de Nederlandse journaliste en Afghanistan-experte Bette Dam nam Timmermans de periode 2002-2021 onder de loep en analyseerde 690 artikels van *The New York Times* over de oorlog in Afghanistan. De keuze voor dat medium is niet toevallig. Als een van de grootste spelers binnen de internationale media, behoort de krant onmiskenbaar tot de belangrijkste agendasetters. De editoriale en journalistieke keuzes van *The New York Times* beïnvloeden andere media wereldwijd, waaronder ook Belgische nieuwsmerken.

De bias die Timmermans' onderzoek heeft blootgelegd, kunnen we daarom beschouwen als een breed verspreid probleem. Het Amerikaanse War on Terror-narratief domineerde, waardoor (vooral) Amerikaanse overheidsbronnen de bovenhand kregen. "Maar deze militaire en officiële bronnen hadden vaak geen idee van de complexiteit van het land", zegt Timmermans. "Ze lieten zich manipuleren en verspreidden foute informatie, wat het geweld alleen maar aanwakkerde en waardoor het aantal slachtoffers toenam."

Verder ontdekte Timmermans ook dat hoewel Afghaanse bronnen iets meer dan de helft van het totaal uitmaakten, deze bronnen gebruikt werden om het Amerikaanse narratief te bevestigen en te versterken. Zowel wanneer Afghaanse overheidsbronnen als burgers aan het woord worden gelaten, zien we een grote focus op het 'geweldthema'. Aandacht voor andere thema's is er amper.

Dit onderzoek houdt *The New York Times* een spiegel voor over twintig jaar Afghanistan-verslaggeving. Maar hiernaast wil het hen in een volgende fase ook de hand reiken om samen te reflecteren over deze geïnternaliseerde westerse bias en hoe deze tegen te gaan.

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Preface and acknowledgment

This thesis examines *The New York Times'* coverage of the war in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2021. This timeframe largely corresponds with the War on Terror the United States unchained after the 9/11 attacks. Which sources were granted a voice and why? Which stories were being told and more importantly, which stories were not?

In August 2021, I decided to enter the work field and thus, the 'grown-up' world. However, my thesis was still not completed, so I took an extra year to finish the job. During this year, I hovered between the academic world and the practice in the field, as I was working as a journalist for Belga News Agency. In the end, combining writing a thesis and being a journalist proved to be enriching and taught me to stay critical of the process, even when operating within the Western mainstream journalism frame itself. This interaction between the practice and reflecting on a meta-level kept me sharp, as a journalist should be.

What was even more inspiring was Bette Dam's endless enthusiasm and passion for her work. The many stories she told me over a cup of coffee made me dream even more of pursuing a career as an investigative journalist. She supported me in this process together with Jelle Mast, who always provided the right advice and detailed feedback, which certainly elevated the level of this thesis. Therefore, I would like to thank Bette and Jelle for their patience, useful insights, and especially the trust they granted me when completing this work. Gaya Kemous, who helped process the data, also deserves a special word of thanks for his many hours of drudgery. Finally, I am grateful for the supportive words and actions of my family and friends, especially those of Rafke Pijls, Manu Vandersmissen, and my dearest sister Delphine Timmermans.

In July 2021, I spent a few days working in the Pleinlaan. There, glancing through the window, I discovered a French graffiti quote on the back of Etterbeek Station. This quote, from the French philosopher Albert Camus, is in my opinion striking for the objective of this research and in general of Bette's project, which is awareness and eventually change.

"La conscience vient au jour avec la révolte."

Myrthe Timmermans

Brussels, August 2022

1. Introduction

> Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime (Miller Center, n.d.).

With these words, former President of the United States George H.W. Bush responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These words also mark the start of the War on Terror; an international, global war that would not only touch Afghanistan but dozens of other countries too. The fragment above illustrates the strong dichotomous U.S. government narrative that from that moment on would dominate the future course in American foreign politics: 'us' versus 'the terrorists'. In Afghanistan, this so-called War on Terror, the longest war in American history, left around 170.000 Afghans (civilians, national military and police, and opposition fighters) and around 6.200 Americans (troops and contractors) dead (Crawford & Lutz, 2021). In August 2021, the war came to an end. Within a week the Taliban had taken over and after twenty years, the United States had to withdraw suddenly.

The War on Terror, especially during decisive battles and invasions, has been heavily covered by media outlets. Various journalists were sent to conflict regions, most of them embedded with military units (Tumber, 2009). As stated by Douglas Kellner (2008), the relations between war correspondents and the military apparatus are complex considering the degree of neutrality in the war coverage. In his research paper, Kellner explains that during the Afghan incursion in 2001 "the corporate broadcasting media and the press in the U.S. were largely amplifiers for messages of the state and the military" (ibid., p. 298). Media outlets were not so critical of the Bush administration and its 'Operation Enduring Freedom', resulting in poor, one-sided reporting. News articles adhered to a strong 'sphere of consensus'. This concept, defined by the American communication theorist Daniel Hallin, refers to "a province of implicit agreement wherein journalists present the 'official line' as the only correct point of view" (Oxford Reference, n.d.). The War on Terror narrative is dominated by a Western-biased frame. American news media, or the mainstream media, have proven to be following the 'old' routines of journalism, where they clearly show 'national container' thinking. The topic of this research, Afghanistan, is a matter of differences between domestic and foreign news (Berletz, 2013). In this case, Afghanistan was a story of the American government that went along the following storyline: the United States was attacked, and the American government acted upon the situation. The same 'storyline' has been used for similar conflicts involving the United

States, for example, Kuwait in the nineties, as we will see later in the text, and the recent debacle with the Iraq war in 2003.

The idea for this thesis originally came from my supervisor, Dutch journalist Bette Dam. Dam lived four years in Afghanistan as a journalist, and based on her extensive fieldwork of interviewing hundreds of Afghans over the years, she returned with great concern about the 'white' bias. As we will explain in detail in this thesis, she saw how the media sided with the 'us'. Therefore, she decided to enter the academic world and started analyzing journalistic practices. Though there is ample scientific research on biases in Western media, Dam will combine this academic knowledge with direct field experience. This will result in a very unique insight, mainly because of the added layers it gives to the impact of the bias. As said, though there is important academic work on media biases, this thesis goes further by relating it to the impact of this bias.

The subject of this thesis, namely *The New York Times,* perceives itself as a neutral and global player. Its mission statement reads as follows: "We seek the truth and help people understand the world". In the online statement on its mission and values (n.d.), *The New York Times* pledges "to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved" (ibid.). Despite this self-view, Dam saw how *The New York Times* forced the American, often securitized ideas on the country because of its influential position and how this 'Western' aligning with the 'us' had negative consequences for the society, both the Afghan and the Western societies. In this thesis, the main questions come down to this:

- Which sources has *The New York Times* used for its coverage of the Afghanistan conflict after 9/11?
- Which narrative(s) dominate(s) the Afghanistan coverage?
- How can *The New York Times* (and the media in general) become a more cosmopolitan, global entity that structurally includes diverse (not only Western) narratives? Can the Afghanistan case be of help here?

The last question relates more to the future and to change. This is what Dam envisions with her research.

Dam started writing about the conflict in 2006. She firmly believed that she was part of a media world that was close to neutral and objective reporting, and was successful in bringing the best

journalistic stories. She considered, just like many European journalists, *The New York Times* the best newspaper in the world. When she arrived in Afghanistan at that time, she took with her a deeply ingrained world view, solely based on consuming these Dutch and American newspapers. From that, she expected the Western world to be engaging, hard-working, sensible, and foremost knowledgeable in their struggle against strong terrorists. Dam was convinced that the West – guided by the powerful United States – intervened in somebody else's society very carefully and skillfully.

Instead, within two weeks of her embed with NATO in 2006, Dam's beliefs started to shake as she saw how things went in the field. As she describes in her book *Looking for the enemy* (2019a), the mission in Afghanistan, dominated by the American government, was very uninformed, and as could be argued 'colonial' ("We tell you what to do here!"), and for that, detached from realities in the field. Despite that, the United States strongly believed that Afghanistan was better off with a military solution. Diplomacy (a priority for democracies, something one would expect) was simply put aside.

Worried about this situation, Dam left the NATO bases in Afghanistan and returned solo, without any military support from the troops in the country. Most of the journalists only went embedded for their reporting, but Dam saw how this biased the information. She soon discovered that there was more nuance to the dangerous image the United States had ascribed to Afghanistan: in many areas, Afghans easily welcomed her. In no time, she had arranged interviews with the President and with tribal leaders in the far South. Dam wrote her first book about this period called *A Man and A Motorcycle* (2014), which created cracks in the strong War on Terror narrative. Then she decided to dive deeper and spent five years researching the Taliban-leader Mullah Omar, which resulted in the book *Looking for the Enemy* (2019a). Based on 150 conversations with Afghans who had never been interviewed about the topic, the narrative about the terrorist was almost turned upside down. The outcomes in this book include Dam's personal experience doing research in Afghanistan plus the outcomes that often correct the master narrative. This book forms the backbone of her current Ph.D. at the Free University of Brussels and also of this thesis.

When Dam started her work in the academic world, she quickly discovered essential context to understand the Western bias and found solace and support in the work of academics like Daniel C. Hallin, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Douglas Kellner, and others. Their work also plays an important role in this thesis. The prominence of 'the Western voice' she experienced in the field was nothing new in academia. However, to her surprise, journalists themselves were not aware of what had been researched about them and their practice for years,

it seemed. What was already written by the academic world, felt familiar to Dam, based on what she had seen in the field.

In this master's thesis, we will first start with the theoretical framework in which different insightful theories will be touched upon. We will examine the theory about macro-, meso-, and micro-narratives and we will introduce the American military master narrative versus the suppressed or minor narrative about the conflict in Afghanistan. Then we will take a look at the academic literature on sourcing practices in journalism, propaganda, the influence of 'the Big Three', peace versus war journalism, and previous research on the media's coverage of the Afghanistan conflict. In the methodology chapter, we will explain the coding process, for which we used the software program Dedoose. This chapter also provides some insights on the timing of the coverage and the most used words in the Afghanistan reporting. Then, in the analysis, we will examine and discuss the Afghan voice and the Global North voice, which is predominantly the American voice. At last, in the conclusion, we will formulate an answer to the central research questions as stated above.

2. Theoretical framework

We will first map out the theoretical framework, which is necessary to understand the complexity of the subject of this thesis. This chapter is divided in three main sections. First, we will explain Stathis N. Kalyvas' theory on macro-, meso-, and micro-narratives. These concepts are central to the understanding of the differences between the American, military master narrative and the 'suppressed' or 'minor' narrative, that will be discussed in the second section. To illustrate how the media mainly went along with the former, we will use the specific example of Dad Mohammed, who was an Afghan strongman in southern Afghanistan. In the third section, we will use the Nayirah-testimony to illustrate how the American media in the past fell for officialdom and embraced a factually untrue war narrative. Then, we will elaborate upon the academic input on (Western) bias and how the American media's ethnocentric focus on the conflict relates to racism and patriotism. Further, we will touch upon the wide-reaching influence of 'the Big Three', or the world's three biggest news agencies. We will also briefly explain the difference between the 'peace journalism' and the 'war journalism' frame, as described by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick. At last, we will discuss some previous research on media reporting of the Afghanistan conflict.

2.1 Macro-, meso-, and micro-narratives

The Western frame in media coverage about Afghanistan often downplays or ignores the complexity of the Afghan society, culture, and politics and reduces it to a hotbed of Islamic extremists instead of capturing the bigger picture. The war in Afghanistan is in most cases portrayed as a binary conflict. However, this is certainly not the case given the multiplicity of actors in the conflict including warlords, tribesmen, Taliban, government officials… and their interference with each other. In the preface of Mike Martin's book *An Intimate War*, Stathis N. Kalyvas, a Greek political academic, touches upon the issue: "[N]ot only do we 'not get' Afghanistan, but we don't even realize that we don't get it" (2017, p. xv). Kalyvas uses a strategy of disaggregation to analyze political violence, rebellions, revolutions, and civil wars. He defines the three levels – the macro-, meso-, and micro-level – as follows:

> The first level focuses on interactions between unitary (state and non-state) political actors; the second level deals with the interaction between political actors and the populations they rule; and the third level concentrates on interactions within small groups and among individuals (2006, p. 10).

The trifurcation permits a more nuanced and deeper analysis than the majority of the existing research in the field of violence studies, which mostly focuses on the country-level macro. The author underlines the importance of research at the micro-level which is, as said, often ignored. Another characteristic of the macro-level analysis is to assume unitary actors, creating two (or sometimes even more) demarcated, coherent parties in the conflict, repeatedly reducing the reality to a binary conflict. Kalyvas denounces this tendency because it "fails to match the vast complexity, fluidity, and ambiguity one encounters on the ground" (ibid., p. 10). The macro-level can be linked to war journalism practices, which tend to represent a conflict as a feud between mainly two rivals and neglects other possible stakeholders in the conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 209). We will later return to this. The meso-level, however, focuses a bit more on the populations and the people. However, these groups are still represented as a monolithic unity that political actors seek to win for their 'party'. Empirical evidence has shown that this type of analysis still ignores the complexity and the intercommunal dynamics. Hence, Kalyvas developed a micro-level way of analysis, which scrutinizes individual realities and internal divisions among small groups. Kalyvas' method tries to function as a bridge between abstract macro-level studies and extremely specific micro-oriented research.

2.2 Introducing the master and suppressed narrative on Afghanistan

Kalyvas' theory about frames can be linked to the concept of master narratives versus non-master narratives. Dam realized that before she arrived in Afghanistan, she had been living in the master narrative, fed by the Western media, which was mainly embracing the War on Terror. The most insightful work on narratives comes from Morgan Stack (2013). She wrote her Ph.D. about media coverage of three terrorism attacks and denoted the problematic bias in the reporting. She also sees the problem explained best with the concept of master versus minority or minor narratives or frames. In her research, she acknowledges how the War on Terror, just as the Cold War frame, is a master frame. Stack refers to the theories of Kuypers, Cooper & Althouse (2008), Reese (2007), and Hackett (2001) who have written on the development of this frame and how it started to occupy this major position within foreign politics. Only a few weeks after 9/11, Hackett described how quickly the master frame dominated other frames and stories in the media.

> In America's alternative press, but rarely in the dominant media, other frames were in play – that violence begets violence, or that the double standards and hegemonism of the U.S. government's foreign policy were part of a broader pattern from which the evil acts of September 11 emerged (cited in Stack, 2013, p. 56).

Moreover, according to Kalyvas, these master narratives simplify the complexity of conflicts. The hegemony of such narratives sometimes leads to the marginalization of research findings that do not fit in the frame of the narrative (2006, p. 390).

Below, we will introduce the 'master narrative' or the military narrative that the United States developed and used after 9/11 as a justification for their military invasion of multiple countries, Afghanistan among others. Then, we will zoom in on the 'suppressed narrative', which offers a different account of the events. In this research we opted for the term 'suppressed'. However, alternatives like 'minor' or 'marginalized' can also be possible. It is difficult to determine the most neutral term when the intentions or work routines of the journalist are not yet known. In the interviews with reporters, Dam will try to figure this out to determine if these narratives were 'suppressed' or 'marginalized' on purpose or out of ignorance.

2.2.1 The master narrative

Most Westerners were only introduced to Afghanistan after the attacks of 9/11 when four airplanes hit the United States and killed almost 3.000 people. President George Bush quickly responded to the attacks by claiming that the United States was engaged in a 'Global War on Terror'. This "American-led global counterterrorism campaign" would soon "represent a new phase in global political relations" (Jackson, 2020). In a few days, the face of Osama bin Laden, the until then unknown man who was behind these attacks, appeared on television. Bin Laden, who stood at the head of al-Qaeda, was based in Afghanistan – or rather said: he was hiding under the protection of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In the West, the Taliban regime was already known as these unreliable fundamentalists who were anti-Western. They, as Bush said, stood for everything the West did not stand for. Soon CIA head George Tenet convinced Bush that the enemy was even bigger than al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Eventually, the United States would fight its War on Terror against "organizations, groups, and individuals in 92 countries" (Dam, 2019a, p. 251)

It was not difficult for President Bush to rally the international community to take a stance. In no time he organized the biggest coalition ever to start fighting against the terrorists. In October 2001, Washington decided to initiate 'Operation Enduring Freedom' and invaded Afghanistan on the 7th of that month (Barfield, 2010, p. 269). The Americans easily expelled al-Qaeda and toppled the Taliban regime. According to Gopal (2014, p. 104), the Taliban movement had ceased to exist barely one month after its military collapse. Most of the al-Qaeda members had fled the country to Pakistan, Iran, or elsewhere. Bin Laden himself had fled to Pakistan (Barfield, 2010, p. 270). Taliban members had returned home and renounced the cause that originally tempted them into joining the Taliban. In three months, the war was won: the Taliban had been defeated, and the new democratic government could be installed. In the eyes of the United States, the troops would still be necessary because they expected the Taliban and al-Qaeda to immediately fight back. For them, the priority was to install security in the country, by completely defeating the terrorists. Therefore, the United States sent out Special Forces teams to hunt them down. Most of the money went to these military activities. Gopal (2014, p. 273) described how the lion's share of the American budget for Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011 (557 billion dollars) "was mostly military expenditure, a significant chunk of which ended up in the coffers of regional strongmen". Every attack was seen as terrorist violence. That often resulted in the request for more troops, to win against these terrorists. This was the narrative that dominated these first years of war.

2.2.2 The suppressed narrative

Only from 2006 on did other narratives come to the surface. Most of them were correcting and nuancing the American narrative. In 2012, the book of Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2012) created a storm among experts. While it has not sold well, the book described for the first time the very problematic relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as they were not allies. They were even uncomfortable with each other. "A bone in the throat", as the authors called it in the eponymous chapter on the period between 1998 and 2001 (ibid., pp. 159-188). After 9/11, Washington threatened the Taliban leadership with destruction if they chose to protect Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. However, Mullah Omar refused to hand over Bin Laden, as he saw the protection of guests as a "religious and cultural duty" (ibid., 2011, p. 5). There was a lot of Taliban opposition to Bin Laden as they had tried to expel him at least three times. But because of Mullah Omar's refusal to give up on Bin Laden, public perception – and the perception of American officials – no longer made a distinction between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and they were seen as close allies. Dam's book came out in 2009 and states the same.

The most important element that has been largely omitted within the American narrative, was the Taliban's surrender after the United States launched its operation. On December 4th, 2001, Mullah Omar consulted for the last time with his senior commanders to discuss their options in the war. The commanders unanimously agreed to halt their fight because the enemy was too powerful. Moreover, dozens of fighters had already surrendered or fled the battlefield to go home. Earlier at the beginning of November, Mullah Omar had already explored the possibility of surrender. According to Gopal (2014, p. 47), he had reached out to Hamid Karzai (through tribal intermediaries) and "was seeking a face-saving abdication of power, which meant an 'honorable immunity', in the words of an associate". But Donald Rumsfeld, the American Secretary of Defense, responded clearly that "Washington would accept nothing short of unconditional surrender". Even after the Taliban collapse, attempts to reconcile with the Karzai regime were rejected. In his book, Gopal cited the Taliban Defense minister Mullah Obaidullah, who said that "a war [was] forced upon [them]" (2014, p. 195). In Kunduz on the 23rd of November, the Taliban surrendered to general Abdul Rashid Dostum – who would later become vice-president of Afghanistan in 2014 – after heavy combat. In her book, Dam (2019a, p. 258-259) reports how Dostum's militias killed hundreds of surrendered Talibs. Other Taliban members died during transport to detention centers like the Qala-i-Jangi and Sheberghan prisons.

Eventually, on the 5th of December, a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Obaidullah met Karzai, who soon would be appointed as the new President during the International Conference

on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany. Mullah Obaidullah, who was the new Taliban leader after Mullah Omar's departure, surrendered to Karzai and expressed the war fatigue that reigned within the Taliban ranks. In a letter, Mullah Omar recognized Karzai's selection as interim President and officially relinquished power. The Taliban top figures "pledged to retire from politics and return to their home villages, […] agreed that their movement would surrender arms, effectively ensuring that the Taliban could no longer function as a military entity" (Gopal, 2014, p. 47). Al-Qaeda on the other hand had fled to Pakistan to pursue their holy jihad. The contrasting reaction to the American invasion emphasized once more the differences between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, "[…] but as Washington declared victory, they passed largely unnoticed" (ibid., p. 47).

Karzai accepted the surrender and even decided to grant amnesty to the Taliban fighters. He promised this in the international media. Al-Qaeda members however would still be brought to justice. Dam (2019a, pp. 268-270) recounts how this decision would infuriate Rumsfeld, who followed a strict policy toward the Taliban "to bring justice to them or them to justice", as Coll (2018, p. 118) recounts. Rumsfeld demanded to recall the amnesty immediately. Karzai gave in on this request and prohibited all Taliban members from participating in the future government. This new provisional regime would be the topic of the international peace conference in Bonn, organized by the United Nations. Different Afghan (political) factions were present, apart from the Taliban, who were excluded from the talks (Barfield, 2010, pp. 283-284). Coll (2018, p. 118) points out how hardly anyone in Washington had thought about the backlashing effects that this exclusion might create.

Dam was among the few to describe how the surrender of the main enemy of the United States was not accepted by the American government. While in the field most Taliban had gone home and started a new life, the United States ignored this reality.

That brings us to the second large part of the suppressed narrative (besides the surrender): the Taliban did not regroup until 2005/2006. Before that, there was no Taliban resistance except for a few individual actions. But while there was no enemy, the number of foreign troops increased. From 2002 on, the Americans chased down 'the Taliban' and continued to 'fight the enemy'. They did not realize they were fighting a non-existing adversary and that, as Gopal has marked, "the War on Terror had become an end in itself, the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy" (2014, p. 133). The American military lived in this ideology and believed that the Taliban was still everywhere. The 'counterterrorist' troops would conduct raids throughout the country in their attempt to find Bin Laden and other remaining al-Qaeda members and Mullah Omar and

Taliban members, but with little result. All violence was attributed to these terrorists, as Stack also discovered when she researched three terrorism attacks for her Ph.D. (2013).

Dam (2019a) describes in detail how this went in Afghanistan. They asked the newly installed government for information about where to find the Taliban. After the Taliban collapse, the new governors and police commanders filled the power vacuum. They used the foreign troops and the Afghan government in their local feuds. Since Afghanistan has been at war for forty years, there were a lot of feuds between families and tribes that resulted in open quests for revenge. Also, there was still intense competition between families, tribes, and sub-tribes for more land, gaining more income for their families. The United States came in with heavy weapons and tons of dollars and had no eye for the background of the Afghan leaders. These Afghan leaders sent the American soldiers to their rivals and told them that they were Taliban in order to kill them. The United States often did not cross-check the information of their allies. Most of the dead people in the first years are rivals of the newly installed government, and basically civilians. Due to their poor knowledge of these micro-level dynamics between strongmen, tribes, and families… American troops were manipulated for the personal goals of Afghan warlords. Mike Martin, a former British army officer who designed and implemented the British Military's Cultural Advisor program in Helmand, where he was stationed with the British troops, described in his book *An Intimate War* (2017) how the British tried to grasp the local Afghan reality and the dynamics but failed in doing so.

Three aspects are crucial for understanding. There was a heavy or sole reliance on these governors who were asked to chase down Taliban in a land without Taliban or with surrendered Taliban. As we will see in the subchapter on journalistic practices, officialdom has been a problem and was again a problem in reporting on this. The second was that the American army – without the help of their governors – tried to hunt down the assumed Taliban (who actually surrendered) and al-Qaeda (who left the country). Because the media had missed this surrender or were agreeing with the officials (the U.S. government) that the surrender should be overruled, they regarded this hunting down as an agreeable strategy. The third was the strategy of promising a bounty for turning in Taliban or al-Qaeda members, which backfired in the fractured and complex Afghan society. Martin repudiates the American approach which "would cause people to denounce anyone they were having a feud with, or even innocent people, in order to collect the money" (2017, p. 125). Despite the absence of the Taliban, and thus the enemy, Afghan strongmen would create enemies where there were none. They manipulated the Americans – and the Americans let themselves be manipulated – into battling their personal rivals and "[exploited] the perverse incentive mechanism that the Americans – without even

realizing it – had put in place" (Gopal, 2014, p. 109). They were involved in a constant struggle for power with each other. False reporting, or as it is called in international law, 'denunciation', led to the imprisonment of many Afghans, who were – in the eyes of the United States – all affiliated with terrorist groups one way or another. As we will see with the example of Dad Mohammed, Afghan commanders greedily joined this practice and offered false reports to the American forces. According to Dam, but also Gopal and Aikins, most of the killings during the first four years of Operation Enduring Freedom had to do with rivalries, not with terrorists. The inaccurately used War on Terror had become a term that was misused on many occasions, and mostly to legitimize violence.

Recently in June 2022, Dam met the Taliban deputy minister of Public Works who told her that he had surrendered in 2001, and went home to start a pharmacy or telephone shop. But he was quickly arrested and put in prison because he was Taliban. However, the deputy minister knew that this was a scam: he had denied the marriage of his daughter to a tribal elder in western Kandahar in July 2001, just before 9/11. The rejected Afghan man was on good terms with the newly installed controversial governor. He was close to the CIA and managed to convince them to arrest the deputy minister 'for being Taliban'. He was imprisoned but later released because he managed to get his side of the story out to President Karzai. Afterward, Karzai offered him a job in the government, but he was afraid and fled, and became Taliban. This is an example to illustrate how these suppressed knowledge stories were systematically left out. Of course, there are more examples of suppressed narratives, but in this research, we decided to focus on the surrender and the false reporting/denunciation.

2.2.3 Denunciation by Dad Mohammed

As Martin has done with several cases in his book, we will use the specific example of Dad Mohammed to illustrate the complexity of Afghanistan in the 21st century that the British, the Americans, and previously also other foreign invaders like the Soviets, were unable to grasp. For years, this has led to more fighting, more chaos, and furthermost, more (citizen) victims. We will focus on the events in Helmand until Dad Mohammed's death in 2009 to demonstrate how the British did not understand local dynamics, but as previously stated the Americans and ISAF troops were also unable to comprehend certain practices like the side-switching and manipulation, especially by local warlords or strongmen. This proves that the focus on the suppressed or macro-narrative (portraying Dad Mohammed as an Afghan 'government'

actor/source) has always prevailed over the micro-narrative (acknowledging that Dad Mohammed is more than a governmental player).

After the American invasion, millions of dollars were pumped into the creation of an Afghan national army and police, while other funds were directed to corrupt warlords who fought these security forces and set up checkpoints along the road to earn 'passage money'. But within their 'counterterrorist' narrative, the Americans empowered the Afghan army, which consisted at the time of "collections of militias associated with local or regional strongmen", like Dad Mohammed (Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 26).

This strongman from Sangin was also known by the name 'Amir Dado' and was a member of the Alakozai tribe. By mid-1979, during the Soviet-Afghan War, Dad Mohammed allied with Atta Mohammed and Abdul Khaleq to overthrow the governor and rule over the district of Sangin. As Martin states, the response to the government was primarily organized by local resistance groups without help from the mujahideen parties. How local commanders grabbed power, was described as follows: "The mechanism was that an individual actor – a military entrepreneur – would leverage the perception of a power vacuum, created by a weakened or non-existent government in a district, to improve his own position" (2017, pp. 46-47). Later in the conflict, when supplies and funding were running low, these local commanders would approach mujahideen parties to seek (financial) protection. As such, local commanders provided mujahideen parties with crucial information about the on-the-ground fighting in exchange for funding and legitimacy from the political parties (ibid., p. 47).

Dad Mohammed initially allied with 'Mahaz-e Milli' (Mahaz), a traditionalist party within the seven parties of the mujahideen, but he soon switched to another mujahideen party: the 'Jamiat-e Islami' (Jamiat), an anti-royalist party which sought to establish a modern state based on Islamic principles (ibid., p. 41). But Mahaz could not supply Dad Mohammed sufficiently enough in his feud with Atta Mohammed – who also had 'been' briefly with Jamiat – over Sangin's Bazaar. Local commanders often switched between parties, and thus ideologies, which indicates according to Martin that "private disputes between local actors were the primary factor when deciding to affiliate with a specific mujahideen party" (ibid., p. 55). A lot of these feuds were over the opium trade and stimulated the 'intra-mujahideen war'. Martin even believes that the Atta Mohammed-Dad Mohammed dispute over local dominance has influenced the present-day violence in the region, which is still mainly about local dynamics (ibid., p. 71). The mujahideen parties were unaware that their money was being used in local conflicts that often had originated before the revolution, and that they were being manipulated

by local strongmen. The situation is similar to the more recent state of affairs, where foreign troops and the Afghan government were being used in local feuds due to their poor knowledge of micro-level dynamics between strongmen, tribes, families, etcetera.

In the 1990s, the Taliban attacked Dad Mohammed and Atta Mohammed, who had – despite their dispute over the past fifteen years – formed an alliance. The two strongmen were defeated by Talib fighters and fled Sangin. In December 1994 and January 1995, Helmand fell to the Taliban who largely disarmed the formerly ruling jihadi commanders and installed their own people on important political key posts (ibid., p. 98). This takeover in Helmand is illustrative of how other Afghan cities would fall into the hands of the Taliban in the following months.

After the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Dad Mohammed was assigned as Helmand intelligence chief for the National Directorate of Security (NDS or the Afghan Internal Security Service). He exploited his family's power base and set up his brother Daud as chief of police in Sangin. Another brother became the governor of the district. During their time as NDS chief and governor of Helmand, Dad Mohammed and Sher Mohammed Akhundzada (Alizai tribe) – another important Helmandi figure – "ruthlessly favored their individual and tribal networks, while excluding and preying upon rivals through use of their own personal militias" (Bird & Marshall, 2011, p. 168). Especially Afghans from the Ishaqzai tribe were "systematically marginalized" (ibid.). In another conflict, Dad Mohammed informed American soldiers that the Chowkazai, a tribe with a lot of drug wealth, housed multiple Taliban members just so he could steal their opium crop.

From mid-2003 onwards, Dad Mohammed and his militias were funded and armed by the U.S. Special Forces. He relied on the American military to secure his position as NDS chief in Helmand. In March 2003, commanders Mir Wali and Shirzai had tried to blame Sher Mohammed for the killing of two U.S. Special Forces soldiers. Dad Mohammed, as Sher Mohammed's ally, appointed another man with whom he had a personal feud as the culprit. However, Dad Mohammed was presumably involved in the crime himself (Martin, 2017, p. 127). For this reason and other abuses and manipulations, the United Nations called for his removal. This practice of false reporting or denunciation was a widespread phenomenon that has been suppressed in the coverage. We will soon see in *The New York Times* analysis, how these real reasons for the conflict – that had nothing to do with the War on Terror – were just not reported on.

2.3 How come *The New York Times* did not cover the suppressed narrative(s)?

2.3.1 Media debacle after media debacle: the Nayirah-testimony

The potentially devastating impact of solely focusing on elite/official sources is known. Many are aware of the debacles in Iraq in 2003, where American media fell for the officials and embraced a factually untrue war narrative. This led to the invasion of Iraq, and destroyed the country, killing at least 300.000 people (Crawford, 2021).

Other lies have been tried by the U.S. government, which were also embraced by the American media. Take for example the Kuwait war. When Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied the small Arab monarchy, the American public was puzzled: what is Kuwait? Washington D.C. and the corporate world, however, did know what Kuwait was: a strategic pro-Western oil-rich nation. Losing the Kuwaiti resources was no option for Iraq. Therefore, the American establishment considered war. But how to convince a war-tired public that the United States should intervene in a far-away historic quarrel? Besides, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Hussein was a Western ally (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016, pp. 439-440). Why was the United States trying to fight the man they armed during the Iraq-Iran war? What followed was a carefully planned media campaign to support a U.S.-led intervention against Iraq. First, the White House tried to explain to the American public that there was no guarantee that Hussein would stop in Kuwait. What if he invaded Saudi Arabia and consequently ruled over the lion's share of oil fields in the world? But these geopolitical calculations did not convince the Americans, nor their press (Darda, 2017, p. 79).

Then came the fifteen-year-old Nayirah. From an unofficial congressional committee, in front of live TV cameras, the then-unknown Kuwaiti girl recounted her experiences with the Iraqi soldiers. Nayirah described what she saw as a rampage: "I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns. […] They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the children to die on the cold floor" (ibid., p. 79). An American congressman stated he had never heard such "a record of inhumanity, brutality, and sadism" (ibid., p. 80). The war was now mediatized as a humanitarian intervention against a country of baby killers. Nayirah's story was thus "crucial in authorizing the state's own story of a humanitarian crusade in the Middle East" (ibid., p. 74). The United States led a U.N. coalition into Kuwait, decimating the Iraqi army and reconquering Kuwait for the Al-Sabah family, the ruling family in the country.

However, a few months after the war, *The New York Times* journalist John MacArthur uncovered a great scandal: the Nayirah testimony was nothing more than a public relations coup. At the hearing she did not reveal her identity "for fear of inviting retaliations against her

family", but she appeared to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States (ibid., p. 80). The girl did not witness Iraqi soldiers killing babies in a Kuwaiti hospital. She never was a volunteer. The whole story was set up by the American public relations firm Hill and Knowlton. They were working for Citizens for a Free Kuwait, a U.S.-based organization backed by the Kuwaiti government that advocated for American military intervention in Kuwait. The story allowed the American government to frame the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in humanitarian terms. Consequently, creating bipartisan and public support for the war (ibid., pp. 79-83).

Before MacArthur's discovery, wide-reaching media outlets like *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Los Angeles Times,* and also *The New York Times* had almost blindly treated the story as facts. Moreover, Nayirah's testimony was also widely accepted among NGOs as truthful (ibid., p. 80). Even Amnesty International – who originally went along with the incubator story – had to issue an embarrassing retraction when the fakeness of the story was discovered. Thus, few voices within the media seemed to contradict the narrative in the direct aftermath of the testimony, except for a handful of editorials including *The Seattle Times* and *USA Today*. MacArthur (1992) refers to *ABC*'s John Martin as one of the first journalists to contradict the story. However, their investigation fell on deaf ears with the larger public, including other media outlets and the political scene. Herbert N. Foerstel (2001), among others, described how the American press was silent about their faulty reporting and the lack of source and fact-checking they did on the Nayirah testimony.

MacArthur's discovery is important for our work since our ambition is to create change. It corresponds with this thesis about ignoring suppressed knowledge and creating wrong narratives. But Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) have pointed out a deeper problem: despite MacArthur's unraveling of the false stories, and the wide attention it got, not much happened after. As with the Iraq debacle, and despite the apologies of *The New York Times*, not much has changed since. In 2014, Damaris Dolhoun wrote an article for *Columbia Journalism Review* about why ISIS coverage sounds familiar and how the media kept repeating the same narrative about terrorist threats, instead of nuancing the story. They did not learn much from the past debacles. As with Dam her disclosures on the Afghan case, it has not become part of the mainstream narrative.

The question that needs to be asked here is: is the lack of time and money the reason for this dangerous bias? In the case of MacArthur, the knowledge was available, as was the case with Iraq and Afghanistan. The knowledge was available, but there was simply no interest.

After the Nayirah-story and the lies about the Iraq war, there was a basis of information at hand that could help make the journalist more critical. But this did not happen; there was no more criticism toward the American government about Afghanistan. Adapting narratives, how can we do that? In interviews with *The New York Times*, Dam hopes to find an answer to this.

2.3.2 Academic input on bias, propaganda and sourcing practices

While all the newspapers claim to be neutral and global (see the mission statement of *The New York Times* on page 2), there is a problem. History (and previous examples like the Nayirah-testimony) tell us that relying on elite sources and thus the subsequent bias, is a dangerous routine. Those elite sources tell the formal story, often the one of the master narrative. In the Afghan case, but also in the cases we will discuss in this chapter, we see that these elite sources are not only embracing this master narrative, but they often also initiate it. In 1975 already, Philip Knightley demonstrated in *The First Casualty* – a history of war reporting – how the American media has relied mostly on Western journalism. Knightley described how the Western media predominantly chose white sources throughout the history of journalism to talk about the Other. Even when they reported on their own Civil War in the United States in the nineteenth century (and when there was no 'far away Other'), strong officialdom dominated within the American domain of war correspondence. This points out that self-censorship, by relying mostly on one's own government, has always been a strong part of war journalism.

Whilst the extent of it is debatable, it is thus widely accepted among scholars that the American media are often used by the government to sell, garner support for, or discredit a certain policy. This is what is called propaganda. Western propaganda is mostly coated in a democratic jargon that camouflages the propagandist objectives. Therefore, many believe that the Western press can never become totally independent, free, or democratic. A major contribution to this field was the work of Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. Within the media world, Chomsky is sometimes considered to be a very leftist academic. He was a prominent voice in this debate, where he and Herman pointed out the problem of elitism, and of a strong focus on interviewing officials. In their bestseller *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* they tried to explain how the American media is in fact a propaganda machine:

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of

> concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda (1988, p. 59).

They argue that news items go through five filters, thus rendering them propaganda to serve the interests of the elite. A few authors blamed the propaganda theory to be a conspiracy, refusing to believe – as Herman states – that "institutional factors can cause a 'free' media to act like lemmings in jointly disseminating false and even silly propaganda" (2010, p. 104).

Another critique came from Carlin Romano, according to whom Chomsky and Herman "failed to ask reporters why they did what they did" (ibid., p. 105). Journalists might not be fully aware of the bias they may have internalized, argued Herman. Nevertheless, he emphasized that he and Chomsky did speak with several professionals in the field, something Dam is also doing. Moreover, Herman explained that the theory should not be seen as a static phenomenon, but that it "requires modification depending on local and special factors" (ibid., p. 107). In a final note, Herman argued how the theory uncovers "media subservience to government propaganda" in other conflicts – or as was said in *The First Casualty* – in almost all conflicts. As we will see in this thesis, some aspects of the propaganda model are valuable when analyzing the reporting of the Afghan conflict. We expect filter three (sources) and filter five (fear) to be especially prominent for this research. The first one relates to sources, on which the late Robert Fisk, a well-known British journalist who was based in the Middle East, made the following comment (Maté, 2013):

> And what is the sourcing? "U.S. intelligence officials said," "a senior U.S. intelligence official said," "U.S. officials said," "the intelligence official said," "Algerian officials say," "national security sources considered," "European security sources said," "the U.S. official said," "the officials acknowledged." I went—boy, I've got another even worse example here from *The Boston Globe and Mail* [*sic*], November 2nd, 2012. But, you know, we might as well name our newspapers "Officials Say." This is the cancer at the bottom of modern journalism, that we do not challenge power anymore. Why are Americans tolerating these garbage stories with no real sourcing except for very dodgy characters indeed, who won't give their names?

The fear filter, which Chomsky and Herman called 'anticommunism' in 1988, goes back to the Cold War period when people were taught to fear communism. However, after the implosion of the USSR, the anti-communist threat was no longer as viable as it was before – although it never completely disappeared. Instead, American media would slowly start to frame the world in terms of terror, especially after the attacks of 9/11 (Altheide, 2007, p. 288). They thus

promoted the 'War on Terror'. The Other – the terrorist – was villainized. Through stereotypes and ethnocentrism, the American public learned to fear Muslims (ibid., p. 292). Effectively, this discourse of fear is used as a tool for social control and "promotes the politics of fear, and numerous surveillance practices and rationale to keep us safe" (ibid., p. 304).

Chomsky and Herman's Manufacturing Consent theory partly overlaps with the "hierarchy of influences"-model which Stephen D. Reese and Pamela Shoemaker established in 1996. This theoretical framework "proposes important distinctions between levels of analysis and locates the individual journalist within a web of organizational and ideological constraints" (Reese, 2001, p. 174). According to Reese and Shoemaker, five 'levels' (from micro to macro) influence and define journalistic practices. On a micro-level, the 'routine' level describes how routines are created to help perceive the world through certain norms, values, procedures, and rules. These patterned practices constrain the 'individual' level, which comprises the "attitudes, training, and background" of a single journalist (ibid., p. 179). Further, Reese and Shoemaker defined the 'organizational' level, which specifies the organization and its dynamics in which a journalist operates and how these dynamics influence the work of the journalist. On the more macro-level, the academics determined the 'extra-media' and the 'ideological' level. The former refers to influences "originating primarily from outside the media organization" (ibid., p. 182). The ideological level defines how "media symbolic content is connected with larger social interests, how meaning is constructed in the service of power" (ibid., p. 183).

Another central theory is Lance Bennett's 'indexing norm hypothesis'. Bennett describes indexing as a practice where the elite 'indexes' media coverage, meaning that they set the boundaries of the discussion. The media question certain policies, but only insomuch the elite themselves debate on these policies (Robinson, 2001, pp. 525-528, 531). The indexing norm strongly marginalizes public opinion voices or simply non-official sources. Therefore, Bennett labels modern public opinion as "the distribution of dominant official voices as recorded in the mass media" and blames mainstream media to participate in a process wherein "democracy becomes whatever the government ends up doing" (1990, p. 125).

Journalists privilege official voices and thus, transmit the – biased – views of these elites. In the process of constituting news, other voices are being ignored and marginalized. By only representing sectional interests, a large part of the story is omitted. Newsmaking through a specific bias leads to the construction of "different portrayals of reality" according to Sigal (cited in Carlson, 2009, p. 528). The question to ask oneself is not what the reality is, but whose reality or version it is. In the article 'Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics

of Newsmaking' (1999), Sigal researches the channels of information for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He concludes that routine channels outnumber informal and enterprise channels. The notion of 'routine channel' refers to, within the context of sourcing, the routinized and almost automized act of using available, mostly 'known' sources. Sigal classifies different possible sources of information that we also located in our analysis. The big 'winners' prove to be American officials, upon which journalists tend to rely the most for their coverage of non-local news. Moreover, in articles with only one source, the dominance of American official sources appears to be even more prominent.

When we zoom in on why journalists are writing a certain story and consequently selecting certain sources, the theory of American sociologist Herbert J. Gans is useful. Gans identifies 'audience power', 'source power', and 'the need for efficiency' as driving forces behind news production. The latter two are the most interesting within the context of this thesis. In his research, although it focuses on national news, Gans discovered that journalists mainly reported on what authoritative sources like government officials told them. He refers to the outcome of this sourcing practice as 'monoperspectival news', underlining the one-sidedness of the story (Usher, 2011, para. 4). Opposed to monoperspectival news is 'multiperspectival news'. In an interview with Nieman Lab, Gans defined the concept as follows: "[Multiperspectival news] obtains news from many other sources, including ordinary citizens, and it reports a variety of political, ideological, and social viewpoints (or perspectives)" (2011, para. 5). This view partly overlaps with the values and goals of 'peace journalism', which will be described at the end of this chapter. Within monoperspectival news, journalists deliver news top-down, reporting the news "that deals mostly with people of power and high rank" (Gans, 2003, pp. 45-46). Gans admits that journalists can be critical of what these officials are saying, but that "the sources usually have the first say, thereby putting the critics in a reactive and as such inferior position" (ibid., p. 46).

Consciously or not, journalists do legitimate and spread the voices of officialdom, and thus "follow the power" (ibid., p. 47). The prominence of officialdom as a source can be seen as 'source power'. However, as mentioned earlier, efficiency is another important pillar to consider when analyzing the news process. According to Gans, news selection and production are based on a defined need for efficiency. Yet, journalists do not consciously pursue this efficiency, which is based on three "scarce resources: staff, airtime or print space, and, above all, production time" (Gans, 2004, p. 283). As Gans showed, power and efficiency are often intertwined. For example, official voices are often easy to access and are thus considered the

most efficient source (ibid., p. 282). News equation can therefore be seen as a balance between efficiency and power, "meaning that news workers must allocate scarce resources in producing their product, with due respect to the power within they operate" (Reese, 2001, p. 287). Just like Sigal among others, Gans attributes great value to the routine level. In his theory, the construction or creation of news does not happen on the individual level of the journalist self, but during "the process by which all parts, routines, and arrangements of the organization are engaged for" (ibid., p. 280).

2.3.3 The wide-reaching influence of the 'Big Three'

An important factor to keep in mind, is the influence of press agencies on the news gathering and production processes. Most of the news we consume, not only from *The New York Times*, comes from these so-called big press agencies. Sarah Van Leuven (2009) describes the influence of the three powerful agenda-setting transnational wire services: the British Reuters, the French Agence France-Presse (AFP), and the American Associated Press (AP), often collectively referred to as 'the Big Three'. Because of their global monopoly, these press agencies can influence the media flux on a large scale. Most media outlets lack sufficient resources or do simply not free enough funds for the employment of foreign correspondents, so they must rely on sourcing international news from these news agencies.

Despite their unquestionable influence in the global news sphere, Rafeeq and Jiang point out that the hegemonic role of the Big Three has decreased since the advancements in telecommunication in the 1990s (2018, p. 7). With the emergence of the Internet, it became a lot easier to connect with different parts of the world and thus to gain access to other sources than those provided by news agencies. The diminishing influence of the Big Three agencies gives editors the chance "to make news selection choices from a myriad of sources to set their own agendas" (ibid., p. 14). The authors state that "media outlets are trying to diversify their sources of foreign news" (ibid., p. 15). This is a rather optimistic conclusion when compared to other authors like Gans and Sigal who state that the dominance of routine channels is still ubiquitous.

Multiple authors have examined and criticized the ethnocentric practices of the Big Three. First, we see that the dominance of their news topic selection is very Western-based/focused. Van Leuven pointed out how uniform this topic selection is, as these agencies target the same market and the same audience. The mainly Western news selection is a result of the commercial market approach (2009, p. 5). Because the audience is mainly concentrated in the West, the journalists

are too. This leads to situations with only a handful of reporters in the country that they write about, and the majority concentrated in the United States/the West, where the elites themselves are present (ibid., p. 6).

Later in 2015, Van Leuven and other authors denoted this focus on Western (elite) stories, which are generated by the overall dependency on the Big Three (pp. 576-577). Moreover, they show that news organizations tend to 'domesticate' foreign reporting "in a way that it becomes understandable and culturally resonant for the home audience" (ibid, p. 576). This resonates with the essentialist tradition, described by the American-Palestinian author Edward Said. This tendency to simplify and thus omit parts of a story is another main characteristic of Western war journalism. The discourse used by Western journalists generally proves to be reductive to the 'actual' situation (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 28). Besides, journalistic representations frequently lapse into an Orientalist projection and thus processes of Otherization and the promotion of Western domination (ibid., pp. 51-52).

Finally, we also see that if there is attention to the Global South, the topic selection is negative. It is about war, conflict, and corruption (the stereotype). A lot of research – including articles from Boyd-Barrett (1997), Carlsson (2003), and Shrivastava (2007) – has proven that information flows in one way: "from the center to the periphery" (Rafeeq & Jiang, 2018, p. 2). Mowlana links this hegemony or even 'media imperialism' to the important role of the news agencies: "the majority of international news flow from the 'center', the 'North', or the 'West' by way of the dominant news agencies … from the developed to the developing nations" (cited in Rafeeq & Jiang, 2018, p. 3). These news agencies have a huge responsibility, as they are the first to decide on how an international story will be covered (ibid., p. 2). The role of news agencies can thus not be underestimated as they "contribute to internationalization, constructing influential news agenda and acting upon retail media" (ibid., p. 3).

The Western-based topic selection, the essentialist tendency to 'domesticate' foreign news and the negative media attention for the Global South all relate to a dominating ethnocentric bias, central in the Western mainstream media. This often results in patriotic, nationalist, and in some cases even racist media coverage. In the academic literature, this problem has already been examined by a few important authors. Moreover, the postcolonial intellectual tradition in media studies or theory is expanding, as more researchers use this critical lens to examine journalism practices. The dynamics of Postcolonial Media Theory were described as follows: "postcolonial theories and concepts hold the potential to repoliticize media theory by questioning Western assumptions about technological progress and innovation" (Llamas-Rodriguez & Saglier,

2021). This can be applied to multiple disciplines related to media studies. Crucial in this research domain, is the work of the Dutch discourse analysis expert Teun Van Dijk. To analyze the role of the press in the reproduction of racism, Van Dijk used a multidisciplinary approach. First, he mapped out some key concepts as 'racism' and how discourse can reproduce socials representations and thus contribute to racism, which is defined as:

> a system of ethnic or 'racial' dominance, that is, of systematic power abuse of a dominant (European, 'white') group against various kinds of non-European groups – such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees – in Europe, the Americas, and other European-dominated countries (2012, p. 15).

Regarding this reproduction of "racist social representations", Van Dijk acknowledges that the mass media play an important role (ibid., p. 17). This can be reflected in the source selection, which is also the core of this thesis. Journalists themselves carry the responsibility for their source selection, Van Dijk argues. In Western mainstream media, ethnic minorities are "typically considered biased sources, whereas (white) politicians, police officers, lawyers, scholars, or organizations tend to be seen as 'independent' or 'expert' and hence as reliable sources, also on ethnic events" (ibid., p. 20). But also other steps in the news making process, like routine news gathering, the discrimination of minority journalists and "the biased interest in specific negative topics associated with minorities" – which matches the negative attention for the Global South described above – all contribute to the reproduction of racism (ibid., p. 21). Van Dijk's theory thus resonates with other academic contributions on elite sources and the Western bias, previously discussed in this chapter.

There have been a few interesting contributions to the academic research on media coverage of Africa, for example by Toussaint Nothias. Nothias, a former French journalist who has entered the academic world and is now Associate Director of Research at Stanford's Digital Civil Society Lab, examined how foreign correspondents in Kenya and South Africa position themselves in relation to criticism about the international media's reproduction of racist stereotypes of Africa (2020). In the following chapters, we will elaborate upon Nothias' work. In his Ph.D. 'Forgotten Newsmakers. Postcolonial chronicles of stringers and local journalists in Central Africa' (2017), journalist Anjan Sundaram, also acknowledges how stereotypes and certain biases are reinforcing damaging, neo-colonial representations of Africa. In his work, Sundaram cites Beverly Hawk, who wrote that "metaphors used to frame African stories were Western and often colonial, not African at all" (2017, p. 20). However, there are still many

existing lacunae in the research on Afghanistan within the Postcolonial Media Theory. This thesis aims to contribute to that research field.

2.3.4 Research on the media's role in the Afghanistan conflict

There are a few pieces of research on the coverage of the Afghanistan conflict, shedding light on different journalistic sections or steps in the news production process. First considering the amount of coverage, John Hanrahan (2011) examined media coverage of wars for NiemanWatchdog.org and pointed out how U.S. newspapers have grossly underreported Afghanistan, especially in 2001 and 2002. He described how only a few media outlets had reporters on the ground. Another interesting element Hanrahan touches upon is the relation between the state and the media, as discussed earlier in the theoretical chapter. Hanrahan refers to the observations of Stephen P. Cohen, who was a South Asia advisor in the State Department in the late 1980s. According to Cohen, military and government officials often provide reporters with a lot of 'disinformation': "The press, especially in a war setting, tends to cover events the way the government presents them" (2011).

More recently, Roshan Noorzai and Claudia Hale (2020) examined how the concept of 'balance' is perceived and applied by journalists working with non-governmental/private broadcast media in Afghanistan. The authors used Robert Entman's definition of 'balance', meaning "treating opposite sides in a conflict equally and avoiding personal opinions about issues and persons in the news reporting" (ibid., p. 4). Although they focus on Afghan media, the findings of this paper could be interesting regarding this research. Besides, the partition Noorzai and Hale use for the two types of biases – structural and partisan – could be valuable when applied to the field of conflict reporting and objectivity. Structural bias is "the product of a number of factors, including news values, professional routines, resources, and dependence on sources", whereas partisan bias is "a result of the political orientation of journalists and media organizations" (ibid., p. 3). Noorzai and Hale found out that the dominant source in security-related news stories was "the official government account of events" (ibid., p. 8). The Taliban were sometimes also present but their perspective on the events always came after the government's one. "Typically, the Taliban were not given the same time or space as was given to the government nor were they quoted while government officials were." (ibid., p. 9) The researchers also pointed out that very few stories presented voices of eyewitnesses or ordinary Afghans. By ignoring this important source group, "the complexity of the Afghan conflict, particularly the human impact of the violence, was neglected" (ibid., p.16). Afghan journalists thus only presented two opposing sides, namely the government versus the Taliban, and

therefore polarized the conflict. This corresponds to the war journalism theory of Lynch and McGoldrick, as will be explained at the end of this chapter. However, the authors nuance this with a few examples of journalists who "actively sought to balance the news coverage of violent conflict with news concerning peace and reconstruction" (ibid., p. 17). Noorzai and Hale conclude that there is a need for the inclusion of other sources, like people-oriented ones, other than warring parties. This would benefit "a more inclusive and comprehensive picture of the conflict" (ibid., p. 18). As we will later see in the analysis, this reflection can be interesting when applied to the analysis of *The New York Times*' coverage of Afghanistan.

Lars W. Nord and Jesper Strömbäck (2006, p. 89) did also examine the use of sources for their research paper. The two authors compared sourcing practices in the Swedish media coverage of the September 11 attacks with the reporting on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Firstly, the use of anonymous sources was the most frequent for the coverage of Iraq (57 percent of the articles) and the 9/11 attacks (52 percent of the articles), whereas only a quarter of the Swedish articles on Afghanistan used at least one anonymous source. Further, approximately half of the articles did not include at least two sources. Nord and Strömbäck find this remarkable when regarding the widely accepted journalistic principle of using two separate independent sources. When we zoom in on the categories of sources in the news articles or features, we see that Swedish media made more use of American official sources than Afghan official sources. This applies both to the researched newspapers and the TV coverage. Moreover, the ruling category in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan were Swedish experts. Thus, American official sources were favored, "either anonymous or mentioned by name, in front of Afghani or Iraqi official sources" (ibid., p. 99). The results demonstrated "a bias in the media coverage of these events, a bias that favored the American side of the conflict and the American perspective" (ibid.). However, the authors nuance this by saying that the bias cannot be seen as intentional. According to them, two more likely explanations for this were the accessibility of American (and Swedish) sources and the dependence of Swedish journalists on American news media. The latter often led to rewrites of American articles or news features.

Lastly, in 2014 the London School of Economics and Political Science carried out a more topical-oriented research. Therefore, they partnered with the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) and investigated the British print media from December 2008 to November 2013, with a specific focus on the portrayal of British aid efforts in Afghanistan in 2013. One of their main conclusions, namely that 'aid and development' only represented 4,3 percent of the coverage on Afghanistan, emphasizes once more the focus on topics and frames that fit within the war journalism practice. Moreover, 'aid and development' appears to have

been framed in predominantly negative terms. The authors conclude: "Whilst there has been positive reporting on 'aid and development', the intensity of language used in negative portrayals appears to be much stronger" (ibid., p. 15).

2.3.5 'Peace' versus 'war' journalism

We expect *The New York Times* to mostly embrace the ideology of terrorism when reporting on attacks. *How come The New York Times did not cover the suppressed narrative?* Dam (and also other authors like Gopal, Martin, and Coll), indicates that *The New York Times* mainly covered the master narrative and not the suppressed narrative. The first time *The New York Times* spent time on the surrender was only in 2021, with an article titled "Did the War in Afghanistan Have to Happen?"[2]. About the denunciation is even less known in the newspaper.

As is the case with marginalized, suppressed groups, the – by Western media degraded minority narratives – need 'agency' to play a part in a more cosmopolitan, global international perspective. The question is how? With that, we return to the main questions of this research:

> *Can these powerful media change? What are the arguments that will change The New York Times into a more cosmopolitan, global entity that structurally includes diverse (not only Western) narratives?*

To be heard, minorities need mentors, supporters, and allies to get elevated to the level of the mainstream world. How does that work with newsgathering? This is what Dam is examining in her Ph.D., to achieve a more inclusive, global, cosmopolitan coverage in the news industry. At the beginning of this chapter, we have briefly discussed the history of bias. This is necessary to give more context to the news world, and how it could have missed essential (peace) stories. In this light, the opposition between the 'war journalism' and the 'peace journalism' frame is interesting. This theory was originally set out by Johan Galtung but was recently covered by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick in their same-titled book *Peace Journalism* (2005). In this work, the authors provide handles to recognize the dynamics of these two types of reporting.

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/23/world/middleeast/afghanistan-taliban-deal-united-states.html

Although most Western mainstream media present its conflict reporting as 'neutral', 'objective', and 'unbiased', a bias in favor of war has often been internalized and has been reinforced over the years. When referring to conventions of objectivity, the authors state that there is an overall 'natural drift' to adopt the practice of war journalism. Lynch and McGoldrick distinguish three main biases in war journalism: the first in favor of official sources, the second in favor of events over the process, and the last bias favors 'dualism' in reporting conflicts (ibid., p. 209). In this study, we will focus on the first bias, which refers to the exclusive reliance on authorities as sources. In the next paragraph, we will elaborate on the definition of 'war journalism' and its characteristics as described by Lynch and McGoldrick.

War journalism systematically focuses on violence, casualties, and visible developments in the conflict. This frame approaches conflict or war as a 'sensational' zero-sum game with two opposing sides and a strong emphasis on the eventual outcome. The classical dichotomy between winners and losers is prioritized above conflict resolution or reconciliation, as is the case with peace journalism. Moreover, war journalism tends to favor 'classical overt warfare' over 'covert wars', a non-conventional type of warfare that includes more intelligence and law enforcement practices. War journalism also favors 'elite-orientated' sources. Lynch and McGoldrick state that these 'official' sources are "often misconceived as neutral, or at least passive" (ibid., p. 18). "Official sources in nation states, with their monopoly on legitimate violence" are seen as prime sources, based on so-called "objectivity norms" (ibid., p. 140). Through this 'passive' label, official sources may try to manipulate journalists or 'spin' the news (ibid., p. 183). These sources do not only reflect reality but construct a reality that fits their concerns.

Contrary to the above-defined practice of war journalism, peace journalism "concentrates on areas of agreement, tones down political and ideological differences, and focuses on the structure of society, thus promoting conflict resolution and reconciliation" (Cozma, 2014, p. 4). According to Rune Ottosen (2010), peace journalism, as opposed to war journalism, does acknowledge the role of the media in the propaganda war. Moreover, it stands for a solution-, people- and truth-oriented approach to conflict reporting.

Peace journalism pleads for a more diverse use of sources, and thus the inclusion of 'alternative' sources other than the official and 'authoritative' ones. As previously stated, non-official sources or 'people voices' are simply ignored and do not get the chance to be heard by journalists. Peace journalism, therefore, advocates to readopt a skeptical attitude toward the real intentions of these 'neutral' sources and to "reconceptualize official sources as a party to

the conflict" (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 18). Thus, journalists must prioritize the public's interests when covering conflict, not the state's interests, who are, again, participating in the same conflict.

3. Methodology

We hope that analyzing *The New York Times* gives a detailed insight into their reporting routine. With those insights, we can learn how biases occur, and also, how we can find solutions for eliminating them. First, we will elaborate upon the research method – which is a quantitative content analysis – and the corpus selection. Then, the coding process in Dedoose will be explained before focusing on the timing of the coverage. With this timeline, which was generated by an API (Application Programming Interface), we can see the peaks in the Afghanistan reporting and thus the amount of attention *The New York Times* granted to the topic. Finally, we will discuss the WordSmith analysis that allows us to see what words/terms *The New York Times* used the most in the corpus.

The research method is mainly based on a quantitative content analysis of a selected corpus of articles from *The New York Times*. It must be clear that we choose this paper because of its power. *The New York Times* is still seen as "a leading newspaper with regard to the coverage of international news and views, drawing readers from every state and around the world" (Izadi & Saghaye-Biria, 2007, p. 148). *The New York Times* thus has a wide reach and occupies a prominent position within the Western agenda-setting media.

By doing a quantitative content analysis, we could examine a large sample of the coverage. As described by Willem Koetsenruijter and Tom Van Hout, this type of analysis allows the researcher to establish "frequencies and correlations between those frequencies" (2018, p. 194). This helps us to answer the research questions:

- Which sources has *The New York Times* used for its coverage of the Afghanistan conflict after 9/11?
- Which narrative(s) dominate(s) the Afghanistan coverage?
- How can *The New York Times* (and the media in general) become a more cosmopolitan, global entity that structurally includes diverse (not only Western) narratives? Can the Afghanistan case be of help here?

One limitation of this method is that we do not get an insight into how the reporting came into being or the choices a journalist made. For this, Dam plans to interview the journalists In New York and ask them about their working routines.

To not overlook one article (which could undermine our credibility in the talks with the newspaper itself), we decided to start with a complete sample of what has been written on

Afghanistan over the past twenty years. We obtained this with an API that was offered on *The New York Times* database. By using this tool, all the articles that matched the chosen query term were drafted into an Excel file. From this file, we could select a representative corpus for further analysis. Considering the capacity of the team and the wish to create a responsible sample, we have chosen to include ten percent of *The New York Times'* coverage of Afghanistan. It is difficult to determine a justified sample size. In their book on methods for journalism studies, Koetsenruijter and Van Hout (2018, pp. 62-64) have dedicated a few paragraphs on how to determine the right sample size, however, this remains a grey area. There are multiple factors like the confidence level and the confidence interval which should be taken into account. We think that by analyzing nearly ten percent, it is possible to get a proper idea of the coverage of *The New York Times*.

From the different sections and news desks (like culture, politics, and sports) within *The New York Times*, we chose to focus on the 'World News' section. This section is synonymous with foreign affairs, and most of the articles we are looking for come from that section. Sometimes articles on Afghanistan were more on American national politics. Then these articles focused on, for example, traumatized American veterans of the Afghanistan war who had returned home. We did not add these articles to our sample, because it was not about the conflict as a whole, but it was the coverage of an American problem in America.

The peak in coverage of *The New York Times* – as can be seen in the timeline in Figure 1 – is due to the immediate aftermath of 9/11. At that point, the master narrative started with the so-called War on Terror. To us, this is an exceptional period, with possibly a heavy reliance on Western or American government sources. Therefore, we choose to start at the time when the first extreme attention calmed down. That is from the first of January 2002. Our sample ends in March 2021, the moment the corpus was drafted. This results in an analysis of nearly twenty years of Afghanistan coverage. The query term selected to run the data collection was AFGHAN*. Possible words that could respond to this query term were Afghanistan (the country), Afghan (the adjective), and Afghan or in plural Afghans (the noun referring to the people). An article was selected when AFGHAN* popped up in the title or the lead paragraph. For safety terms, we decided to double search the term AFGHANISTAN to make sure every article that could correspond, was included.

This resulted in **7.637 articles** over nearly twenty years. This is the total *The New York Times* produced on the topic of Afghanistan. Of that, as said before, we would take ten percent which would lead to 764 articles. However, 74 articles were deleted from the drawn corpus because they would not fit in the corpus we aimed for, meaning that they would have no or

solely a very weak link to the coverage of Afghanistan. Thus, for example, opinion articles, photo or video reportages, interviews, transcripts of speeches, corrections to previous articles, geographical maps, or other articles focusing on graphics were deleted. Moreover, we chose to exclude the 'World briefing' and the 'Briefly noted' articles, which are brief articles, often containing no more than two or three paragraphs, sometimes based on news agency messages. These pieces aim to inform a reader on a topic in only a few concise sentences, often omitting sources. At the beginning of the coding process, we stumbled upon a few of these articles and coded them, but from article 50 on, we decided to exclude them. Nor the articles within the 'Struggle for Iraq' or the 'Transitions in Iraq' sections were included. Besides, when an article is about another country than Afghanistan, it was only adopted into the corpus when the part on Afghanistan was sufficiently elaborated, meaning that it would obtain a few paragraphs on the situation in Afghanistan. Reporting from the 'At War' blog was also included, just like the coverage of *The International Herald Tribune, The Times'* international edition, which was the predecessor of the current *The New York Times International Edition*. *The International Herald Tribune* ceased to exist in its form in 2013. Eventually, the **final corpus** consists of **690 articles.**

3.1 Coding process: Dedoose

The original idea of this research was that in order to address a potential bias seen in *The New York Times* (based on Dam's work in Afghanistan) we needed a firm and transparent analysis of the sources used. We need to understand the inner worlds of the journalistic routines of *The New York Times* to understand the scale of the problem and to think about solutions. As mentioned earlier, we are looking at a sample of almost ten percent, which corresponds with 690 articles. This is seen as the core of the research. For this analysis, we chose to work with the software Dedoose, which is a coding platform that enables multiple users to work (simultaneously) on the same project. We uploaded, named, and numbered the articles in Dedoose and created a codebook with different mother and child codes. At first, this was a process of trial and error. During the coding process, we sometimes agreed to add, delete or modify codes. Therefore, we coded a few articles as a test to perfect the code book as much as possible.

All the articles were given two descriptor sets: 'byline' and 'theme'. The byline-descriptor set detailed the following categories for each article: date, author, sex of the author, and the location where the article was written. In this thesis, we have only used the date and the author. The sex of the author and the writing location were not used for the analysis, but can be interesting for further research. Within the theme-descriptor set, we wondered what the (main) theme of the article was. For this, we developed eleven options: corruption, culture, women, diplomacy (referring to the more peace-oriented and non-violent approach to journalism), drugs (the Afghan opium production and trade), economy, elections (more specifically Afghan elections), health, torture/prisoners (referring mostly to Guantanamo Bay, excluding for example articles about the Taliban taking prisoners), violence, and finally varia (a category for the few articles that did not fit properly within another category). The violence category mainly covered all military actions like attacks, patrols, terrorist activities, kidnappings, the amount of threat, tracking of terrorists, violence among Afghans etcetera.

Often, articles start with an introductory or summarizing paragraph that explains the gist of the article to the reader. We decided not to code the source(s) in this 'introductory paragraph' because it will emerge further on in the article. We made three important distinctions, one concerning the naming of the source, the second one about the location, and the last one referring to the distinction between the type of government branch. As for the naming practice, when coding a government source (whether Afghan or American), or another institutional source (NATO, UN…), there were three options: 'named' (when the article attributed a name to the source), 'unnamed' (when the source remained nameless and was put away under a

certain category, for example, “an American official has said…”) and ‘anonymous’ (when a source decided to speak on condition of anonymity for some reason). Then, with regards to the location, there were three options for foreign government sources: ‘In the field’ (mainly Afghanistan, but this category also refers to other regions inflicted in the conflict, for example Pakistan), one in the home country of the source, for example, ‘In the US’, and the most frequently used one, ‘Unclear location’. Only when the location was explicitly mentioned in the text, the ‘In the field’ or the ‘In the home country’ codes were used. Finally, for the governmental codes, we made a distinction between ‘civilian government’ and ‘military government’ (including police and other security forces). For this thesis, only the naming practice and the distinction between the government branch were useful.

Each time a source was indicated in the text, it received a code. Each paragraph was coded, meaning that the same source can be coded multiple times each time the journalist started a new paragraph. When there were multiple sources in one paragraph, a corresponding number of codes was attributed. We always coded in the lowest child code as possible, defining the source as much as possible, if applicable along the three distinctions described above. The main categories include ‘American Government’ and ‘Afghan Government’, which were each divided into two subcategories: ‘Civilian’, referring to all non-military government factions, and ‘Security’, which includes all Defense sources. International organizations such as NATO, the UN, and different civil society players like NGOs did also receive a category, just as the Taliban itself, (individual) experts, think tanks, diplomats, politicians, academic sources etcetera. Another important code is ‘civilians’. For Afghan civilians, we created a distinct subcode to single out Afghan women who were given a voice. In the appendix, a list with remarks defining the coding process was included. This will facilitate the comprehension of the coding process. As multiple people have contributed to the coding, it was important to set a few practical agreements on how to code to assure the highest intercoder reliability. The team often coded together, so when someone had a question or was not so sure about a code, we discussed it together.

When all the articles were coded and the codes were revised and double-checked by another encoder, the results were exported into an Excel file. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we used pie charts.

3.2 Coverage timing

Below we introduce a timeline based on the total of *The New York Times* articles on Afghanistan after January first, 2002. This is based on the total coverage on Afghanistan, roughly 7.000 articles. With this timeline, we can see the frequency of the published articles, and with that, we can get a peek into the agenda of *The New York Times*: when did they report and when not? What was their timing for coverage of the conflict? Can we actually look at the themes or topics *The New York Times* spent this amount of time on?

With the theory of Van Leuven in mind, who says that Western press agencies mostly select Western-themed topics, and write more negatively about the Global South, we now will examine the coverage of *The New York Times*. The peaks – and the non-peaks – give away something about *The New York Times'* editorial choices on Afghanistan.

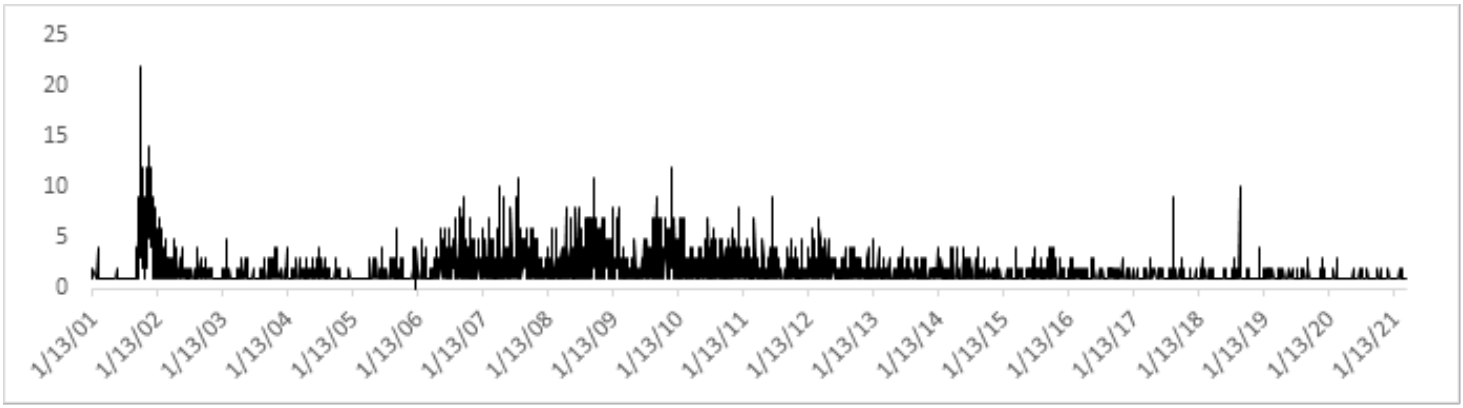


Figure 1 *Timeline of the articles The New York Times wrote on Afghanistan from 2001-March 2021*

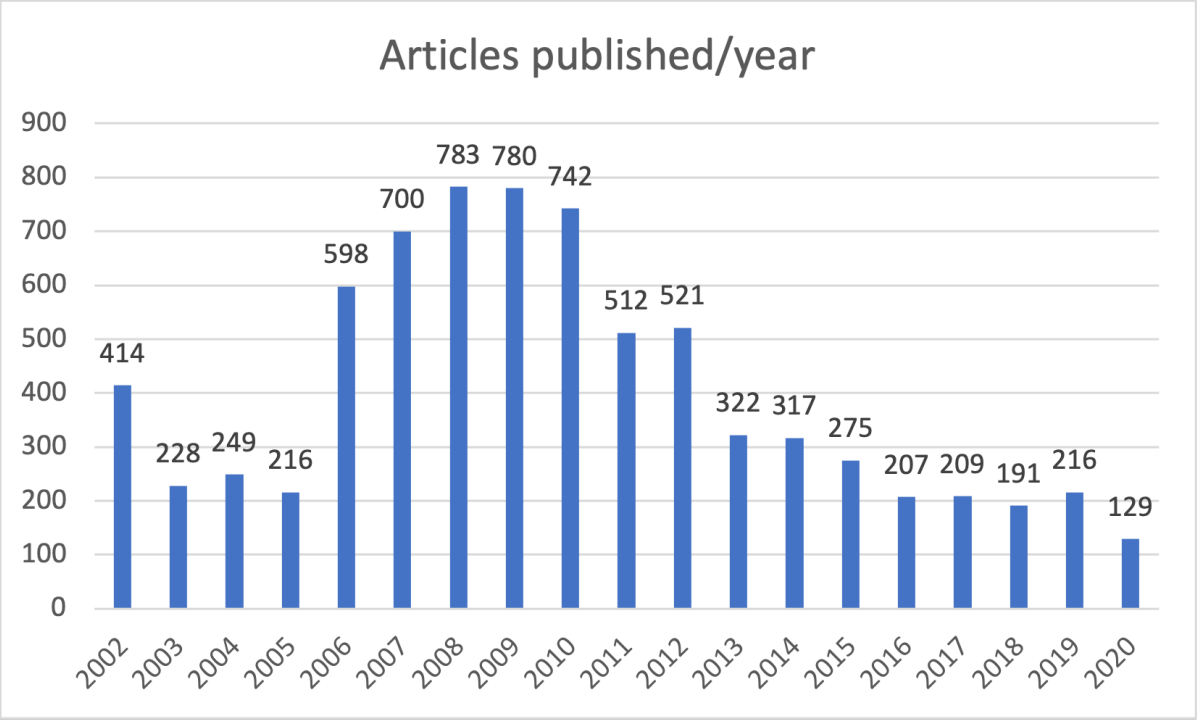


Figure 2 *The total of articles on Afghanistan published in The New York Times from 2002-2020*

We see that there is a peak in 2001, which is obviously due to the attention in the aftermath of 9/11. We chose to ignore it in the rest of our research because it influences the representation too much.

We continue looking at the statistics from **January first, 2002** when the coverage came to a calmer phase. After the Taliban regime had collapsed (and surrendered), we do see that the media attention calms down. In the following two to three years – despite the extreme coverage of Afghanistan in 2001 – *The New York Times* spent less time on the conflict. The coverage continued with around 200 articles per year in **2003, 2004, and 2005. 2005** is the lowest year.

In 2003 the Iraq war started. This new war diverted the media's attention from Afghanistan to Iraq. The steep decline of articles from 2002 to 2003 (from 414 to 228) is probably because of that. We see that the decline continued in 2004 and 2005. But in 2006 we see a steep increase: from 216 to 598 articles. The question is: what made *The New York Times* increase its attention? We will surely interview *The New York Times* about this, but we can already see some indications. From Dam her knowledge, we know that 2006 was a year of increased violence. We also see a direct link in **2006** with the increase of dead U.S. soldiers (see Figure 3). We also observe a less direct link to the increasing amount of troops that were sent to Afghanistan (see Figure 3). Especially the first link indicates that *The New York Times*

was very focused on the American soldiers who die. Of course, this is logical for an American newspaper. We also could expect more media attention from Dutch or Belgian newspapers for their own soldiers in war. But those newspapers do not have a mission statement like *The New York Times*, wanting to be a global newspaper. "*The Times* is a global news organization with readers everywhere. Gone are the days in which we can view our audience as an American one" (Takenaga, 2019). This is what Marc Lacey, at that time *The New York Times'* national editor and former foreign correspondent based in Nairobi, said about the newspaper. He referred to a scandal in *The New York Times* about an Otherizing photo about Africa (the paper showed dead bodies in an attack, something that would not happen if the wounded/dead victims would have been Americans). Lacey's quote in more context:

> I do think we can do a better job of having consistent standards that apply across the world. *The Times* is a global news organization with readers everywhere. Gone are the days in which we can view our audience as an American one. We ought to make our standard decisions without regard to nationality. If we believe a particular type of photograph or article is too sensitive for an American audience, we ought to apply that same standard to a Kenyan audience, and a French one and a Mexican one (ibid.).

In 2006 – during the 'escalation of violence' – we also see that *The New York Times* hired more people. More journalists started writing for the newspaper. In 2004 and 2005, in our corpus, we saw ten journalists working for *The New York Times*, seven of them only contributed once. Carlotta Gall wrote the majority of the pieces. In **2006 and 2007**, we counted 31 journalists, of whom fourteen only contributed once to our sample. What is interesting is that from this point on, *The New York Times* cooperated with Afghan and Pakistani journalists like Sultan Munadi, Ruhullah Khapalwak, Abdul Waheed Wafa, Salman Masood, and Taimoor Shah.

Then in **2008 and 2009**, we see the highest number of articles *The New York Times* ever wrote about the conflict: 783 (which is almost three articles per day) in 2008 and 780 in 2009. This corresponds with more American deaths, the first peak of civilian deaths (Afghans), and more troops (30.000) present in the country.

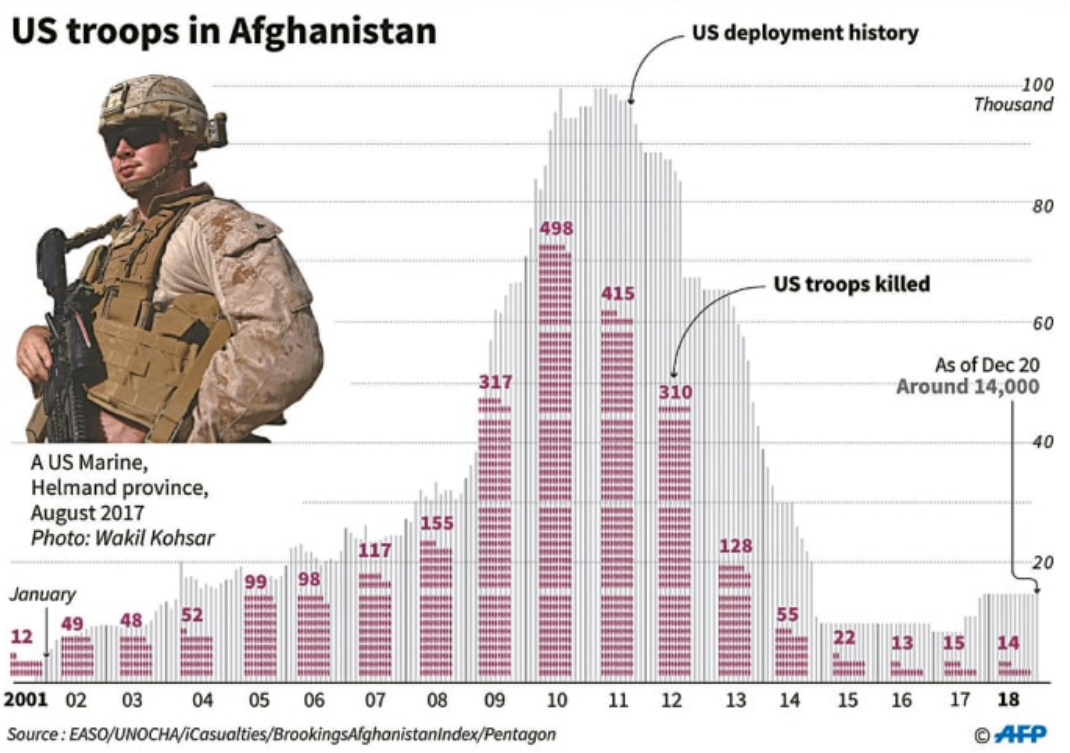


Figure 3 *Graphic of U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 2001-2018. From US to keep 8,600 troops in Afghanistan even after the deal, by Dawn, 2019 (https://www.dawn.com/news/1502511). Copyright AFP.*

The escalation of the violence will peak even more after 2008. This mainly happened in 2009 and 2010, when there were around 100.000 troops in the country. This troop presence led to the highest number of attacks, and the most American deaths all over (see Figure 3). In **2009**, when President Barack Obama announced his surge – when the troops went up from 40.000 to 150.000 in one year – the media attention for Afghanistan peaked, similarly to the period of **2010**, with the start of the withdrawal debate. After that, it decreased. The slow-down of the media attention of *The New York Times* in **2011** (512 articles) corresponds with the American military developments in Afghanistan. The troop levels were announced to go down. However, we do see two remarkable peaks of U.S. deaths in 2011 and **2012**. This is not immediately reflected in the number of articles.

In the timeline, we discovered certain (mostly American) key moments/topics that fit in with the narrative covered in Afghanistan. We will describe the most important ones below:

1. In **2006** there is a lot of attention to topics related to Western themes. Besides a cabinet approval in Kabul after the elections, bloody riots erupted about a scandal over the Prophet Mohammed cartoons in Denmark. The attention to Afghanistan was mainly

negative and related to violence. Also, the NATO mission started in the second half of 2006 – which was requested by the United States – with an extra 15.000 troops. They opened military bases now in almost every province. This meant an increase in patrols and an increase of contact between the U.S. military and Afghan inhabitants, often escalating in violence.

2. In **2007**, 23 South Korean civilians were kidnapped in the city of Ghazni. For *The New York Times,* this was an important topic, considering the frequency of articles.
3. In **February 2009**, President Barack Obama decided to send an additional 17.000 troops, on top of the 36.000 American troops and 32.000 NATO service members already present (Witte, 2010).
4. On **August 20, 2009**, Hamid Karzai was re-elected in the highly controversial presidential elections.
5. At **the end of 2009**, Obama agreed to send another 30.000 additional troops to Afghanistan by the summer of 2010. This is known as the often written about *surge.* Overall, the fighting and bombings would escalate, as were the (suicide) attacks and kidnappings. The coverage in 2008 (783 articles), 2009 (780 articles), and 2010 (742 articles) especially peaked.
6. Another important moment happened on **July 25, 2010**, which was another American affair, namely the publication of the 'Afghan War Diary'. Whistle-blowing organization WikiLeaks published this cache of classified documents related to the Afghan war.
7. At **the end of 2010**, Obama announced that he would divert the responsibility for the war to the Afghan forces "within the next 18 to 24 months" (PTI, 2019).
8. On **May 2, 2011**, al-Qaeda leader Bin Laden was killed by American forces. This led to a peak in attention. This is quite understandable, because of the high profile Bin Laden had within the U.S. narrative. At the same time, what is missing in the articles of *The New York Times,* is the Afghan perspective. There is no consistent mention of the non-involvement of the Afghans or Mullah Omar in 9/11. For the Afghans, Osama bin Laden had hardly any meaning, and Afghanistan was not involved in 9/11. Only in 2021, *The New York Times* referred to these issues when the American government froze the bank money in Kabul because of the so-called Afghan involvement in 9/11. This was one of the rare moments *The New York Times* pushed back.
9. In **June 2011**, Obama announced a withdrawal of troops, "saying that the United States had largely achieved its goals by disrupting al-Qaeda's operations and killing many of

its leaders" (Witte, 2021). As Figure 3 shows, in 2011, the presence of U.S. troops was at its highest.

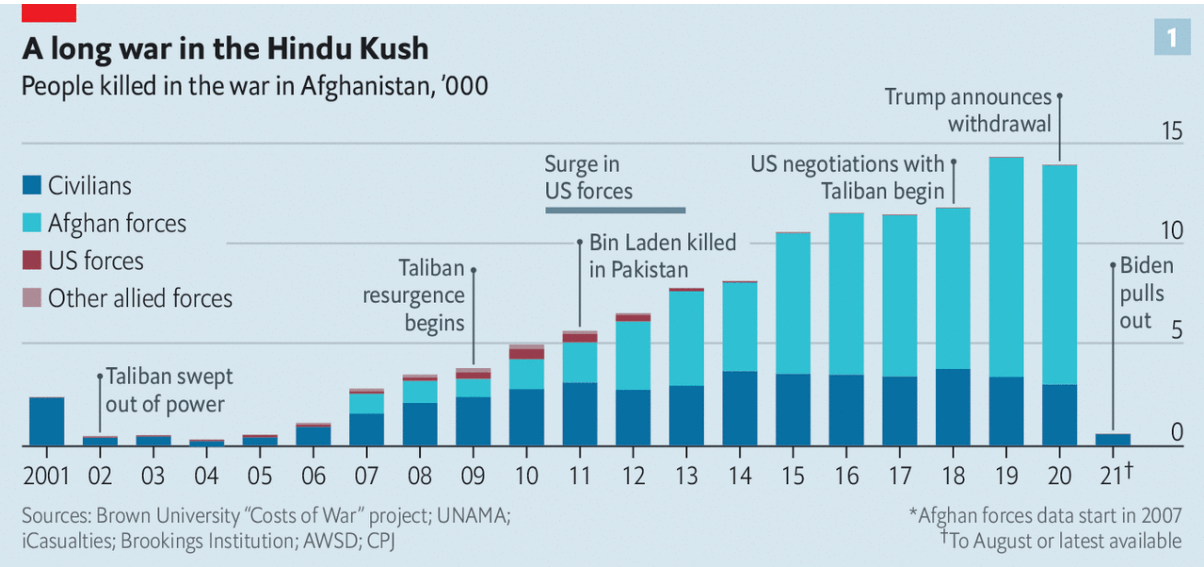
10. At the **beginning of 2012**, demonstrations against the American presence in Afghanistan erupted after a series of scandals, like the Kandahar or Panjwai massacre, where an American soldier broke into several houses and murdered sixteen civilians, including children (Witte, 2021).

The timeline shows how American/nationalist/patriotic *The New York Times* is when it comes to coverage of the Afghan situation. After **2012**, we see the start of a slow decrease in *The New York Times'* writing about Afghanistan. While in that year the situation deteriorated for an average Afghan (with rampant corruption and many losses because of the ongoing U.S. operations often based on false intelligence), it did not lead to more attention. The opposite happened: the debate of handing over authority to the Afghans and plans for the withdrawal of the American soldiers started in 2012. This resulted in a steep decrease in troops. For the United States, the war had to be transmitted to the Afghan security forces. The media greedily went along with this narrative. In **2014**, the decrease in attention is even more apparent with a maximum of one article per day, which is almost half of the production before. We do still see some peaks, though not as high as when there were more troops in Afghanistan. The peaks are mainly instigated by the American agenda: one in **2017** (with a yearly total of 209 articles) and one in **2018** (with a yearly total of 191 articles), especially around August of both years.

Between 2017 and 2018 there was a little surge in the deployment of American troops. On the 21st of August 2017, American President Donald Trump committed to continuing the American military involvement to prevent creating a "vacuum for terrorists" (Lederman & Burns, 2017, para. 6). In August 2018, a suicide bomber killed 48 people and injured another 67 people in a tuition center attack. None of the deaths were Americans, but the reason for the peak and the newsworthiness was probably the high number of dead children in an education center in a Shia neighborhood (the minority).

We cannot use the timeline in Figure 1 to discover details about the suppressed knowledge. We do see that the peace initiatives of the Taliban did not lead to a peak in the coverage between 2002 and 2004 – when most of these surrenders happened. In 2004, President Karzai hinted very clearly at these surrenders, by saying that many Taliban had contacted the government. He also said that the United States was exaggerating the threat. He also refers to the second

suppressed narrative, by saying that most of the violence did not come from the Taliban but from mafia, or tribal militias.



The Economist

Figure 4 *Graphic of Afghan civilian and security deaths from the United States and other allied forces' deaths. From A long war in the Hindu Kush of The Economist, 2021 (https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/08/21/from-saigon-to-kabul-what-americas-afghan-fias)*

As Figure 4 above shows, the moment *The New York Times* loses interest is the moment 'her' U.S. military started leaving (and for that with the decrease of Washington D.C.'s attention). While violence is often a topic *The New York Times* wanted to write about in the so-called War on Terror, the violence escalated **after 2012**. But the dynamic was different: now it were the Afghans who died, and not the U.S. troops (2012: 310 deaths, 2013: 128 deaths, 2014: 55 deaths). While we are at one article a day by now, in 2012 there were around 2.500 Afghan soldiers who died, in 2013 even a bit more, and 2014 resulted in 5.000 Afghan deaths in one year. This mounted up to around 7.000 deaths in 2015, 8.000 in 2016, 2017, and 2018, and a peak of almost 10.000 deaths in 2019 and 2020. Parallel to that, there were also more Afghan civilian deaths: an almost constant 2.000/3.000 civilian deaths per year from 2013 on.

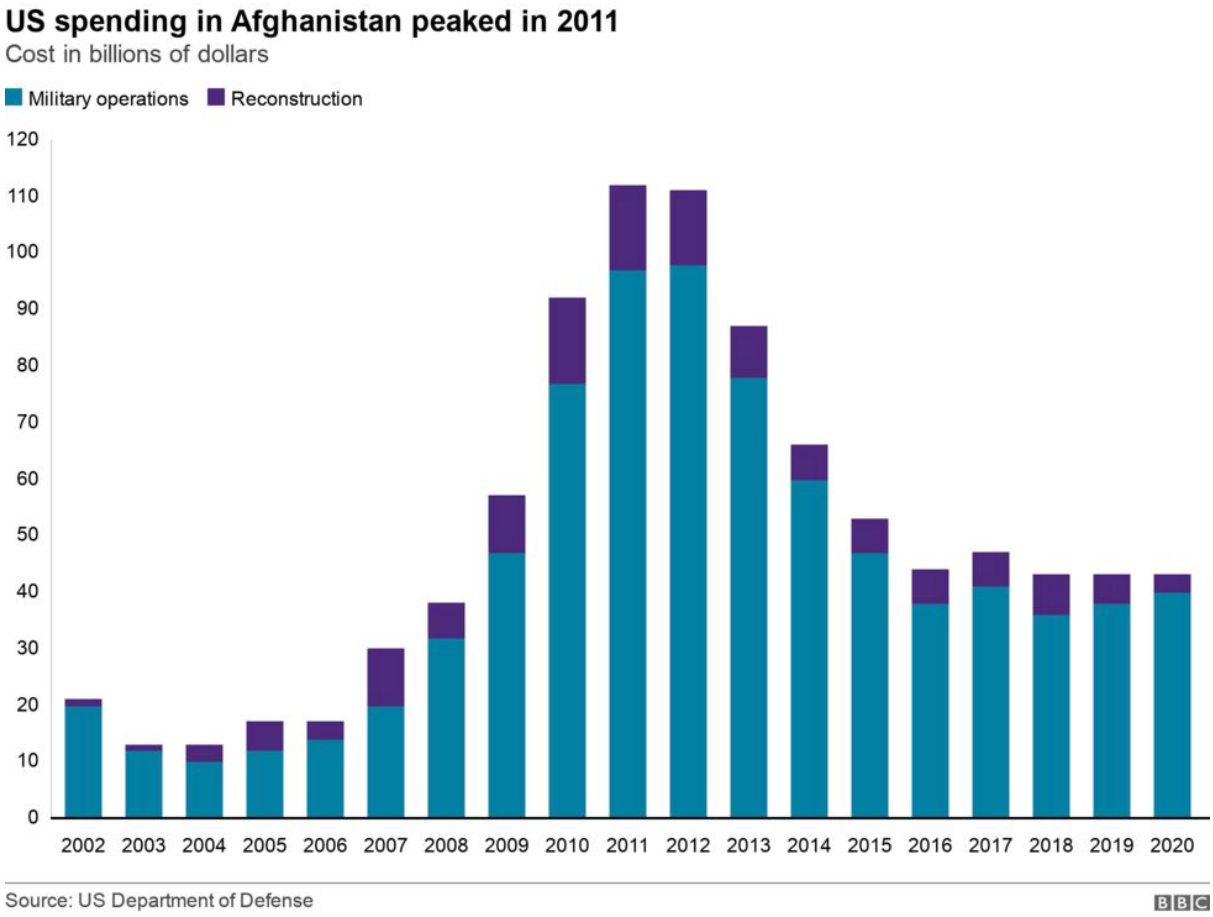


Figure 5 *Graphic of the U.S. spending on Afghanistan for the period 2002-2020. From US spending in Afghanistan peaked in 2011 of BBC, 2021 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821)*

As with the graphs of the deployment of American troops and the subsequent increase in media attention described above, we see some quite striking parallels with the amount of money the United States spent on its military operations in Afghanistan. Starting from 2006, Washington increased its spending from about 20 billion dollars to nearly 100 billion dollars a year in 2011 and 2012. After that, the budget started to decrease until 2016. In the following years, the cost fluctuated between 40 and 50 billion dollars per year. The budget for 'reconstruction' was far less than the military budget. We do see that it was at its highest in the period between 2009 and 2012, parallel to the increase in military spending. However, there remains a big gap between the two categories.

3.3 WordSmith: what words were used mostly in *The New York Times*?

After this step, we used the tool WordSmith to do a frequency analysis, which "allows researchers to count how many times the element occurs in the corpus" (Haider, 2017, p. 2). Most of the time, this tool is used to examine frequent words or word patterns in a text, before being qualitatively interpreted as an indicator in a certain discourse. Moreover, it can uncover the news foci of a corpus. The results of the word list show a focus on terms related to war or 'official' discourse, or the earlier introduced master narrative. After the temporal overview of the timeline, these WordSmith results thus indicate which topical foci the articles contained.

Number	Word	Frequency
1.	Afghanistan	12.190
2.	Afghan	5.105
3.	Kabul	4.144
4.	Taliban	3.846
5.	American	2.494
6.	Officials	2.141
7.	Killed	1.902
8.	Military	1.799
9.	United	1.605
10.	President	1.501
11.	Pakistan	1.489
12.	Forces	1.389
13.	War	1.332
14.	NATO	1.292
15.	Government	1.250
16.	Troops	1.235
17.	Soldiers	1.007
18.	Police	906
19.	Washington	876
20.	Attack	856

Table 1 *WordSmith analysis: top 20 of most frequently used subjectives in the corpus*

In the topic analysis, with the help of the timeline above, we see that the American government – with its misinformed idea that Afghanistan is a terrorism haven – was leading the agenda, and *The New York Times* followed closely. *The New York Times* thus embraced the misinformed narrative that portrays the Other as dangerous. As Lynch and McGoldrick have described so importantly, "these 'patterns of omissions and distortion' not only result in a misrepresentation of the subject, and thus misinformation of the public, but they also enhance the overvaluation of reactive, violent responses and the undervaluation of 'developmental, non-violent ones'" (2005, p. 28).

With WordSmith we can have a closer look at what to find in the suppressed narrative. When analyzing the timeline in Figure 1, this was more difficult: the peace initiatives and the false reporting incidents cannot be qualified by the amount of coverage. But we can use WordSmith to see how often the newspaper referred to certain terms. Obviously, the words Afghanistan and Afghan are used the most, because the news is related to and happens in Afghanistan. The rest of the outcomes are very war-related, with about eight terms in the top twenty that refer to warfare and violence (highlighted in red) and six terms that are related to 'officialdom' (highlighted in green). None of the peace-related words or words that include complexity (like false reporting) are in the top 20.

When we look for the suppressed narrative (as described above) in these WordSmith results, we have to sink lower in the list of prominent words. The words *The New York Times* used to cover these not reported, suppressed narratives, are seen less frequently in the WordSmith outcomes. This includes words that refer to peace-oriented terms and terms that are related to negotiations, surrender, diplomacy, and humanitarian aid. The word 'peace' was number 57 in the list, 'talks' number 82, and 'diplomacy' number 1.857. The word 'surrender', reflecting the major part of the suppressed narrative, was number 930 on the list. This indicates that the words and thus the topics that correlate with the military, 'counterterrorist' frame are prioritized above words and foci that are related to the more complex narrative.

With the second part of the suppressed narrative, the false reporting or denunciation, we see a similar situation. The word 'tribes' is a dominant part of suppressed knowledge since it plays an important role and is often the main instigator for personal, economical, and/or social attacks. In the coverage of *The New York Times,* the word 'tribes' was not considered important, and comes on number 1.970, 'tribesmen' on number 2.209, and the singular form 'tribe' on number 4.086.

The timeline and WordSmith results, already prove to be much more indicative of the substantial American bias in *The New York Times* than we expected. It shows that there is already clear evidence of the problem that could be used in the interactions with the editors of *The New York Times*. The decision to write about the Other (often made by the white, highly educated, elite editors in New York) – in this case, Afghanistan and the Afghans – is mainly instigated by the agenda of Washington D.C. Based on the timeline and the WordSmith results, we thus see that the journalist is biased, but this might not be convincing enough. For that, we dive deeper, and will also analyze the sources used in the sample of articles from *The New York Times*.

4. Analysis of codes/sources

In this chapter, we will first examine the balance between the Afghan voice and the Western voice, which is predominantly ruled by the American voice. For both voices, we will take a look at the dominant source categories and what they are saying. To analyze the content, we will use the 'theme' from the descriptor, to indicate the narrative in the article. We will dive into the articles and discuss a few examples to analyze which narratives were deployed.

Of the sample of 690 articles (almost ten percent), *The New York Times* used **a total of 7.821 sources** to tell the story of Afghanistan. In the sample, we immediately see an unexpected outcome. Despite the very Western neoliberal topic selection of *The New York Times* on Afghanistan and a very 'white' or American use of terms when covering Afghanistan, as described by Van Dijk among others in the theoretical framework, we see at the same time that almost half of the sources used by *The New York Times* are Afghan. Although we expected a majority of Western/American/white sources, this is not the case. We see that 3.580 sources (52,2 percent) are Afghan and 3.277 are Western sources (47,8 percent), predominantly American.

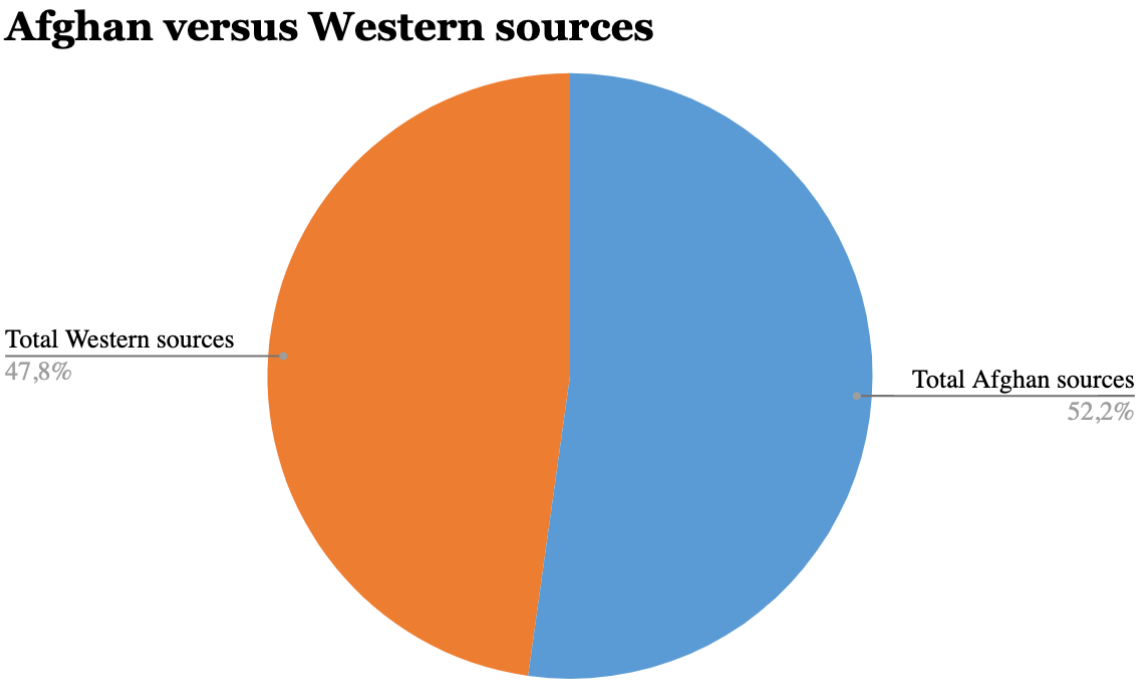


Figure 6 *Total Afghan versus Western sources*

4.1 The Afghan voice

The slight Afghan majority is already an interesting outcome. The first impression might be that there is substantial attention to what the Afghan has to say. Though we need to see how this works out in the topic use and the word used in *The New York Times'* coverage.

We see similar outcomes in reporting on Africa for example. Toussaint Nothias, who has been mentioned before in this thesis, has investigated Western coverage of Africa and says the following:

> Looking at nearly 300 news articles (including several written by some of these interviewees), I found that explicit, generic references to Africa were part of the journalistic discourse, but not necessarily to the extent that many critics argue. Overall, there were also more African sources quoted than Western ones. However, **politicians dominated these African voices, and the framing of these voices in news reports undermined a sense of African agency or empowerment** (2020, p. 16).

The work of Nothias also concludes with a request: "because postcolonial reflexivity appears to be a disposition that opens up a spectrum of possible practices, more work is needed in the future to understand the conditions and factors that encourage the adoption of different practices on this spectrum" (ibid., p. 17). In the following chapter, we will elaborate upon the work of Nothias.

What Nothias has not mentioned though, and what we have found in *The New York Times*, is that many articles do not have any Afghan source at all. There were 189 articles on the Afghanistan conflict that did not include any Afghan source. This comes down to almost one-third (27,4 percent) of the articles in our dataset. This was a result of the research of Daan Pierson, who examined the hierarchy of Afghan sources in our dataset for his bachelor's paper (2022). Dam was one of his supervisors and guided him during the research. As Pierson was a part of Dam's bigger research project, we think it is interesting to incorporate his findings on the Afghan voice in *The New York Times* in this thesis. There is one caveat here that we need to solve in the future: Pierson did count almost 3.500 Afghan sources, which is a large sample. But we discovered that he missed one code ('Afghans quoted by other media') from about a hundred sources. We will soon incorporate this as well in the larger research, but we have decided for now that the missing sources will not prevent us from using the data, since it is not directing the outcomes in a different direction.

Although almost one-third is a considerable number of articles without Afghan voices, in some of these articles it was less crucial to include an Afghan voice given the nature of the topic. To give an example, the article with the title: "Tehran's Foreign Minister Says U.S. Should Offer Assistance, Not Accusations" (number 12) had more to do with Iran than with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, some articles did not include Afghan sources even though they would have been relevant. For example, "U.S. Winding Up Bombing Major Al Qaeda Complex" (number 5) was one of the articles which only used American (official) sources. In this article, an Afghan source would have been desirable since this event contains different perspectives, including an Afghan one.

While the Afghan voice is thus missing in a large portion of *The New York Times*, we do see that when it is present, there is quite a large amount of Afghan voices used. Of the 501 articles with at least one Afghan source, almost two-thirds (60 percent) of the sources are Afghan. Although we see that there is a repetition of the same Afghan voice in the article itself (it is used more than once), we also see this practice recurring when analyzing the Western/American voice.

Figure 7 below, created by Pierson, shows an interesting outcome. We already know that the number of articles decreased when the American troop withdrawal started. We also established that there was less priority for *The New York Times* to cover Afghanistan when the military connection was weaker. The lower intensity of coverage after 2012 does show a higher level of Afghan sources though. That means that only after the United States detached itself from the topic, there was more space for the Afghan voice.

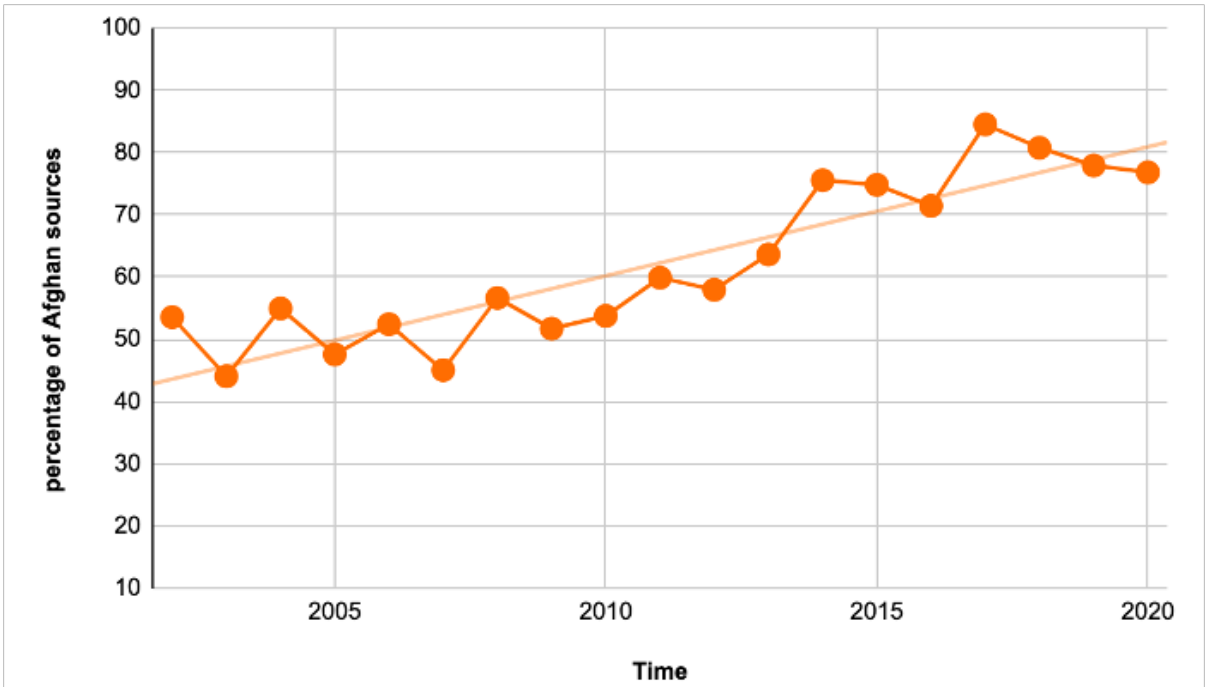


Figure 7 *Percentage of Afghan sources per year for all the articles with at least one Afghan source. Copyright Daan Pierson (2022)*

Now that we have established the density of the Afghan sources, we take a look at the hierarchy of the Afghan source. For this, Pierson developed a technique[3] to determine the location of the Afghan voice. According to this technique, Pierson found out that the average location of the Afghan source is located a little over the middle of the article. Moreover, he concluded that the average place did not change much over time.

Pierson also analyzed the number of Afghan sources in the first five paragraphs of an article as another tool to indicate the position of the Afghan source(s). When we take the total number of Afghan sources in the first five paragraphs of all the articles in the corpus, this results in 692 sources. This corresponds with nearly one-fifth of the total amount of Afghan sources, which was 3.580 sources. Remarkably is that only five times an Afghan source has been used in the first or lead paragraph.

Based on these results, it is clear that despite a large number of Afghan sources, most of these sources only come later in the article, after the Western/American ones. Even though

[3] Pierson (2022, p. 17) described this technique as follows: Of all the 3405 Afghan sources in the articles, the relative position was determined by dividing the paragraph of the Afghan source by the total number of paragraphs of that article. This way we could get an indication of whether the Afghan source was located rather at the beginning or at the end of the article. Because this estimation is not an exact figure since not every paragraph is the same length, the calculation cannot be interpreted in percentages. However, we could make an estimation based on a scale from 0 to 1 in which Afghan sources closer to 0 are located higher in the article and Afghan sources closer to 1 are located more to the end of the article.

there were more Afghan sources used after the American troops were trying to leave, these sources are still not the 'opening sources' of the article.

Another aspect of the Afghan sources' presence is not 'where' they sit in the article, but who they are. What Afghan is allowed to speak in *The New York Times*?

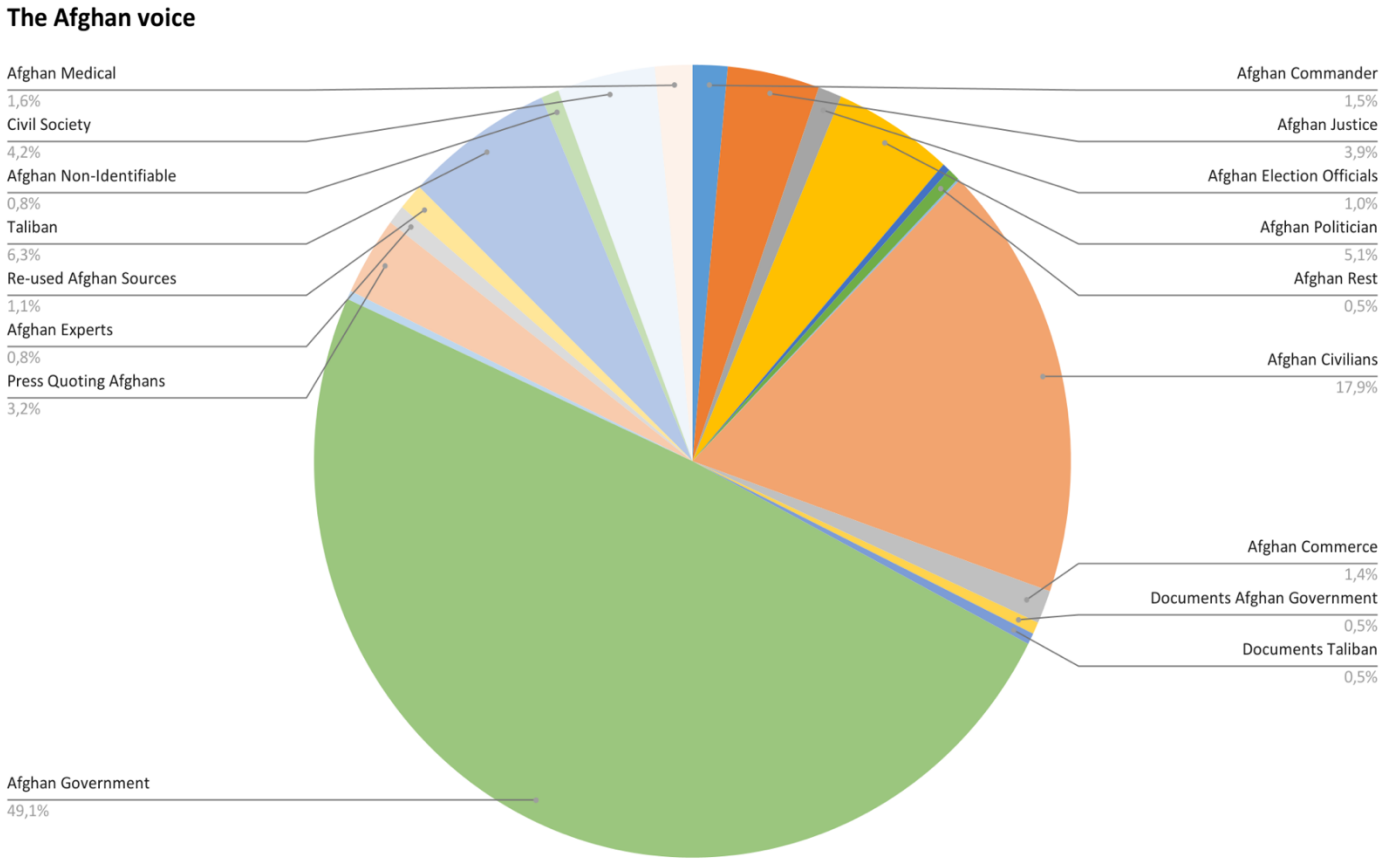


Figure 8 *The Afghan voice*

4.1.1 Afghan government

Of the Afghan sources interviewed (3580 sources), we will first examine the biggest category. We see that the Afghan government – the officials, or the officialdom – represents half of the total sources (49,1 percent). It is known in academia, and the Afghanistan reporting of *The New York Times* is not an exception, that the American journalists (but also others) consider the U.S. government as a 'good' source. In conflict situations, they see the American government as a reliable source. The statements of government sources are "defined by the political culture as authoritative and newsworthy" (Hallin, Manoff & Weddle, 1993, p. 753).

The moment *The New York Times* interviews Afghans, it grants the most space in its newspaper to the officialdom, the Afghan government. We also know that the Afghan government is not so much an independent entity, as maybe another government would be. The Afghan government was an ally of the U.S. government and was not able to survive without American (military) support. For that, the Afghan government was extremely dependent on the U.S. government. According to reports of SIGAR (n.d.), the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – the U.S. government's oversight authority on reconstruction –, Washington has allocated 89.51 billion dollars for security in Afghanistan since 2002. Another 36.07 billion dollars went to governance and development (including counternarcotics initiatives). Only 4.91 billion dollars was invested in humanitarian aid. The spending on the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) peaked in the period between 2011 and 2013. The spending on the Economic Support Fund (ESF) peaked a bit earlier, in 2010 (ibid.). These outcomes were already visible in Figure 5 on the total American spending on Afghanistan.

From the journalistic perspective, this is important to realize. *The New York Times* often used the Afghan government as a second source or as a 'cross-check', as if they would provide a different view. In the context of governmental dependency, this was less likely. However, multiple authors, among whom Robert Neumann (2015), have described how Afghan government officials like President Hamid Karzai became more critical when the U.S.'s war did not bring what it had promised (peace). Instead, more Afghans died every day and the war raged on. Karzai often attacked the United States and asked to reduce the number of military operations, but he never fully questioned the War on Terror narrative. There was often criticism about the civilian casualties, the torture by the United States, or the failing drone attacks, but this criticism stayed inside the War on Terror narrative, as the Afghan regime mostly went along with the American military decisions. Also, this criticism on the United States was not so loud as the other way around, when the United States started openly accusing Karzai of corruption (without pointing at their own role in supporting warlords, who created false report situations and were involved in many cases of denunciation).

In conclusion, the Afghan government is critical, but in our sample, we did not see it saying: "We don't think the Taliban is an enemy". The quotes of the Afghan officials did not reach the level of the suppressed knowledge described earlier.

Within the Afghan government, we see important indications. First, the majority (72,9 percent or 1.320 sources) of the used government sources was named. This is more than we expected. Recent literature shows that when the Western media quote Palestinians in the Israel-Palestine

conflict, for example, they occupy the underdog position. They are less prominent in the coverage compared to the Israeli sources, who are allies of the U.S. government, and often have no name. They are often just indicated as a Palestinian source without a name (Jackson, 2021). It seems that this is not the case with the Afghanistan coverage. This is probably because in the category 'Afghan government named', we do so see a dominance of officials at the top level of government who were being quoted, as we will discuss later. Those are officials whose names are easily known. We do see many more unnamed sources in the U.S. government, but more about that later on in this chapter.

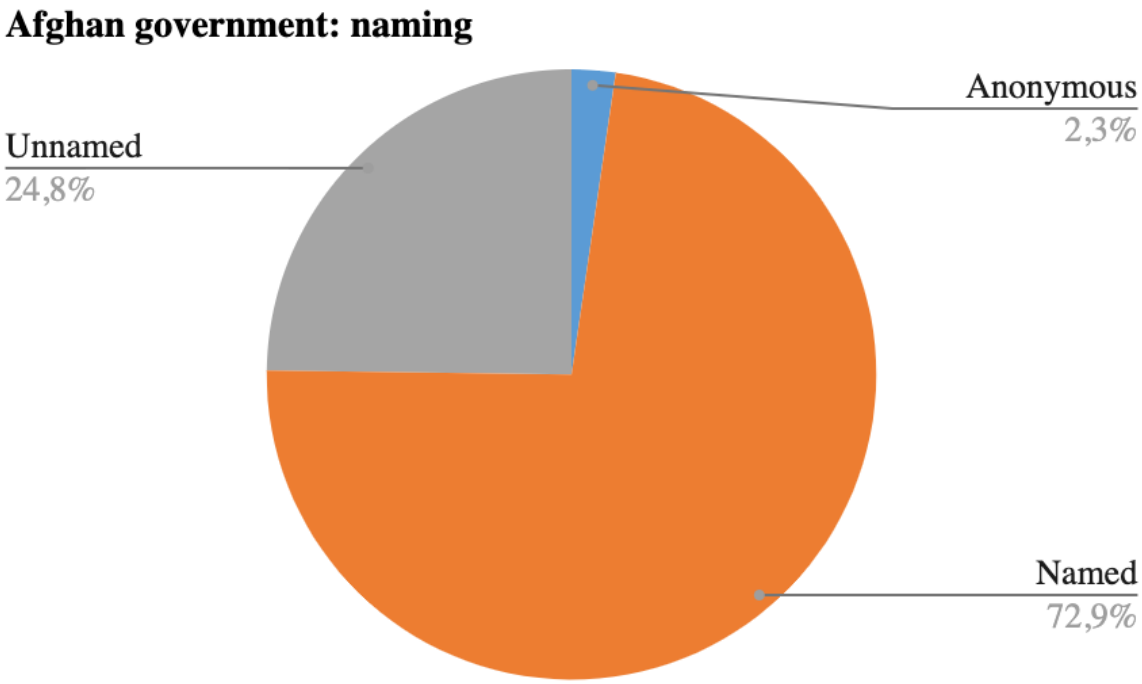


Figure 9 *Afghan government: naming practices*

A smaller part (24,8 percent or 449 sources) remained unnamed and only 2,3 percent (42 sources) appeared anonymous (for one reason or another) in the coverage. When we zoom in on the unnamed category, we notice that the journalists often used vague, plural designations for the source, for example, 'Afghan authorities'. This leaves the reader unable to identify who is talking and how many people are claiming this message. Another similar recurring practice was the use of the term 'officials' to designate the source. As with the other plural designations for sources, it is not possible to make out in which government department these 'officials' are, and thus if they belong to the civilian or military part of the government. This is not clear in the

example below. Therefore, when making up the distinction between the civilian and security departments, we decided to categorize these examples in a third category: 'officials', as shown in Figure 10.

> "Most of the seven areas included in the first round of transitions are relatively stable, or have handled their own security for years with little help from NATO forces. **Afghan officials in Kabul and some of the seven areas** have acknowledged that the change will be more symbolic than substantive, at least in the short term." (Article 460: "Petraeus Hands Off NATO Command to Allen In Afghanistan")

As said with the cross-check above, we observe that Afghan unnamed government sources are often used to confirm the story of a Western/American (named) source. This is clear in the following examples:

> "In one of the worst attacks in Kabul in months, a suicide bomber leaped at a Canadian peacekeepers' vehicle on Tuesday, blowing himself up and killing one soldier and wounding three more, said **Maj. Gen. Andrew Leslie**, the commander of Canadian forces there. An Afghan civilian was also killed; eight other bystanders were wounded, **the police and hospital officials** said." (Article 65: "General Urges NATO to Send Afghanistan More Troops")

> "**American and Afghan officials** said the intelligence gleaned from the October mission was not the sole factor behind the uptick in raids." (Article 579: "Data From Seized Computer Fuels a Surge in U.S. Raids on Al-Qaeda")

Journalists often named Afghan officials and Western officials in the same breath ('Western and Afghan officials say…'). As explained above, this might give an idea that the article is based on two independent sources, but as the Afghan government was extremely dependent on the U.S. government, they often just repeated the story of their American counterparts. For example:

> "**Western security experts and senior Afghan defense officials** say Panjshiri boasts about squirreling away weapons throughout the valley are credible." (Article 548: Recalling Past Threats, Afghans in Tranquil Valley Work to Keep It That Way)

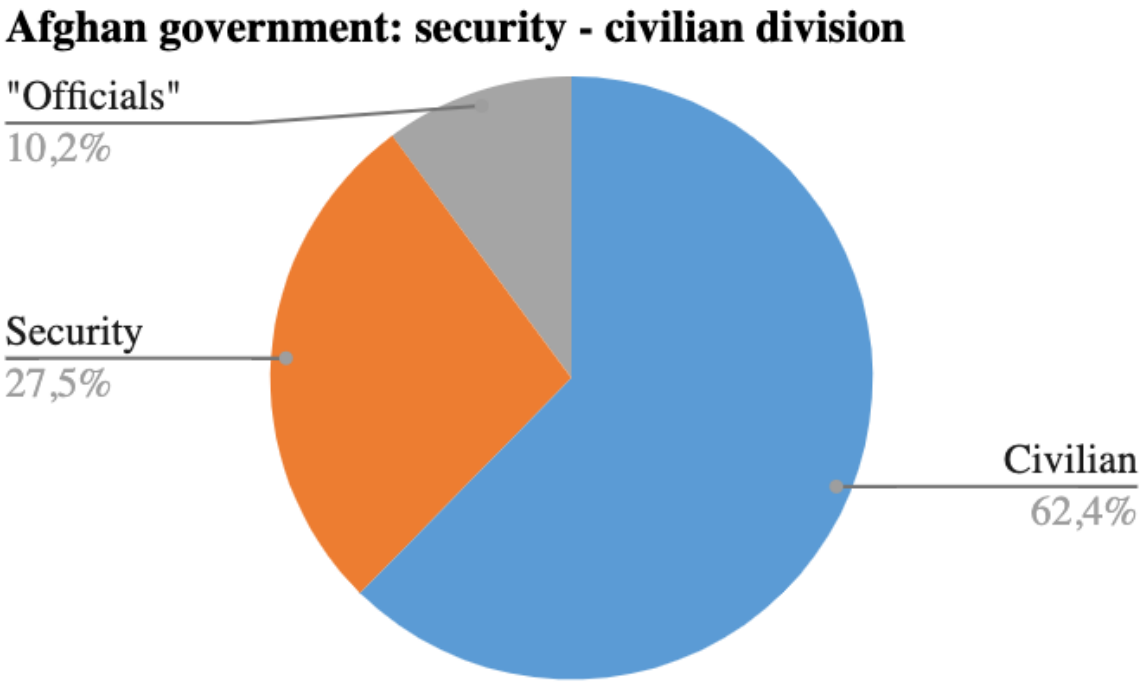


Figure 10 *Afghan government: security/civilian division*

When we take a look at the civilian-security division within the Afghan government, we see a predominance of civilian sources with 62,4 percent of the total (1117 sources). The security department of the Afghan government is good for 27,5 percent (492 sources). And, as described above, 'officials', count for 10,2 percent (182 sources). Again, it was not possible to identify if these officials belonged to the civilian or security source code. For the sources in the unnamed category, it was more clear to identify if they belonged to the civilian or security department.

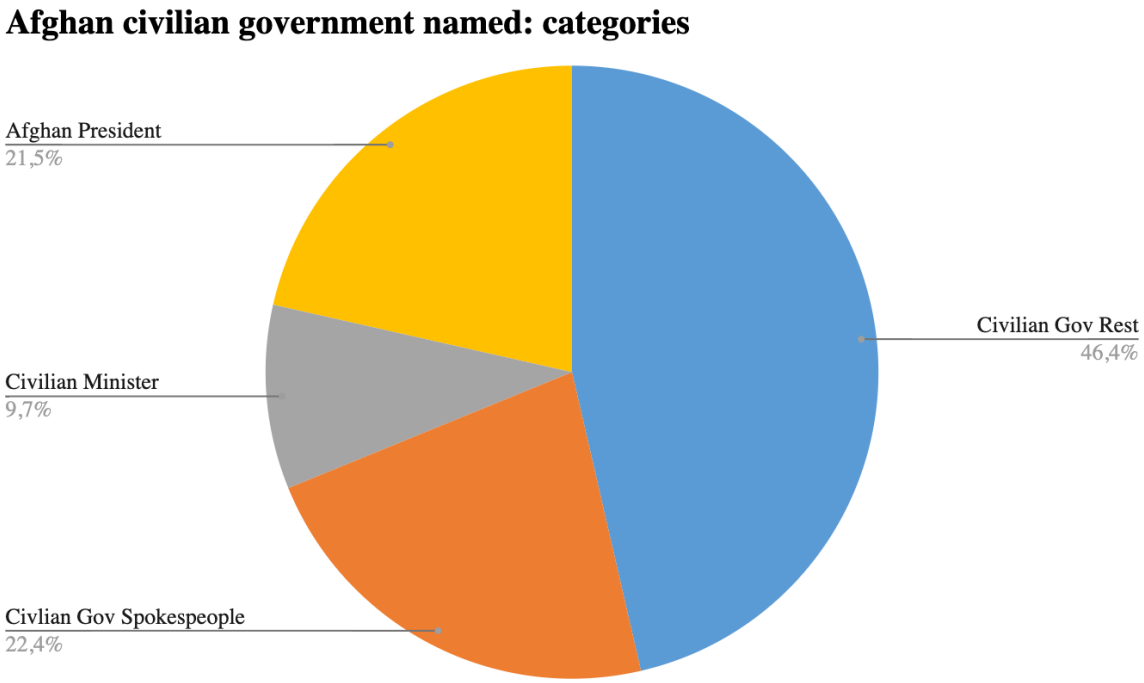


Figure 11 *Afghan civilian government named: categories*

The civilian majority could be interesting in diversifying the military narrative, especially since they are the dominant voice in the Afghan government category. The assumption is that they are less invested in the War on Terror narrative and could potentially be sources that introduce a more complex and complete narrative, especially related to diplomacy, economy, and social issues. We see that in this civilian category when we examine the named sources, officialdom is also very dominant: more than half of these sources are related to the President (21,5 percent, 199 sources), ministers (9,7 percent, 90 sources), and their spokespeople (22,4 percent, 208 sources). This leaves little space for alternative voices and opinions on the highest government level.

4.1.2 Afghan women

Another interesting element to examine is the total representation of female voices in the Afghan government, both within the security and civilian factions. We immediately see an absolute minimum of women who worked in government interviewed in *The New York Times.* Only 37 source excerpts (named and unnamed) were counted from females working in government. This is only two percent of the total Afghan government sources (1791 sources). Later, we will examine what these women were saying and by which themes they were preoccupied.

Now, in Figure 12, we will have a look at the second most important faction within the Afghan voice, namely Afghan civilians. When we start with the male-female ratio, the dominance of men (mainly named) in this pie chart stands out, with 86 percent of the total Afghan civilian voice coming from a man (567 sources). However, it is clear that when women are used as a source, they are named most of the time (11,8 percent, 78 sources). The male named-unnamed ratio shows a bigger difference than with its female counterpart.

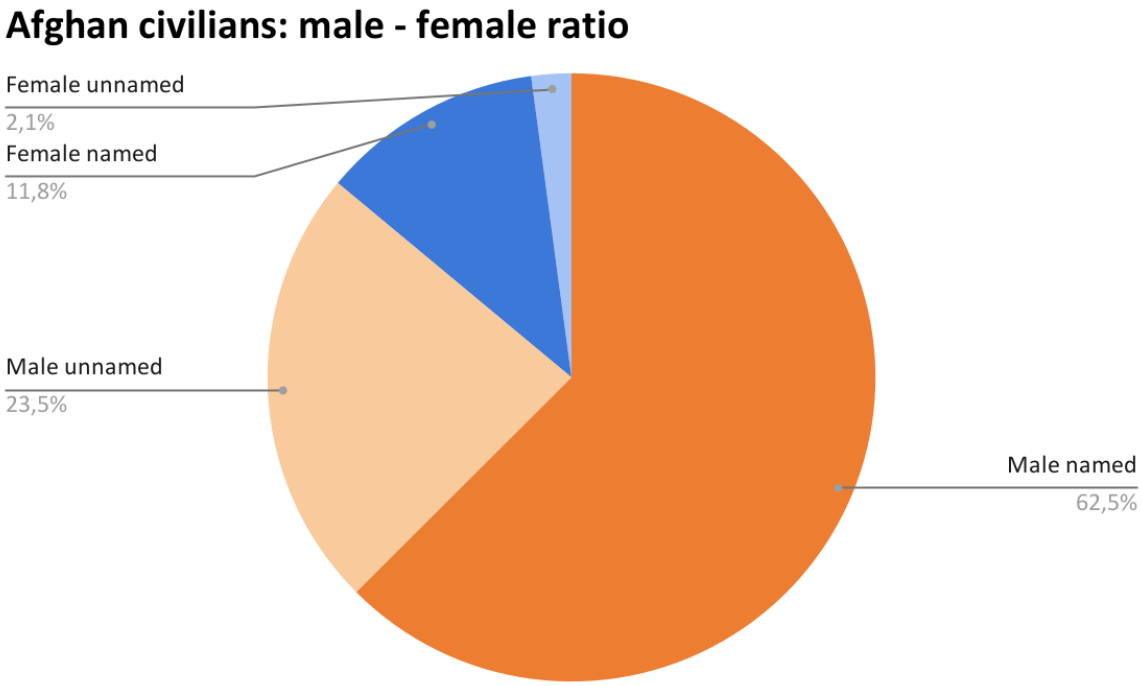


Figure 12 *Afghan civilians: male/female ratio*

When we zoom in on the Afghan women in Figure 13, mainly civilians (35,1 percent, 92 sources) or women of the Afghan civil society (33,2 percent, 87 sources) get a voice. After these two biggest categories, we see women in the political spheres as the following categories, both inside (14,1 percent, 37 sources) and outside the government (10,7 percent, 28 sources). We thus see that Afghan women are poorly represented in government and that when they speak, there is less focus on officialdom than with their male counterparts or with Afghan sources in general. It is not clear if the representation of Afghan women can be linked to the smaller focus on officialdom. Women in the medical world made out 6,1 percent of the total (16 sources), women in business barely account for 0,8 percent (2 sources).

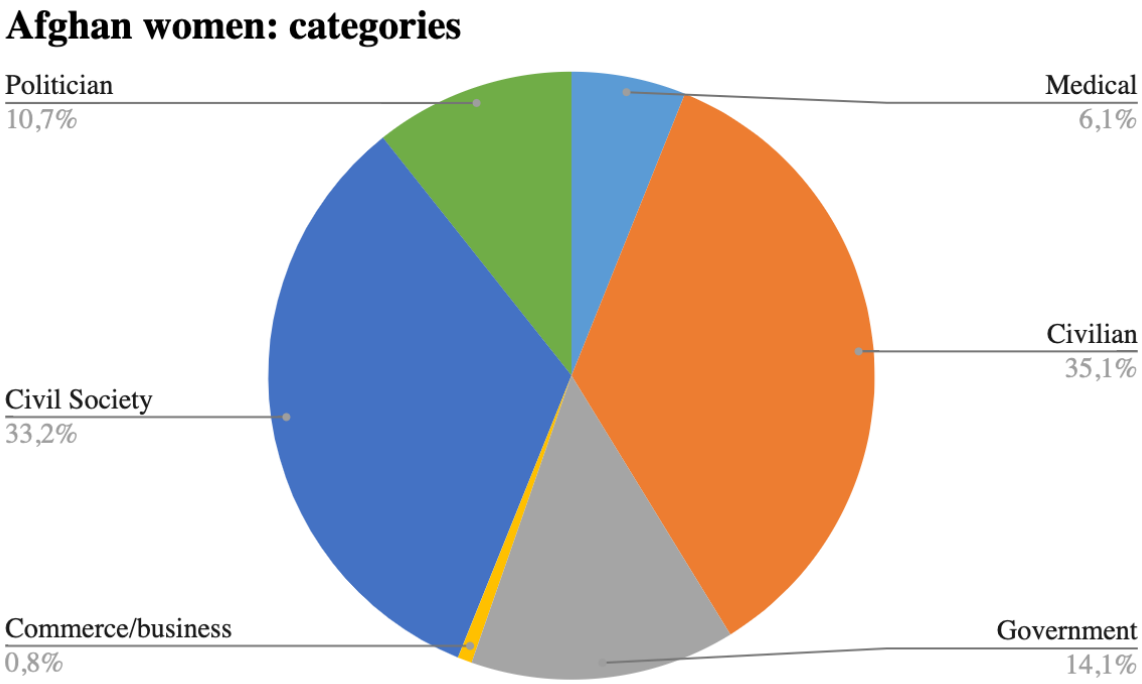


Figure 13 *Afghan women: categories*

4.1.3 Taliban

In total, the Taliban was only good for 6,3 percent (233 sources) of all the Afghan sources used. This is not a high number and clearly indicates that for *The New York Times* 'the enemy of the U.S. government is also their government'.

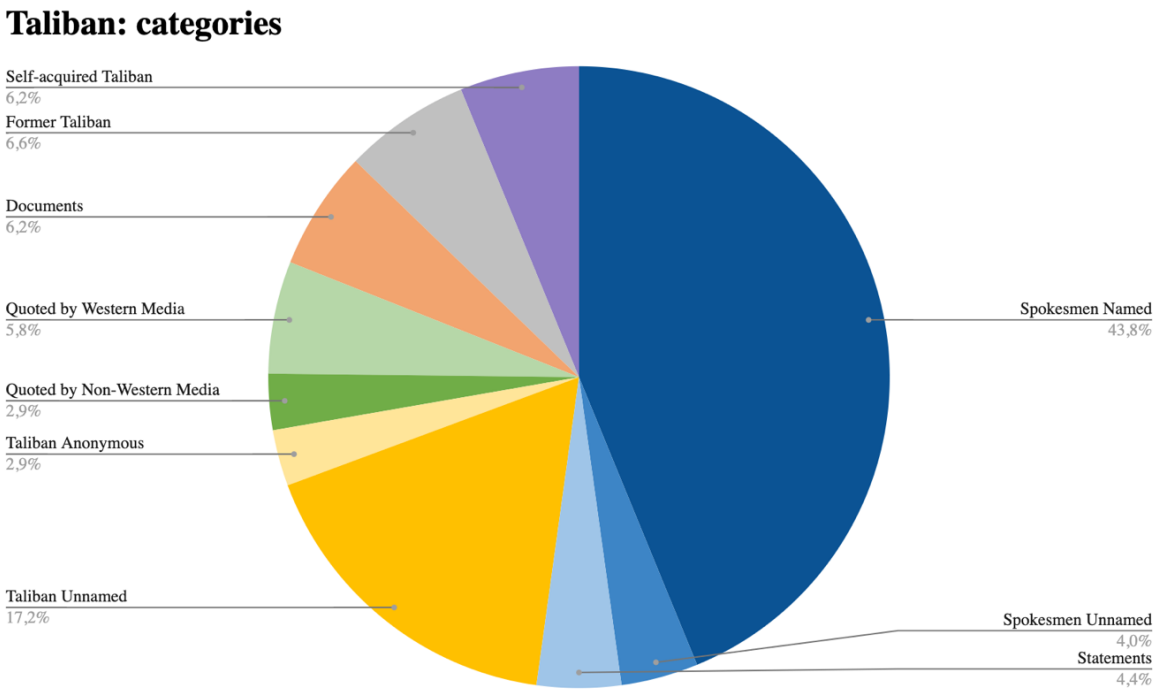


Figure 14 *Taliban: categories*

When the Taliban was used as a source, it was mainly through an 'easily available' (named) Taliban spokesperson (43,8 percent, 120 sources). The second biggest category with 17,2 percent (47 sources) is 'Taliban Unnamed'. Within this category, we see the same mechanism recurring as for the Afghan government, namely using vague plural designations like 'Taliban officials', 'Taliban commanders', or simply 'the Taliban'. The other source categories were similarly small, for example, 'Documents' (6,2 percent, 17 sources) and 'Former Taliban' (6,6 percent, 18 sources). In this last category, all the sources were named. In a few cases, these sources were ex-Taliban officials, for example, ministers who joined the Afghan government's reconciliation program. This was the case for Arsala Rahmani, the former Taliban minister of Higher Education who joined the High Peace Council (article number 443). The category 'Self-acquired Taliban' (6,2 percent or 17 sources) refers to the Taliban sources who are not spokespeople, but who were approached by the journalists themselves. We assume that, because these sources might not always be directed by the Taliban communication department, they are a bit more 'independent'. 'Taliban Anonymous' made up 2,9 percent (8 sources) and consisted of Taliban officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not cleared to speak publicly about certain topics or for safety reasons.

Interesting is that we have found twice as many examples of other Western media quoting the Taliban (16 sources, 5,8 percent) than other non-Western media doing the same thing (8 sources, 2,9 percent). Within the Western press agencies, we see that *The New York Times* referred the most to Reuters, AFP, and AP, thus the Big Three. These two categories do include quotes from different Taliban source categories. In these articles, we came across Taliban spokesmen, an audiotape by a speaker identified as responsible for a suicide bombing in 2002, but also sources that were quoted on the authority of other media were included in this category. For example: "A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for the blast in a phone call to an AP reporter in southern Afghanistan." (article number 302).

Another interesting remark is that the use of Taliban statements was limited to 4,4 percent (12 sources) of the total. We expected this percentage to be higher. However, this is compensated by the high reliance on Taliban spokespeople. The difference between the 'Statements' category and the 'Documents' category is that the first only includes (official) press statements or releases, whereas the latter includes different types of documents like a draft of a constitution, a (handwritten) letter, a videotape… (sometimes obtained by *The New York Times* itself).

If we examine the naming practice within the Taliban sources, we see a high dominance of named source categories: ‘Spokesmen Named’, ‘Quoted by Western Media’, ‘Quoted by Non-Western Media’, ‘Former Taliban’, and ‘Self-acquired Taliban’. We have checked these categories to see if all the sources were named, which was the case. This results in a total of 65,3 percent or 179 named Taliban sources. This result is almost similar to the Afghan government naming practice, where 72,9 percent of the sources was named.

4.2 Content of the Afghan voice: What does he or she say?

4.2.1 Afghan government

In Dedoose we coded themes (see methodology) and decided on the main theme for each article. Articles that contained at least one Afghan government source, among other sources, are predominantly about violence (74 percent). The second largest category where the Afghan voice can talk is about corruption (5,6 percent), followed by diplomacy (5,4 percent) and elections (4,7 percent), all Western themes, especially diplomacy. In the figures below, we will see that some themes were so little used by a certain source actor. Even though these themes were used a couple of times, their number was so low that these categories appeared as zero percent in the graphs. However, we decided to include them for completeness.

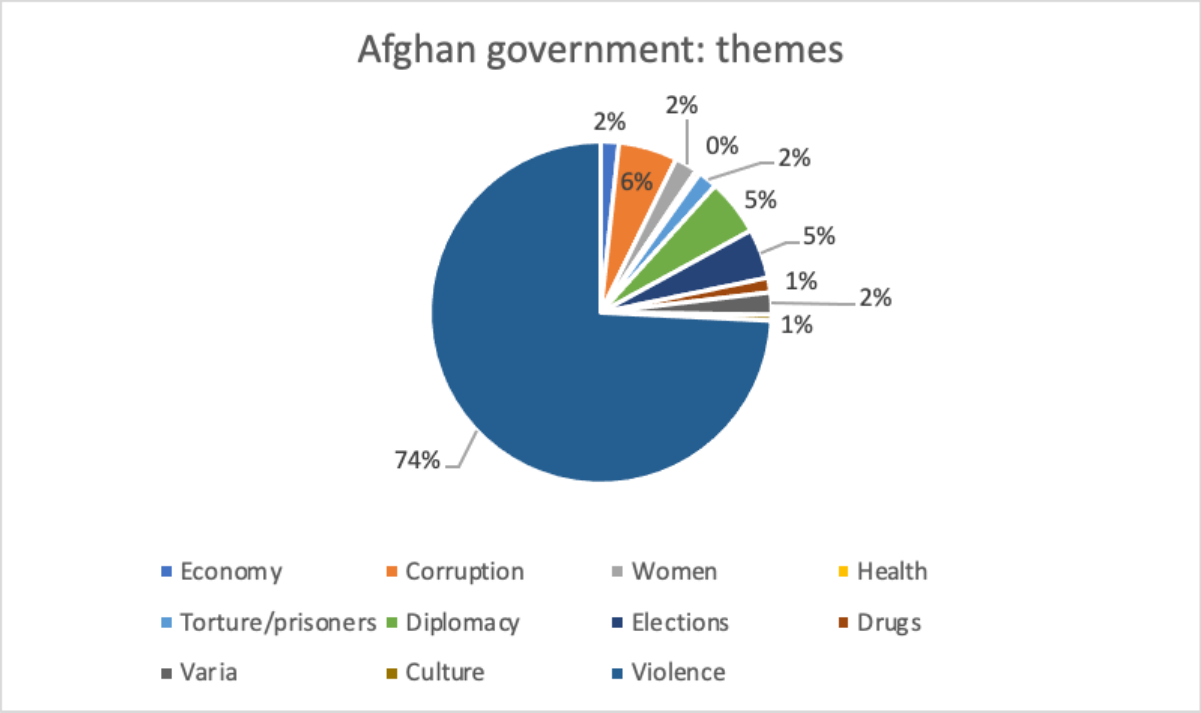


Figure 15 *Afghan government: themes*

The main focus of the articles was thus placed on the violence theme. When analyzing our corpus and reading the texts, we discovered that the quotes of these officials often underlined the War on Terror ideology. We do see that there is criticism from Afghan government officials about the United States ('they kill too many civilians', and torture is criticized), but overall the idea that Afghanistan is a military conflict is embraced. We do not find regular references of these source groups to the so-called suppressed narrative of surrender and false reporting. There

are some examples, where it is mentioned, but then we see that the American officials or the American journalist do not dive deeper into this.

> Only last month, he [Padsha Khan Zadran, a defeated warlord appointed governor of Gardez] was blamed by victims' families for **falsely telling** American Special Forces troops that a convoy of tribal elders on their way to Mr. Karzai's inauguration in Kabul contained Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders, **causing an American bombing strike** that killed dozens of the travelers. The truth of that incident is disputed, with the Pentagon insisting that Taliban and Al Qaeda "leadership elements" were among the elders, and victims' families saying that their only fault was refusing Mr. Zadran's demand that they pledge to support his bid for the Paktia governorship before going to Kabul. (Article number 11: "Warlord Fends Off Warlord, Echoing Afghan's Bitter Past")
>
> Some Afghan leaders have asserted that the American air raids were not directed at the Taliban or Al Qaeda, but at **militias that have been challenging Mr. Karzai's authority**. He in fact has said he will ask for American airstrikes if they are needed to stop fighting among the **rival tribes and warlords** that still control much of Afghanistan. (Article number 15: "Foe's Identity Still Unclear In a Skirmish Aided by U.S.")
>
> Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said Americans generated the intelligence that led to the flawed raid; **Afghans insist the Americans were manipulated by bad information from locals caught in a complex feud**. The Pentagon, which has said the raid had some unfortunate consequences but was not in any way a failure, says Americans were fired upon; witnesses to the raid, on a school and a government compound, say the opposite. (Article 16: "Afghan Witnesses Say G.I.'s Were Duped in Raid on Allies")

Afghan women in government also mainly talked about violence. This theme was reflected in articles about torture, rape, fear of the Taliban, violent attacks, abuse… Maybe we expected them to talk about 'softer' topics like education and health care, but this was not the case. We do see, as their male counterparts in government, that these women mainly got a voice when something violent happened. In a lot of articles where these women were used as a source, the theme was 'women'. However, these articles were, as said above, always about problems or difficulties Afghan women faced in their daily life. These problems thus mostly relate to attacks, poverty, hunger… Therefore, we decided to classify them under the main theme of violence.

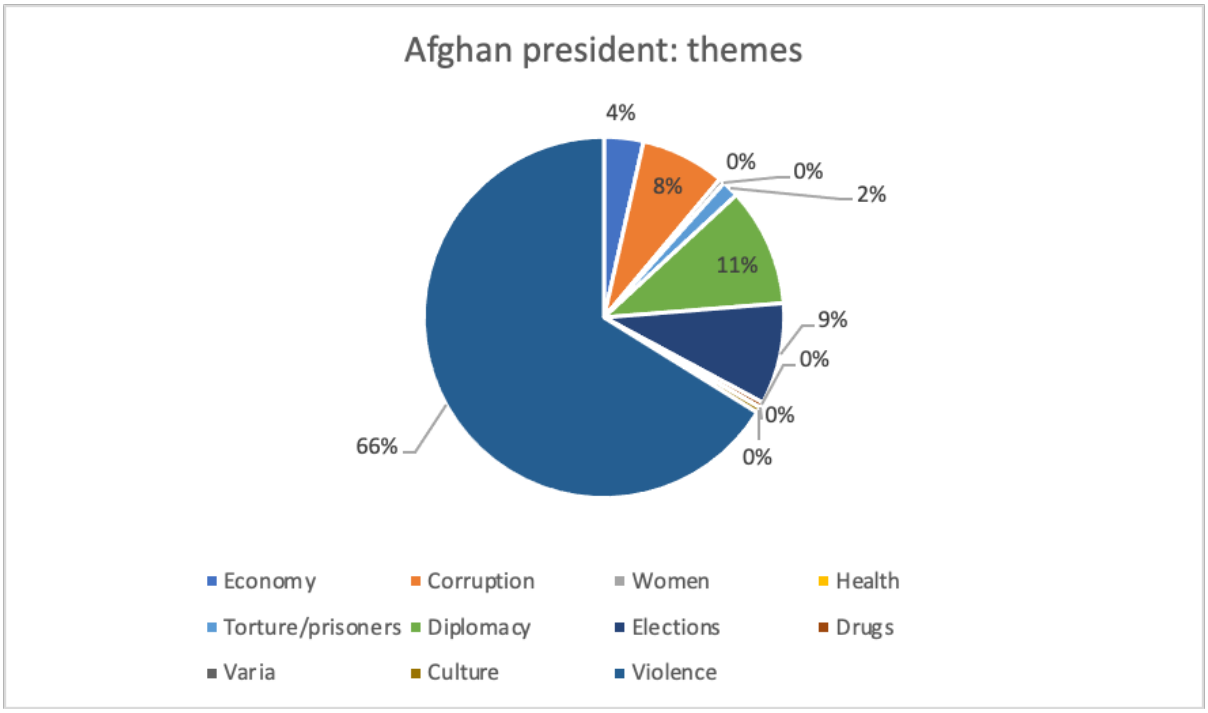


Figure 16 *Afghan President: themes*

When we examine the themes the Afghan President talked the most about, we see a strong overlap with the Afghan government chart (which he also is a part of). The top three consist of violence (66 percent), diplomacy (11 percent), and elections (9 percent). In the period that we have researched, there were four presidential elections. In 2004, Hamid Karzai won the elections. Later, in 2009, he was re-elected. Then in 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected as Karzai's follow-up and re-elected in 2019. So, it is not surprising that the President was used as a source in articles about the elections.

Still, violence remains the main category the President was asked about. This shows again a strong reliance on the Western military narrative, a narrative the Afghan government (especially the military faction of the government) adopted as they considered the West (the United States) as their ally.

4.2.2 Afghan civilian

When the Afghan civilian is speaking, it is predominantly in negative frames, for example about war, conflict, or violence or they are being used as a witness to violence or misery (adding emotion to the War on Terror story). Two examples:

> "The men were packed into a bus and brought to the banks of the Harirod river late on Friday afternoon, Mr. Wahed said, when they were forced into the water. **He said he saw only 12 men come out alive, and he helped retrieve the bodies of seven others**, including those of five people who had traveled with him from his district." (Article number 680: "Afghanistan Investigating Claims Migrants Were Killed by Iranian Guards")

> "Arbab Muhammed Rasoul, an elder in Barfak village who went to help collect the bodies, said **two gunmen on a motorcycle stopped the bus and forced off all of the passengers, who were 25 to 40 years old, before opening fire on them**." (Article number 624: "Gunmen Attack Hazara Miners in Afghanistan, Killing at Least 9")

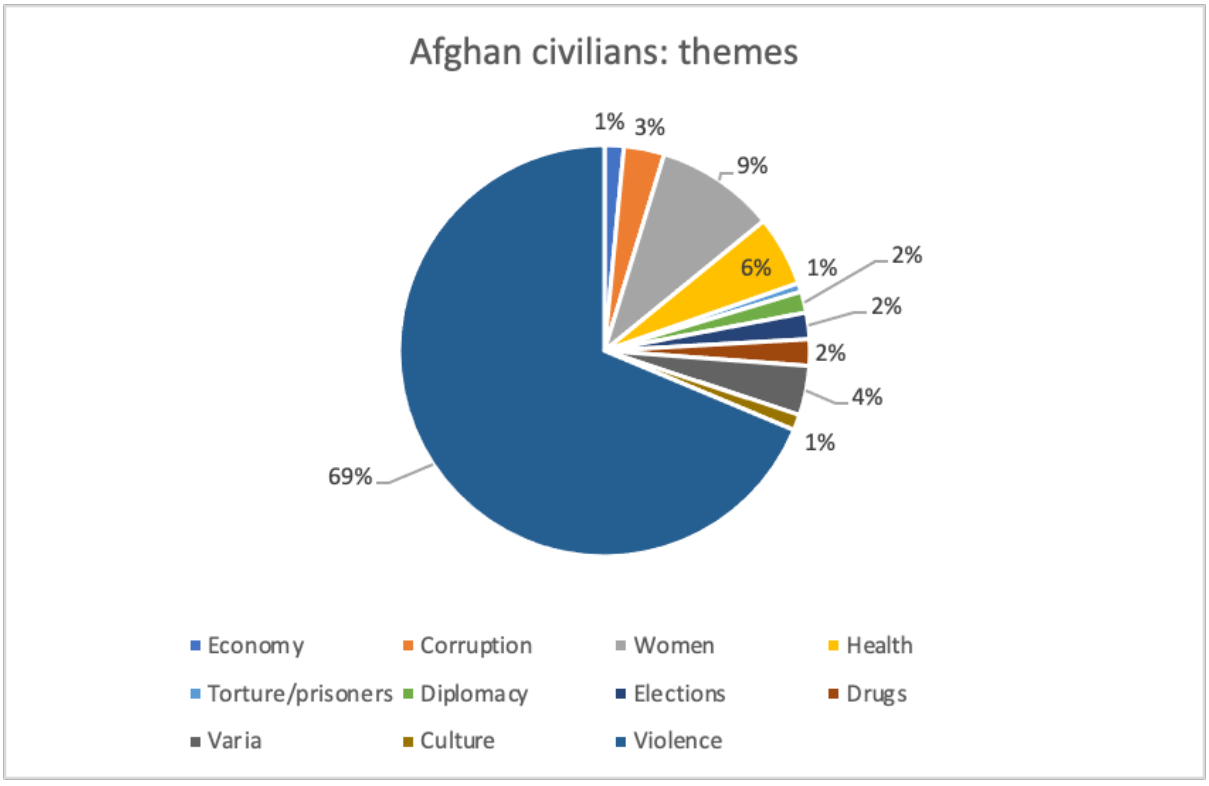


Figure 17 *Afghan civilians: themes*

Figure 17 proves that a majority of 69 percent of the Afghan civilian sources talked about violence. In a lot of articles, Afghan men were introduced when there was a dispute over U.S.

killings in Afghanistan. For example in the article 'Afghan Men's Deaths at US Outposts Is Investigated" (number 77), the majority of sources used are Afghan civilian men. The article mostly focuses on torture but leaves no room for indepthness about rivalry killings. Only at the end of the article, there is a reference to a rivalry with the commander who had beaten the men to death.

Also, we see that Afghan civilians sometimes speak about Western themes like elections (two percent). In this rare case, Afghan civilians are asked about their opinion about the competing candidates. However, this practice is rare as the Afghans are seldomly interviewed and asked to give their opinion on other themes.

When looking at the themes of the articles where Afghan civilian women got a voice (92 source excerpts in total), we see that – like their male counterparts – they are solely being used to share their eyewitness accounts of violence. They speak about the suffering of war and are often portrayed mourning their 'lost sons and husbands', struggling to survive and provide for their families. Afghan women are seldomly asked about their opinion on important matters.

The image of Afghan women is thus often reduced and generalized to the same stereotypes about suffering and the same victim frame. Article 699 for example ("In a Village of Widows, the Opium Trade Has Taken a Deadly Toll") describes how families have been torn apart because of the opium trade and uses strong quotes from these women: "There's nothing for us here – we could starve this winter, said Fatima, who goes by one name and said she was about 40 years old." Other examples we came across in the articles were about mothers not letting their sons go to fight, women losing property because of a flood, risking their lives to vote, male domination, and harassment.

The fact that only two women from the Afghan business scene were interviewed, also proves that the media is at ease with this mainly Western image and refuses to provide more personal stories and thus, a more complete image. There is a certain lack of research on the image of the Afghan woman, as portrayed in the Western media. However, Saumava Mitra (2019) and Azeta Hatef and Rose Luqiu (2020) have shown how the Western media used the so-called 'liberation' narrative of Afghan women to promote the U.S. government's military and interventionist narrative. By solely relying on stereotypes for female representation, the Western narrative gets ensured and reinforced.

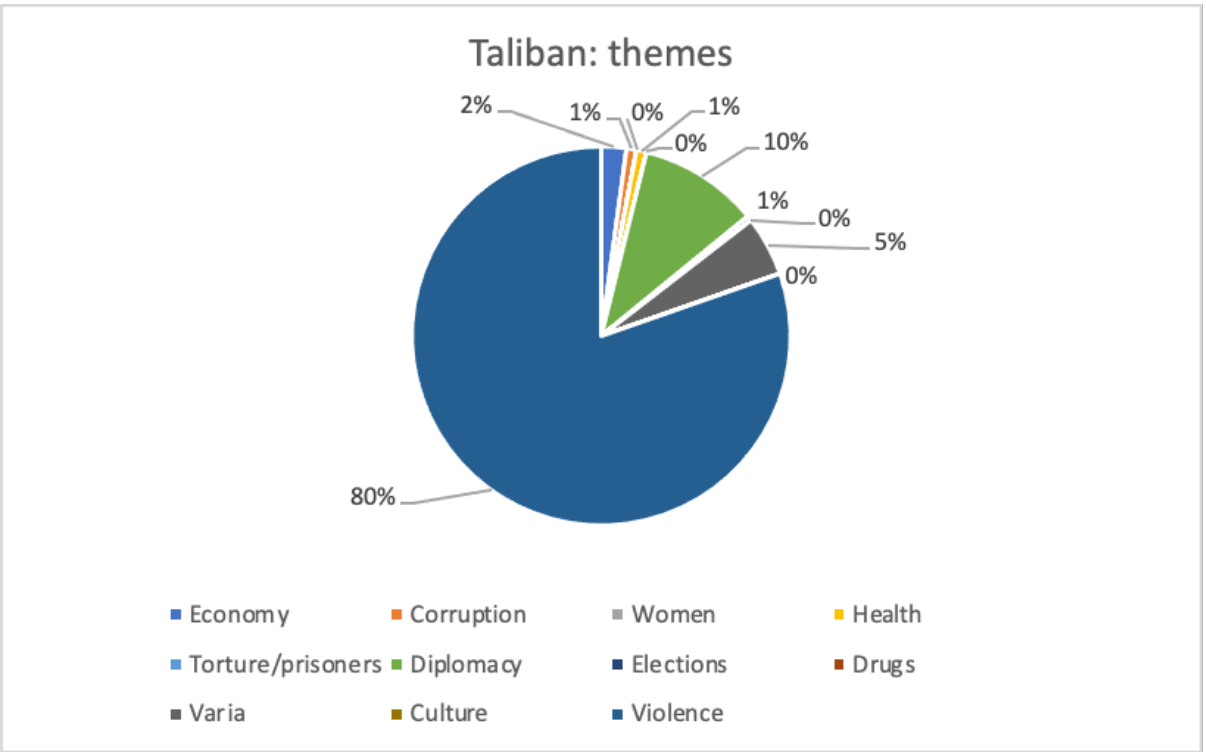


Figure 18 *Taliban: themes*

Further, we see that the Taliban is mainly interviewed about attacks and violence (80 percent). Other aspects like why they fight, their goals, and their attitudes towards the West are less important. With ten percent, diplomacy comes second. The other themes are far less relevant. Taliban sources were mainly used when an attack or another type of violence occurred. There was no neutral approach towards the Taliban in the rare moments they were interviewed.

When we zoom in on the diplomacy theme to check if the suppressed narrative might have come through in those articles, we see that a few articles have reported on peace talks like number 179 "Afghan President Reports Talks with Taliban" (April 2007). Another article (number 371, January 2010) is about Karzai's reconciliation plan that offered jobs, education, and other social benefits to Taliban followers that defected. However, in the article, a Taliban spokesman ruled out the possibility of negotiations with the Karzai regime. Remarkable is that he only got one paragraph to express the Taliban's stance. The relatively long article did not leave any place for him to explain why they chose to close the door to negotiations at that moment. Later, in 2011, article number 443 described how some Taliban officials were open to talks. But in this case, again, these officials merely got a voice and the journalist mainly relied on governmental sources. In 2013, there was a piece (number 541) on how Pakistan released a senior Taliban commander to help kick-start peace talks in Afghanistan. We see a

few more articles on how the Taliban refused to participate in talks (numbers 488, 645, and 660). An exceptional article is number 664, “What Do the Taliban Want in Afghanistan? A Lost Constitution Offers Clues” by Mujib Mashal (June 2019). In this piece, Mashal described the intra-Afghan peace talks in the Qatari capital Doha. This article is rather well cross-checked. It is based on multiple sources from the Taliban (documents, spokesman) and gives them equal space as the Afghan government. Moreover, the author decided to contact an Afghan expert, Ghezal Hares, a constitutional scholar, to comment on this. In other articles, we clearly see Western/American experts getting the upper hand in commenting on the Afghan situation.

4.3 The Global North voice

Now we examine the other large part of the sourcing: the Westerners or the global North voice, which consists predominantly of the American voice.

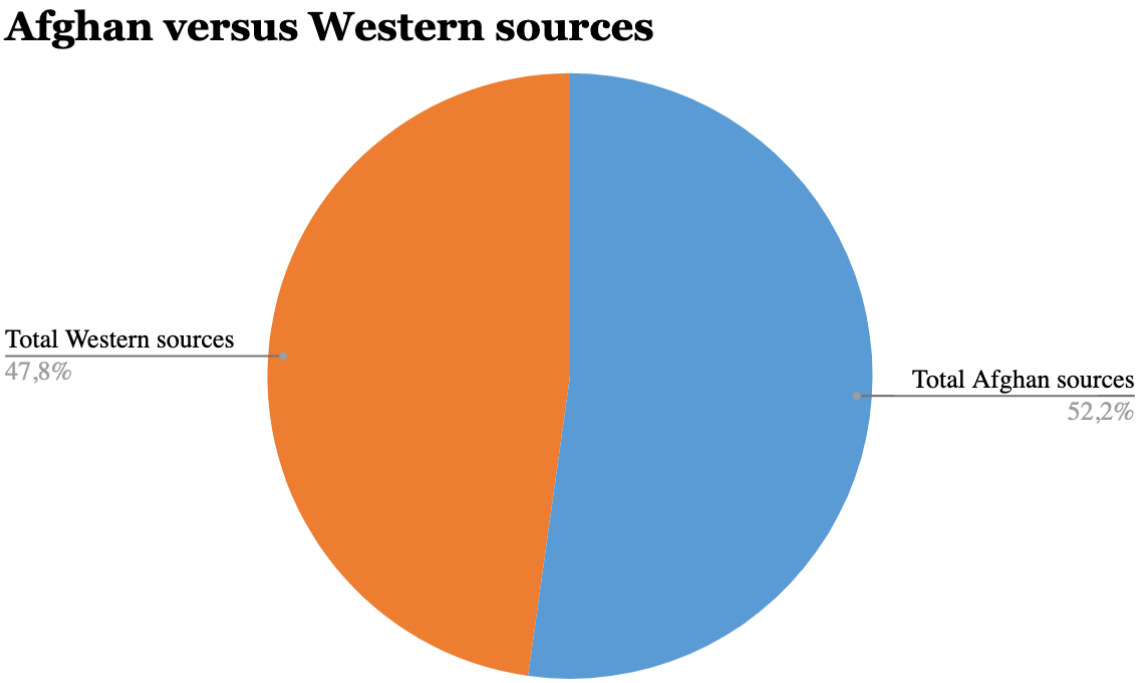


Figure 19 *Total Afghan versus Western sources*

As we already said, the Afghan voice is dominant (52,2 percent, 3.580 sources) and makes up slightly more than half of the sources used in *The New York Times'* coverage of Afghanistan. That is more than we expected.

Of the Western voices, we first wanted to know how large the American share is. Figure 20 below is clear: the majority (60,8 percent, 2.027 sources) of the Western sources in the Afghanistan coverage of *The New York Times* is American. NATO makes up 13,6 percent (447 sources) of the global North voice. NATO is stationed in Brussels and could be seen as a different source adding some diversity, but that has not been the situation on the ground. The U.S. government has been the main leader of the NATO missions in Afghanistan over the last twenty years. The civilian counterparts came from all over the world, but the leaders of these NATO fighting divisions were mainly American. Since February 2007, the Americans were at

the head of the command, with a small British intermezzo of eleven days in 2010 (ISAF, 2012). The NATO sources are thus adding to (the American) officialdom and the military view on the conflict. A quarter of the Western voice (25,8 percent, 858 sources) is 'Western rest'. This category refers to all the other Western governments (the British, French, Canadian governments…), the United Nations, Western diplomats or experts that could not be identified, NGOs, and the Western civil society.

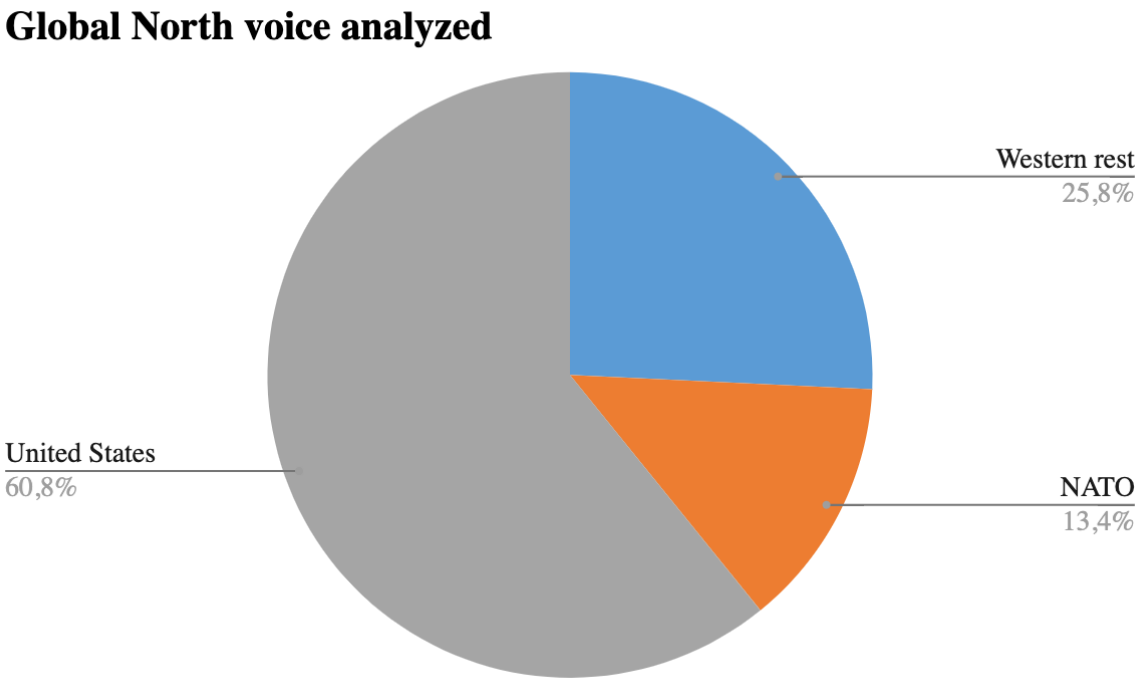


Figure 20 *Global North voice: NATO, United States and Western rest*

When we zoom in on this 'Western rest' category to examine which sources *The New York Times* has quoted mostly in Figure 21, the amount of officials is striking. Of those officials, we see that the United Nations (in total 43,5 percent or 200 sources) is predominant. The large category 'UN-documents' (16,3 percent of the most quoted Western sources or 75 sources) consists mostly of the civilian casualties reports that the United Nations each year wrote or more often, and from their Security Council reports. When checking the sources used in the UN-research, it is often clear that the organization is political: it was not able to dive deep into the enemy world, because they were invited by the Afghan government. For this thesis, it goes too far to dive into the source routines of the United Nations in Afghanistan, but in the context

of this research – which is about postcolonialism in *The New York Times* – it is important to mark this as a side-note.

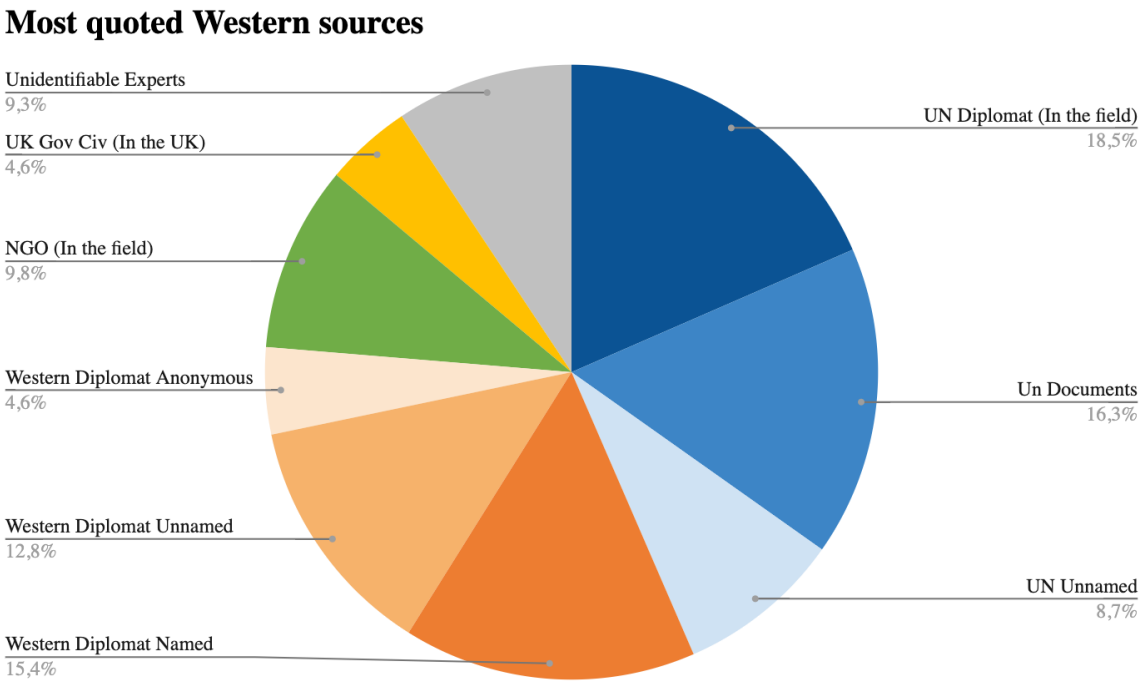


Figure 21 *Most quoted Western sources*

Often official Western sources did not get a name or appeared anonymous. In that case, we categorized them under 'Western diplomats'. Western diplomats (named, unnamed and anonymous) were good for 151 sources and make up 32,8 percent or one-third of the most quoted Western sources. The named and unnamed categories of Western diplomats make up a considerable part of the sources and are mainly used to confirm the military narrative or the enemy picture. The following excerpt shows how these Western diplomats are often mentioned in the same breath as military officials to confirm and enforce a mutual claim:

> "If Pakistan, which is widely seen as a seedbed for the Afghan insurgency, refuses to participate, those goals could be undermined, leaving little doubt that the fighting will continue, according to **Western diplomats and military officials**." (number 471: "Pakistan Rages After Strike, While U.S. and Afghanistan Worry")

Further, when looking at the other Western governments, we see that the British civilian government makes up 4,6 percent (21 sources) and is dominant among the other governments. This explains why only the British (civilian) government was included in Figure 21 above.

Other foreign governments were less prominent and thus not among the most quoted Western sources. The United Kingdom has also been closely involved in the Afghanistan war. In the previous chapter, we have mentioned Mike Martin, who recounted his experiences in the Afghan province Helmand with the British military.

Lastly, we have two remaining categories that each add up to almost ten percent. 'Unidentifiable experts' (9,3 percent or 43 sources) were experts or analysts of whom the nationality was not clear. In the article, this was not specified. By using plural and vague designations ('analysts say', 'industry experts have suggested', 'intelligence experts expect'...), it is not clear for the reader to determine who is talking. Some of these experts may be American. Because of this unclarity, we decide to code them in this 'unidentifiable' category. At last, NGOs (in the field) make up 9,8 percent (45 sources) of this pie chart. Among these organizations were the larger and more well-known ones like Human Rights Watch, CARE International, or Doctors Without Borders. But also smaller NGOs or organizations who are more focused on Afghanistan like the British Afghanaid Charity were consulted. This indicates that the focus of the media, similarly to the focus of the U.S. government, was not placed on development and humanitarian aid.

The New York Times had hardly any eye for the non-American/non-Afghan voice, for example, input from African or Latin-American countries. In our corpus, we only coded one African government source, which is unnamed. At a certain moment, we do see the South Korean government returning a few times, but this is due to a violence-related topic (the South Korean hostage crisis in 2007 when 23 South Korean missionaries were captured and held hostage by members of the Taliban). As for the non-Western experts, we only came across one Japanese historian. At last, we do see five Pakistani experts in our corpus.

4.4 The American voice

Next, we will explore the American voice in *The New York Times*. Within the Afghan voice, half of the sources used came from the Afghan government. We thus conclude that 'officialdom' was half. When we look at the American voice, this situation is completely different. We already know that in conflict and war – also when it is about indirect conflicts as with Russia and China – patriotism and nationalism play an important role. In *The First Casualty*, it was already shown that American newspapers have a long tradition of relying on U.S. government sources.

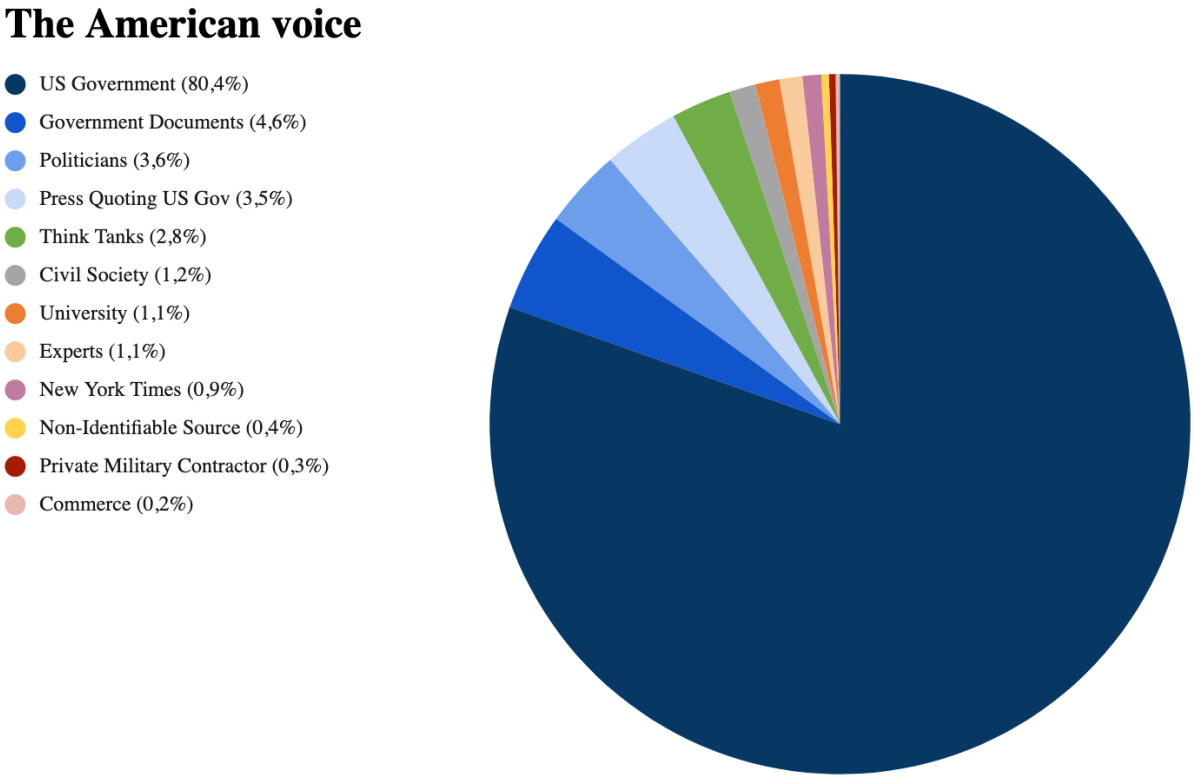


Figure 22 *The American voice*

The longest war in American history, even longer than the Vietnam war, is showing the same patterns: 80,4 percent (1589 sources) of the sources used come from the U.S. government. In the United States, press freedom is highly regarded and respected. Most of the time, journalists can freely choose any source they prefer, but we see that they tend to rely more often on the U.S. government. The second, third, and fourth largest categories are also adding up to officialdom. The category 'Government documents' makes up 4,6 percent (90 sources),

'Politicians' is good for 3,6 percent (72 sources), and 'Press Quoting U.S. Government' accounts for 3,5 percent (69 sources). When we add up all the different government categories, the total result is 88,5 percent (1748 sources). Moreover, within the American think tanks (2,8 percent, 55 sources), we see that the majority of these think tanks are related to or funded by the American government. Almost all of them have a security background, for example, the RAND Corporation (a global policy think tank created by Douglas Aircraft Company), the Atlantic Council (a right-wing think tank of former CIA employees), or the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The American civil society is good for only 24 sources or 1,2 percent of the total American voice. The categories 'University' (1,1 percent, 22 sources) and 'Experts' (1,1 percent, 21 sources) were similarly small.

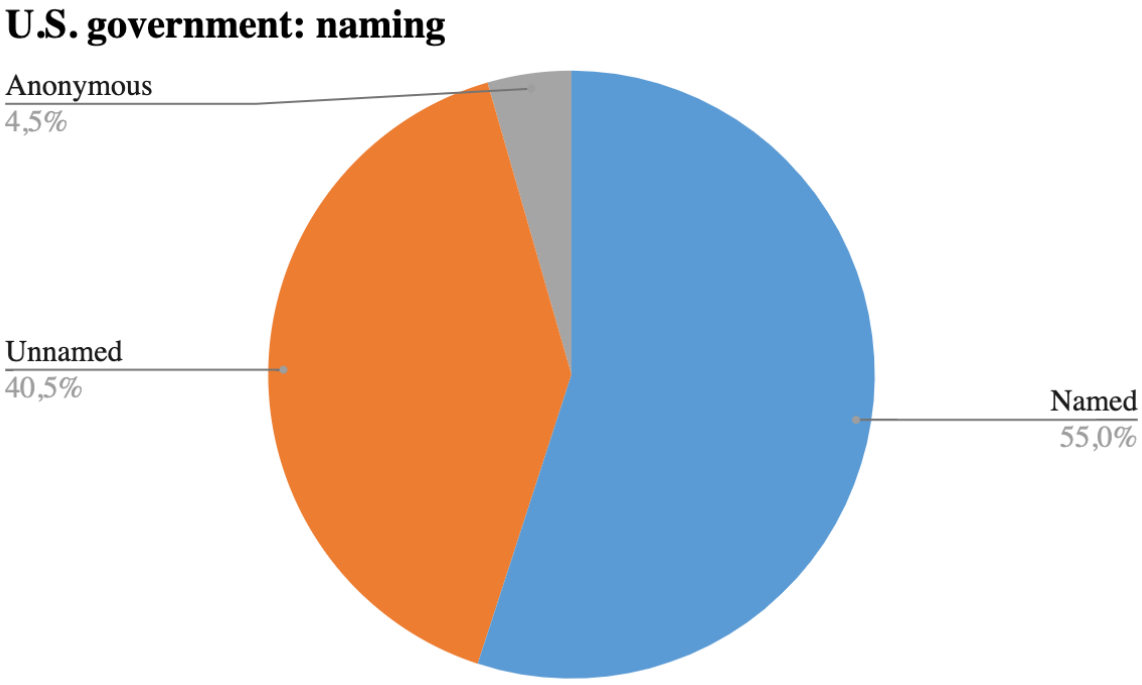


Figure 23 *U.S. government: naming practices*

As we have done with the Afghan government, we will examine the division between, named, unnamed, and anonymous sources. In Figure 23 we see an in journalism 'dangerous' detail: almost half of these government officials appeared in the articles without a name. These are sometimes anonymous (4,5 percent, 71 sources), but much more sources who were what we called 'unnamed' (40,5 percent, 644 sources). This phenomenon is especially recurrent in Washington D.C. (but also when the D.C. diplomats are traveling to Kabul) to quote the clerics

who are in the team of the minister or President. They often attend these press conferences in the background. Jessica Donati and Margherita Stancati, two journalists of *The Wall Street Journal* we interviewed, saw them as independent actors because they are not political nominees like their superior, the minister. They give details about Afghanistan – on finance, security, etcetera – but are not allowed to be named. A brief scan of these unnamed sources results in quotes on the practicalities of hearings (and their participants) about reviews on more or fewer troops. But we also see quotes on the political level, like promoting military action in Pakistan or predicting more military action, or more Taliban activity.

Of all the unnamed sources, none of them referred to the suppressed narratives, like the peace offer in 2001. There is slight criticism to be found like 'the narcotics statistics would be bad', or that the President is worried about the elections, which is seen as a share of criticism. Or they would say that there were problems with a night raid, but that this would not impact the effectiveness of the raid. When we take a look at the anonymous sources, who because of their anonymity could provide a more critical voice in the debate, we see that this is not the case. Most of these sources were quoted on the condition of anonymity as a matter of policy (articles number 214, 337, 442, 445, 544), because negotiations, talks, or decision-making are still taking place (articles number 126, 357, 442, 491, 492, 555), the delicacy of a certain topic (articles number 242, 385, 446, 476) or because the article was about (classified) military information, which could not be publicly announced (articles number 248, 366, 579, 582 613). Only a few times these anonymous sources reveal 'secret' important information or comment on the decisions of the U.S. government (articles number 35, 162, 223, 491), but there is no reference to the suppressed narrative. Only in articles number 280 and 320, an official acknowledged the responsibility of the United States in two separate airstrikes, which caused multiple civilian deaths. But in the rest of the corpus, there is thus a large absence of similar critical excerpts.

We also coded the sources of the American government and divided them between the security and the civilian categories. For us, it was important to see how the embracement of the War on Terror narrative in *The New York Times* was created. As we have seen with Hallin, *The New York Times* mostly relies on military sources or security sources when they speak about the Afghan conflict. As Hallin (1993) stated, when the story is about security topics, they interview security sources. We already see an upcoming debate in the United States about the police being interviewed when it is about crime (Higgins, 2020). The police are, according to critics, too often seen by the mainstream media like *The New York Times* as independent sources who get all the stage to describe what has happened with the crime. We see an identical situation in

Afghanistan. *The New York Times* – we assume – sees the situation in Afghanistan after 9/11 as an ongoing war, something that in itself is already questionable (look at the suppressed narrative). They embrace the War on Terror narrative, see Afghanistan after 9/11 as a conflict, and for that – as our statistics show – they often choose to interview the Pentagon. This represents an underlying suppressed narrative about peace. Peace offers are easily ignored, as any military source would most likely do. The military is raised and educated to fight, and will most likely see their job as something that has to do with war. If you give them the loudest voice and do not cross-check properly, they will automatically see Afghanistan as a conflict, as a situation with a clear idea of the enemy. It is the journalist who should be aware of these dynamics, and who should do his/her best to properly cross-check.

We already know from the WordSmith analysis that *The New York Times* predominantly used security terms and jargon. In their source selection of ministers and departments within the U.S. government, we see again the same strong focus on security (64,1 percent, 1222 sources). The civilian government was used 23,9 percent (456 sources) of the time as a source. In our corpus, we stumbled upon a third category, which we named 'Unidentifiable' (12 percent, 229 sources). This refers to the unnamed sources, which we could not categorize under the civilian or security department due to their vagueness, for example, 'the Americans', or 'American officials'. Earlier, we saw the same phenomenon with the Afghan source.

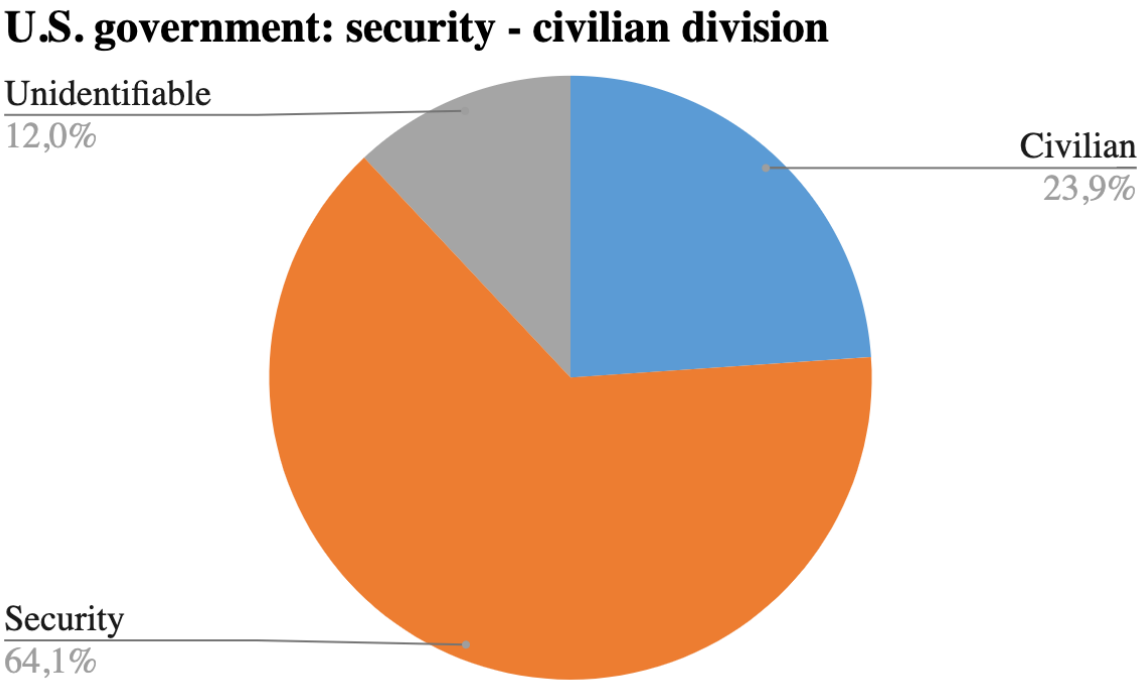


Figure 24 *U.S. government: security/civilian division*

In total, *The New York Times* called the Pentagon or other security-related departments two times more than the State Department or related civilian ministries and departments. The security faction made up 64,1 percent (1.222 sources) of the total U.S. government sources. The civilian category was good for 23,9 percent (456 sources). There is also a third category including government sources for which it was impossible to determine if they were with the civilian or security part of government. This category accounts for 12 percent (229 sources). The same result can be seen in Figure 25, where security sources make up 70,5 percent (617 sources) of the U.S. government named sources. The President was cited 46 times (5,3 percent). The civilian department represents nearly a quarter of the total with 24,2 percent (211 sources).

The point here is that this shows how dominant the securitized narrative is, a narrative that often embraces war and sees war as a solution for the situation where the Other is in. Though we do know from the more cross-checked – though suppressed narrative – that diplomacy was possible from the early days on, there is no reflection on that possibility to be seen in *The New York Times*.

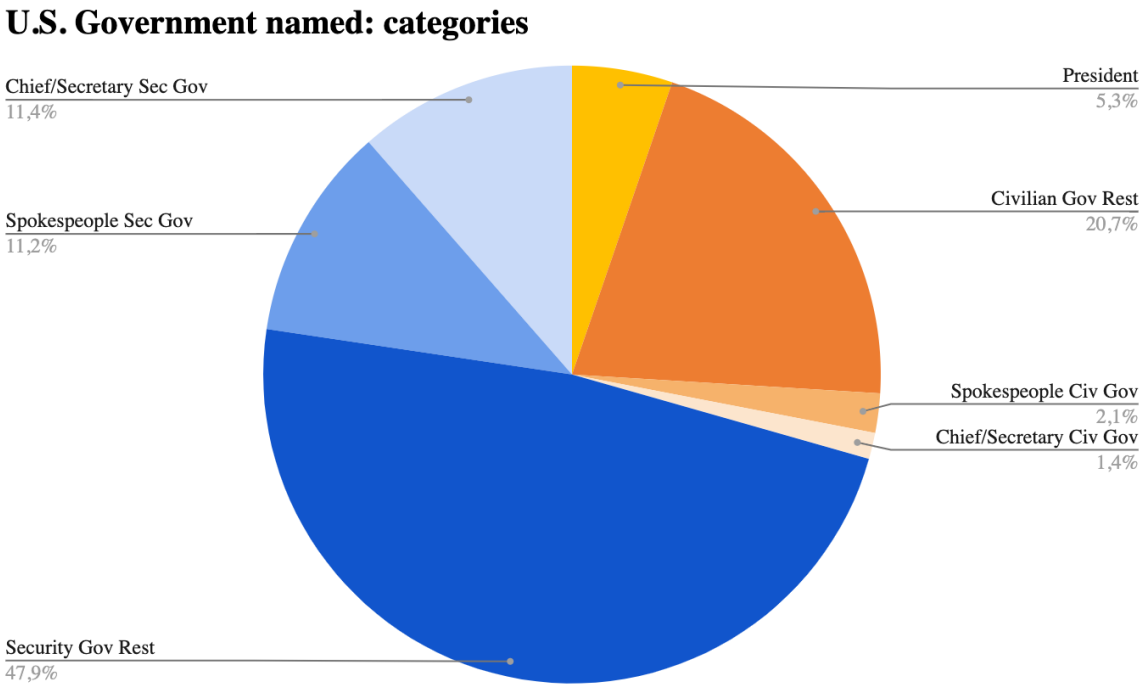


Figure 25 *U.S. government named: categories*

One would expect more soft language from the State Department (which is a large part of the civilian voice), where there is normally more focus on the non-war options, like diplomacy. But as shown earlier, generals initiated 9/11. After this trauma, they considered Afghanistan such a dangerous country that it had to be the Pentagon taking the lead. The State Department was sidelined internally in the U.S. government. But even if *The New York Times* would have interviewed insiders from the State Department, they would not have reached the suppressed narrative of surrender. That required more non-governmental sources, mainly the ones who were living or who were present in Afghanistan. Many of the State Department officials had no idea about the peace offers, as they have witnessed (Dam, 2016). The extreme focus of the U.S. government on a military solution is almost an internal matter of this same government. The press has the freedom to think independently, especially in the United States. No one forced them to embrace this ideology of terrorism. But despite that, we do see firm self-censorship here, in the shape of patriotism and nationalism. In this case, the dominating ethnocentric focus results in Otherizing stereotypes and thus racism.

4.5 Content of the American voice: What does it say?

If we look at the themes in the articles where the U.S. government was used as a source, we see a major dominance (82 percent) of the violence theme. If the U.S. government is interviewed, it is thus mostly talking about violence/war. Other 'developmental' themes like culture, health, economy, or women were considered less important. Though still very small with six percent, diplomacy is the second largest category. However, the gap with the violence theme remains striking.

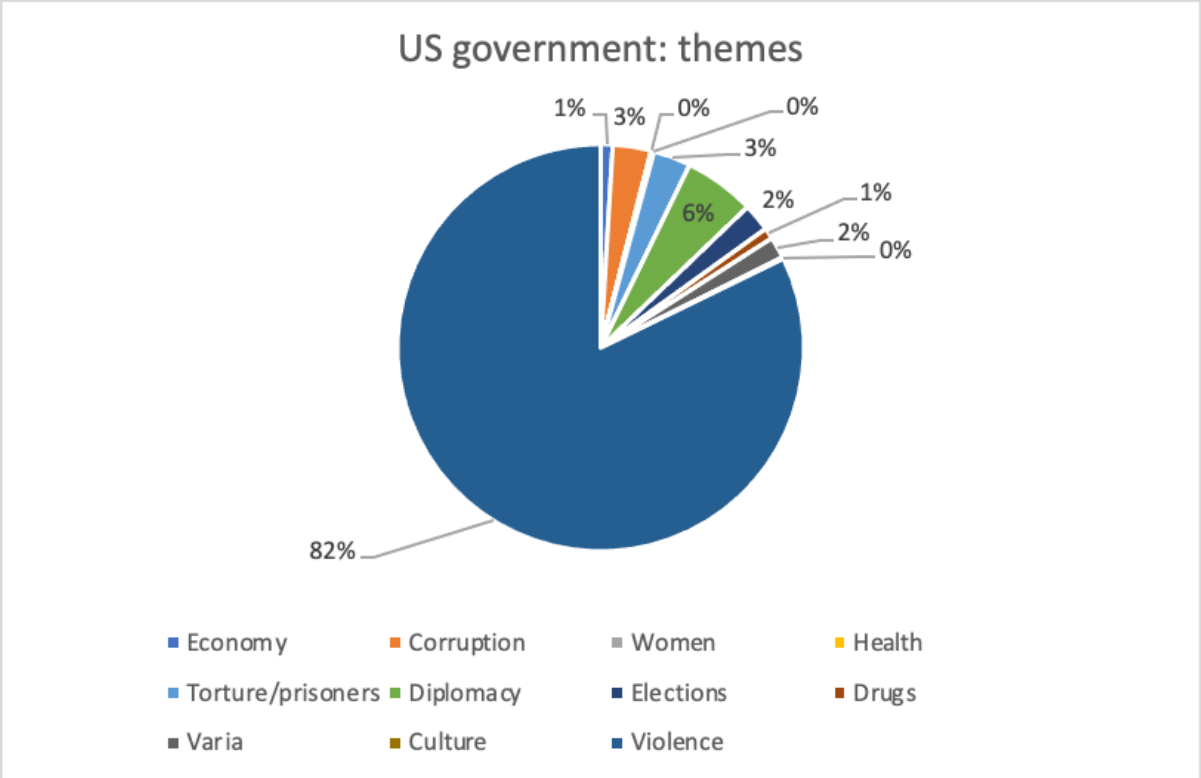


Figure 26 *U.S. government: themes*

Though, we do see different results when comparing the American civilian government and the security government. For the first one, violence was less important than for the security departments. However, with 61 percent, it remained the main category. Within the civilian government faction, there was more attention for diplomacy (15 percent) and elections (5 percent). The main focus of the security department was on violence (93 percent). Other themes were far less important.

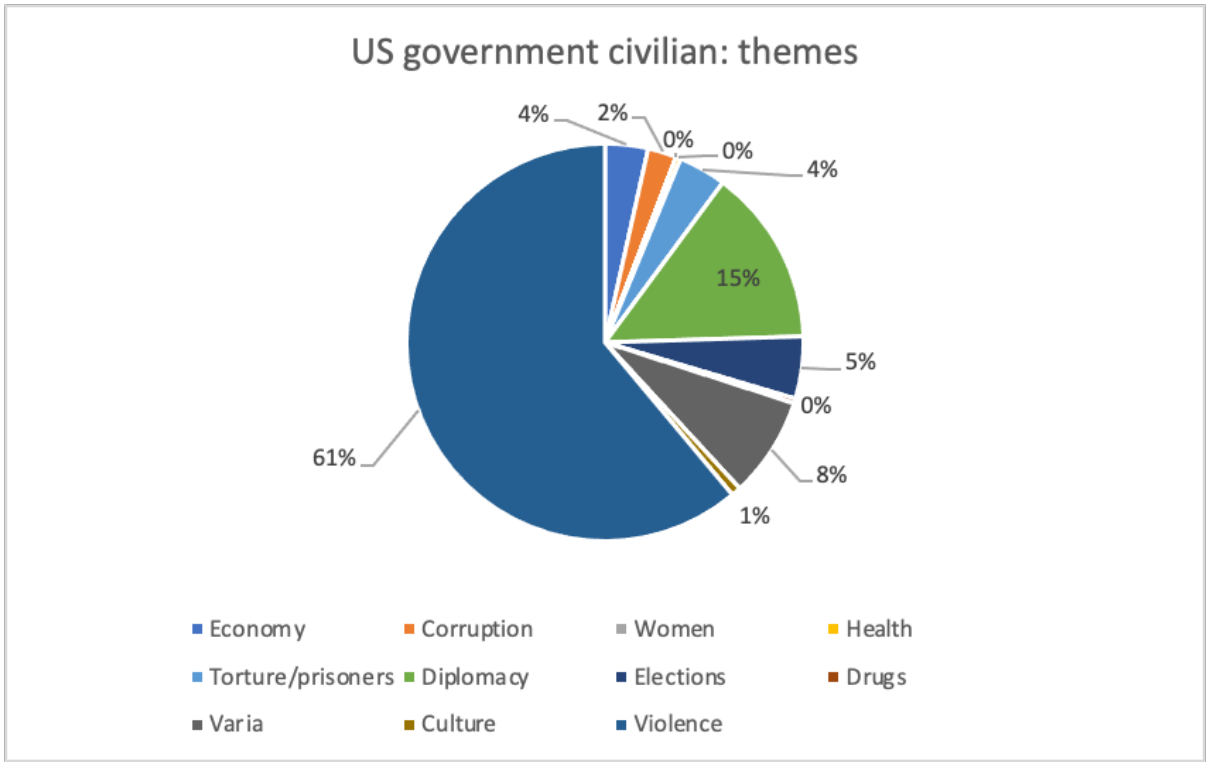


Figure 27 *U.S. government civilian: themes*

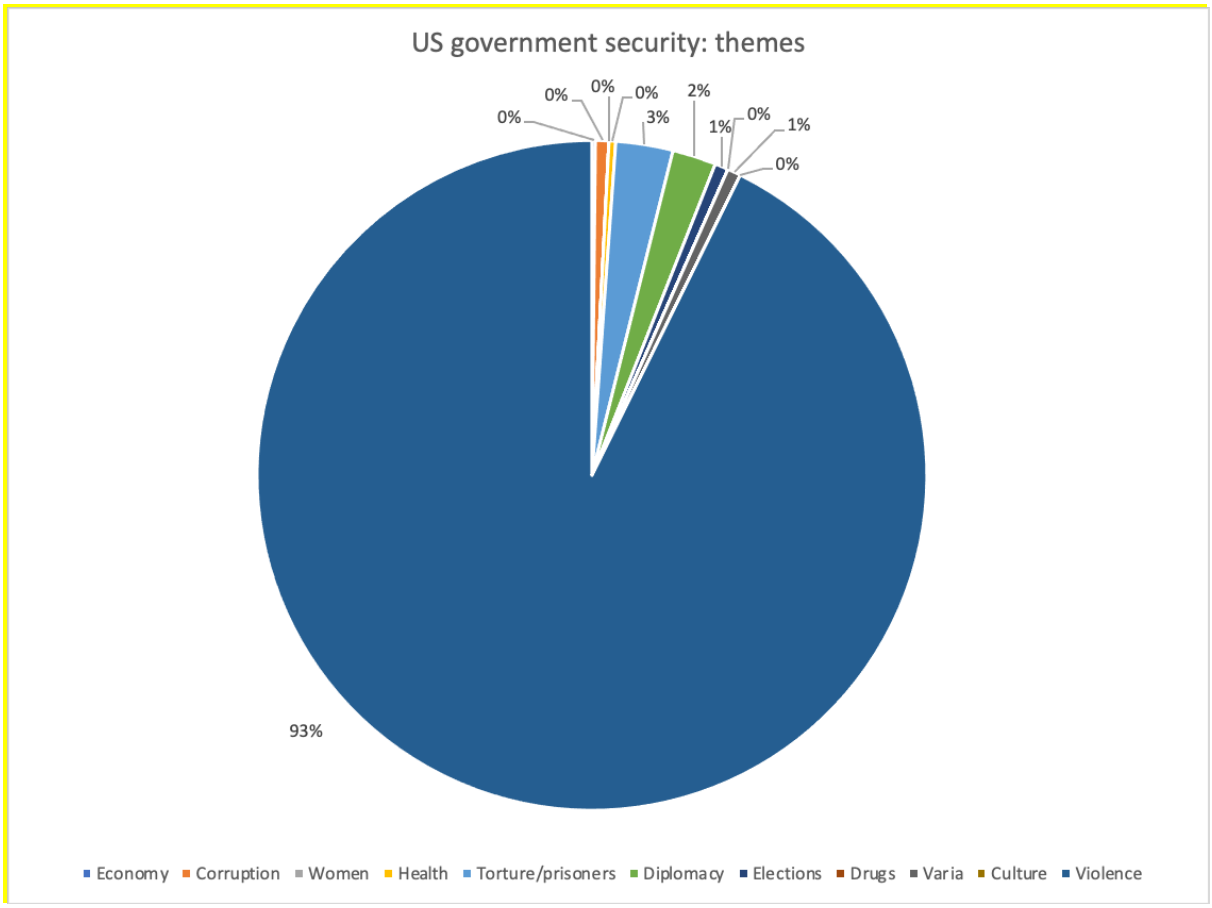


Figure 28 *U.S. government security: themes*

5. Dam her 'change strategy'

Along the way, many have told us – prominent journalists and academics – not to go ahead with this project, because there would be no change. They believe that news production is simply unchangeable. Although the outcomes above are indeed not promising, we will persevere with this project. Moreover, we also applied for a grant to investigate the Dutch and Flemish media, besides *The New York Times*. Since this is more 'in our backyard', we might be able to gain more results. After some hesitation at the organization behind the grant (we were denied first), they are now convinced investigating the journalism practice on a metalevel is important enough to spend money on.

We want to give it a try with *The New York Times* as well. Also, since we will record the attempt for change, this trajectory, this process, and the journey in itself are interesting. Who is receptive at *The New York Times*, and how do they respond?

5.1 Changing *The New York Times:* a snowball effect?

Dam's first step in the project was to create the visualization of the problem above to show it to the news gatherers and producers. For this, she will portray the outcomes in easy-to-read graphics and explanation videos. This is necessary to reach the audience, the journalists of *The New York Times*.

The idea is that if *The New York Times* changes, this would unchain a snowball effect. "When the *Times* indicates that an issue is newsworthy, other U.S. news organizations take note" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 32). Most other newspapers and TV stations copy the line of *The New York Times* (ibid.). Dam experienced this working for a newspaper in the Netherlands. The morning meeting was often based on *The New York Times*: what do they say? Next to *The New York Times*, the British *BBC* also occupied a prominent role. In my personal experience as a journalist working for Belga Press Agency, I do see the same rhythm within this press agency. Belga mainly uses other foreign press agencies (ANP, AFP, DPA, TASS, ATS…) for its international news desk. However, *The New York Times* is agenda-setting and even these big press agencies are influenced by *The New York Times*, and thus the foreign news Belga produces.

Some would say that *The New York Times*, as an elite liberal paper, represents the best that can be expected in the coverage (Ibelema, 2007, p. 165). Dam also selected the Associated Press (AP), as one of the largest press agencies in the world (as seen in the paragraphs on the Big Three) for some context. These outcomes will not play a prominent role in this paper. We

investigated the source structure of the newspaper and showed a detailed analysis of the Western bias in *The New York Times*. From the field, Dam has noticed that most of the journalists she met in Kabul do not know about their own bias, or they see the bias, but do not know how to 'debias'.

While the academics seem to be unanimous about the danger of Western bias, there is not much communication between these academics and the journalists, it seems. "Media and journalism scholars rarely cooperate with the actors with a say in media production", says Leeds professor Jairo Lugo-Ocando, who was a journalist before as well (2015, p. 369).

> Journalism exposes a key paradox, one that many of us who worked in the field are aware of. On the one hand, there is the conviction that the newsroom is the center of the universe, on the other the certainty that it is one of the most isolated places on earth (ibid., p. 370).

The history of the white/Western bias – it has been there from the early start of conflict reporting – shows that change is not easy. "Historically speaking, the news media resist change and criticism. This is why official efforts and civic attempts to change and improve the way journalists go about their work have mostly been ignored", says Lugo-Ocando (ibid.). He names two examples of how journalists were open to change and improve their work. The first, the MacBride Report from UNESCO, dates back to 1980. The Leveson Inquiry produced in the United Kingdom is a more recent example, dating from 2012. "These efforts, which in their time enjoyed considerable support from governments, international organizations and important segments of the public, had almost no effect on the way news media organizations behave or journalists go about their work" (ibid.).

5.2 Attempts to and theory about change in the past

The MacBride report is indeed a fascinating example. A very global (though elite) team of UNESCO rang the alarm clock with the book *Many Voices, One World*. Frau-Meigs, Nicey, Palmer, Pohle, & Tupper (2012, p. 3) have described the history of origin and the goals of the report:

> The expression 'New International Information Order' (NIIO) appeared during the 1970s as a result of what Third World countries perceived as their disadvantaged situation in the field of information and communication. It emerged from claims for a 'New International Economic Order' (NIEO). Encouraged by the movement of the countries part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), they protested against the global leadership of the Western news agencies (AP, AFP, UPI, Reuters), accused of controlling up to 95 percent of worldwide information flows [and thus with this imbalance affecting the international community (Rafeeq & Jiang, 2018, p. 4)]. In the context of the Cold War, this politicized debate was raised in UNESCO, the United Nations agency in charge of communication issues; it established the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (ICSCP) chaired by Seán MacBride. In 1980, the MacBride Commission produced a much-debated report, *Many Voices, One World*, in which several proposals in favor of Third World countries were made, around the concept of a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO), including the creation of the International Programme for Development in Communication (IPDC) as a funding mechanism.

In 1980, the 21st General Conference of UNESCO was held in the Yugoslavian capital Belgrade. There, the attendants of the conference agreed that the foundations of the new order should be based on the following aims, among others (ibid., pp. 21-22):

- Elimination of the imbalance and inequality of the current situation
- Elimination of the negative effects of some public and private monopolies, and the eradication of excessive concentrations
- Removal of internal and external obstacles hindering the free flow of information and hampering a wider and more balanced dissemination of ideas
- Plurality of information sources and channels
- Freedom of press and information
- Freedom of journalists and of all media professionals; this freedom is inseparable from responsibility

- Ability of the developing countries to improve their own situation by upgrading equipment, training staffs, improving infrastructure and enabling information and communication to meet their needs and aspirations
- Sincere willingness of the developed countries to help them achieve these goals
- Respect for both cultural identity and for the right of each nation to inform the world public opinion about its own interests, aspirations and social and cultural values
- Respect for the rights of all people to participate in international exchange of information on the basis of equity, justice and mutual benefit
- Respect for the public right of ethnic and social groups as well as individuals to access information sources and to actively partake in the communication process

Not much of this came to fruition. There was immediate disagreement. Due to these disagreements over NWICO, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore left UNESCO in 1984 and 1985. The United States returned after almost twenty years of absence in 2003 (ibid., p. 3). The main argument for the United States was that it did not wanted the outside world to intervene in its highly regarded free marketplace of ideas.

In the 1980s, there was a lot of debate about the role of the media, but while Chomsky and others are quite known for their contributions, there is one author who is often forgotten, namely Upton Sinclair. In 1919, the American wrote *The Brass Check*, which he named the most important and the most dangerous book he ever wrote (of more than ninety books). *The Brass Check* described how media followed the narratives of the elite and how the American suppressed knowledge (as we call it in this thesis) was created, often related to ignored development. Sinclair did not only talk about conflict, but he also touched upon social movements, like peace, feminism, environment, and civil rights, that were not making any change to become mainstream because the media did not include them in the coverage. Ben Scott and Robert W. McChesney (2002) wrote the following about *The Brass Check* for their review:

> In our view, the explanation is that in this book Sinclair analyzes a central and powerful institution in the United States — the commercial press — and offers an unambiguously radical critique. The fact that attacking the press system was considerably more sensitive, difficult, and controversial than criticizing meatpackers or robber barons was quickly and immediately apparent to Sinclair.

Already in 1919, there was tremendous resistance towards criticism or ideas for change:

> From the outset, *The Brass Check* faced an opposition, unlike any other book he published. For starters, each of the first two hundred pages contained the potential for a libel suit. He could not even find a commercial book publisher willing to tackle the project, so he self-published the book, something he did on only a few other occasions in his career. And the book was hardly lacking in commercial promise. Sinclair organized ten printings of *The Brass Check* in its first decade and sold over 150,000 copies. He did not even copyright the book, hoping to maximize his readership, but also knowing that no one was likely to reprint it and join him in the hot seat. Indeed, at one point, he had difficulties securing sufficient paper from recalcitrant vendors to reprint the book (Scott & McChesney, 2003, p. xiii).

Most critics and newspapers were very hostile to Sinclair and refused to review *The Brass Check*. According to a lot of critics, Sinclair had been cutting corners with the truth and was attacked on the factuality of his work. However, Sinclair countered the criticism by saying that they could sue him "if they could prove a single word in the text was false" (ibid., p. xiv). There were no suits. Only in 1921, the Associated Press organized a reviewing commission to check on the charges Sinclair made about the AP in his book. But the project was later quietly abandoned (ibid., xiv).

The idea of the prominent academic and former journalist Jake Lynch is also that journalists are not easily willing to change (2005, p. 227). The Australian professor Lynch is a fervent lobbyist for elevating the suppressed elements of societies and conflicts in our coverage. The term 'peace journalism' was an unlucky choice, according to us, because it antagonized the journalist in the mainstream. Do we only write about peace? What about the atrocities in the world? But *Peace Journalism* – despite the term – is nothing more than a strong plea for the mainstream media to have more eye for complexity, context, and suppressed narratives. This school of thought has gained some ground but is still considered a minority narrative in the bigger organizations.

Lynch says that in his experience interacting with the mainstream media, change is extremely difficult. Journalists think highly of themselves, and they think they report 'facts and only the facts'. This idea is part of almost all the mission statements of the mainstream agenda-setting media, like Reuters, AP, and *The New York Times*, as we have illustrated multiple times in this thesis.

What would convince journalists to see and understand the problem? Some say not an academic article or a Ph.D. This was described by Lugo-Ocando:

> We dismiss reports and scholarly research based on a systematic and structured study of our work, because – we say – it is 'irrelevant' or presented in convoluted language and terminology that makes it 'inaccessible'. Some of us have gone on to claim that we do not have time for scholarly criticism that overlooks **the pressures we face** and **undermine the democratic value of what we do** (2015, p. 370).

But this is a recurring practice, as stated by many other authors in the same paper (ibid., 372). Some examples:

> I cannot recall a single academic paper issued from 'pure' media scholars that I found relevant or useful to the work I did or that resulted in me changing my practice in any way (Marsh).
>
> It is not only practitioners who feel alienated by such writing. Media, journalism, and communication students are rarely happy with the language of the academic texts they are forced to read as part of their curriculum (Barkho).
>
> But we all have to remember – academics and practitioners – it is the taxpayers who pay for a lot of the research; therefore, the public has the right to know whether they will eventually get something in return for their money (Pettersson).
>
> The way scholars write is a direct offense to the craft skills of journalists. It goes against everything they believe and everything they teach their staff. They see their own job as achieving clarity and regard academics as delivering obfuscation – over-long papers, windy, jargon, cloudy meaning, invented language (Ray).

From the academic side, things do not always go smoothly. Once, a senior academic flew to the CNN headquarters planning to change the bias. Cees Hamelink, who is a Dutch professor in Communication and Media at the University of Amsterdam, told Dam he hoped that CNN would be able to change. This resulted in a request for signatures: if he was able to collect one million signatures, CNN would change and become less biased. But Hamelink did not make it, he 'only' collected 500.000 signatures.

5.3 Present options for change?

One way is to investigate how – in this case, on the academic level – to crack through this thick wall of resistance. Whatever strategy we come up with has to be very clearly adapted to their reality. That means we have to make it very recognizable.

We should not only limit ourselves to criticizing *The New York Times* and in general, the mainstream media. One aspect that should be underlined first and foremost is the importance of journalism in our societies. We all agree on how crucial the fourth estate is. The gatekeeper's function to cross-check the government is of extreme importance.

We also should make it clear that not all the articles are below the required standards. As Hallin said, articles 'within' the frame can be good. Though *The New York Times* was late with criticizing torture in the War on Terror, in the end, it did choose to take a stance on the topic. Moreover, there is a great eye for civilian casualties caused by the U.S. army or their allies. We see this often addressed in the newspaper. Moreover, the newspaper also took a critical approach to private contractors, for example.

But in this thesis, we examine if the journalist can step out of that frame. The above examples illustrate good journalism, but they stay close to the frame. None of them ask the more out-of-the-frame questions: is there terrorism in Afghanistan? Is it war? Is the military solution actually efficient (and thus criticizing the American view on Afghanistan)? This line of thought – positioning articles in and out of a frame – is not easy to understand for an outsider. This is something we should take into account.

Therefore, we should not frame our work as an attack – although we can be direct – but merely like a co-ship of some sorts, where we are both after a very good way of doing journalism. Ideally, *The New York Times* would be part of this process and share a stake in it. This would increase the commitment and benefit all parties. We should also point out to *The New York Times* that they are not the only newspaper with a problem with biases. The AP, for example, has identical problems. Since we have analyzed AP as well, we can show them these results.

The very downside of this all is that we expect that the media are tired of criticism. We are living in an ongoing era of fake news, for example, something they are trying to cope with. The American media is under heavy pressure after the coverage of President Donald Trump.

One important benefit of the project is that Dam, who has been among the top conflict reporters in the United States for fifteen years, is known in this world. She manages more or less to keep in good contact with the editors, although this is not always easy. Despite being

friends, she often disagrees with the ethics of their work. For access, she will try to use these contacts.

According to professor Lynch, addressing credibility might influence these journalists. If you show the journalist is factually wrong, or he/she did make a mistake (because of not executing the core journalistic principles of cross-checking), he/she might be forced to react because of the feeling of being ashamed.

Toussaint Nothias, who we have mentioned already earlier, agrees with what Lynch said about addressing the journalist about the bias. In his paper 'Postcolonial Reflexivity in the News Industry: The Case of Foreign Correspondents in Kenya and South Africa' (2020), he shows how the African continent is reported on. He also analyzed articles – not 700 but 300 – and saw how there is a suppressed African narrative. When he described how to create change in his paper, he introduced an interesting example: *Africa is a Country* (AIAC). This project, which also used the naming and shaming strategy, "was created in 2009 by South African scholar and activist Sean Jacobs to call out Western media misrepresentations of Africa" (Nothias, 2020, p. 19). In a personal interview with a Nairobi-based correspondent, this correspondent says the following about *Africa is a Country* (ibid., p. 19):

> AIAC does actually have an effect, and it's probably the effect they wanted to have. They are never going to be a mainstream media outlet, but if you are covering Africa, you do read them, and you do make sure that you are not ending up on their pages being skewered for your shitty coverage. People do pay attention. I have been asked to read an article that someone had written and asked: "do you think AIAC is going to make fun of me for this?" That does happen. They are a new voice affecting coverage and making people think a bit more about representation.

In his paper, Nothias also suggests the bias and stereotype scanner, a tool developed at Stanford University. This tool, the ASTRSC (Africa Stereotype Scanner), describes its goal as follows (Who is ASTRSC for?, 2017):

> Stereotypes most often creep in because of ignorance and unconscious biases. We primarily designed ASTRSC for international journalists, particularly for journalists writing African news stories for the first time and journalists in training. We see ASTRSC as an opportunity for them to reflect on their writing practices and accountability while learning about key debates surrounding issues of stereotyping and media representations of Africa.

ASTRSC is presented as a tool that can be useful for all journalists or writers, even the more experienced ones. “Still, even with a lot of experience, stereotypes can creep into news stories, particularly when journalists don’t have the luxury of time” (ibid.) The scanner is an interesting concept. Therefore, we chose to introduce it here. It already gives an idea about the problem we are discussing and suggests potential solutions, which have to do with correcting the bias on several levels.

So, we see that Lynch and Nothias both focus on the same mechanism: blame and shame by pointing out the flaws, and that means addressing their credibility. Lynch is not really elaborating on how he foresees this. Nothias goes a bit more in detail (with the concrete example of AIAC) showing that stories were incorrect, that their ‘facts are not only the facts’.

How do we apply this name-and-shame practice to our work on Afghanistan? It is possible in the case of Afghanistan to come up with concrete examples of the missed coverage of an almost unanimous peace offer of the Taliban, which was non-existing in the newspaper. There is enough proof that this peace offer has happened (see the subchapter with the suppressed narrative on Afghanistan), but not in *The New York Times*. Only in 2021, did Alissa Rubin write a piece on it.

It is also possible to show them examples of how they misplaced attacks and jumped on a factual incorrect narrative. This requires offering the story the journalist missed, but in a very convincing way. Dam considers this to be part of her research: finding out the right tone, and cross-checking this approach with the journalists. This would mean showing them wrong based on one topic (the attack that killed Western troops was not the Taliban, but was the Karzai government, for example) or possibly addressing the larger problem of suppressed narratives like on peace.

One way is to point at the discourse. When we read the texts of *The New York Times*, we do see that the language is often Othering, and in some cases even racist. The terrain of Afghanistan is often portrayed as inaccessible, rogue, covered with wild mountains (though half of Afghanistan is easily accessible), for example, or Afghans are described with a wild look on their face. Here are a few examples we found in the articles:

> “Then, in 1979, the Soviet military machine swept in from the north, and one month later the Americans were gone. Lashkar Gah and its hospital, **like everything here, were left to slide back in time**.” (article 19)

> "The hospital workers were expectant, and nostalgic. They had been trained by Americans, their hospital stocked by them, and then they had been left by them. **Now they hoped to be rescued by them**." (article 19)
>
> "Operating deep in **tribal areas** where **suspicions of outsiders run high**, the soldiers show an edginess that hints at the hazards and the importance of their mission." (article 34)
>
> "This spring, Hakim Taniwal, a former sociology professor, returned to this **lawless corner** of southeast Afghanistan." (article 39)
>
> "When it comes to wielding power, the kind of money he raised goes a long way in this **desperately poor country**." (article 39)

But considering the aim for change, we do not think a discourse analysis on Othering/racism is sufficient enough as 'hard proof' to debias. To make the journalist understand that he/she missed something, we guess it is first important to provide insights into the routines of their job through 'hard data', as the pie charts show.

In our opinion, visualizing the problem might help to see through the bias. Only telling your audience about the bias is less impactful. Using examples where they missed the story could be too complex. Though, in New York, Dam will test these assumptions and test what is convincing and what not. We do want to lay out all sides of the story here and connect it to the theory of debiasing. We are convinced these journalists have to see it with their own eyes.

> Effective debiasing training typically encourages the consideration of information that is likely to be underweighted in intuitive judgment (e.g., Hirt & Markman, 1995), or teaches people statistical reasoning and normative rules of which they may be unaware (e.g., Larrick, Morgan, & Nisbett, 1990). Videos (and games) are scalable training methods that can be used for efficient teaching of cognitive skills (e.g., Downs, 2014; Haferkamp, Kraemer, Linehan, & Schembri, 2011; Sliney & Murphy, 2008).

The above text is from a paper (Morewedge et al., 2015, p. 3) about management and intelligence gathering. There is ample research on bias in the private sector and the intelligence sector. There are other reasons for them to unbias than war. "Biased judgment and decision-making affect people in their private lives. Less biased decision-makers have more intact social environments, reduced risk of alcohol and drug use, lower childhood delinquency rates, and superior planning and problem-solving abilities" (ibid., p. 2).

But in the journalism world, it is much more difficult to apply these tactics to news desks, and editors. It turns out, despite the problem, that there is a lack of academic research on how to debias journalism, while there is an overload of confirmation of the so-called pro-Western elite bias (see for example Chomsky).

5.4 Lessons from the debias-literature: how could *The New York Times* have found the suppressed narratives?

We basically exchange insights and then synchronize our knowledge with the journalist of *The New York Times*. The insights are shaped in simple pie charts and other graphs. After sharing those, we will have a common idea of the situation. Our judgment based on the analysis can still differ with the views of *The New York Times*, of course.

We already have some responses from the field. Showing the bias or the Western bias in their own reporting is convincing. This argument could relate to the racism and postcolonialism debate described by Van Dijk, something that is not prevalent in Lynch and McGoldrick's *Peace Journalism*. Showing *The New York Times* their white selection of sources, (and the dangerous outcomes of that) refers to the sensitivities that also have been created by the Black Lives Matter-protests. In an interview with Hélène Biandudi Hofer from Solutions Journalism, this was confirmed. Her team Constructive Journalism implements – as a result of Peace Journalism – change at news desks and focuses for example on more diversity among journalists, to avoid racism, stereotyping, etcetera. According to Biandudi Hofer, some news desks have been alerted by the outcry of the latest Black Lives Matter-protests. This movement has created awareness of their own whiteness among journalists. These days the accusation of racism is highly sensitive and has led to intense debates. Biandudi Hofer said the following about it: "I think the timing of Dam's research is very good in that respect. Things are changing, and the people in power are more receptive to that after Black Lives Matter."

In the articles, we saw enough Afghans interviewed, most of them officials. Though still, some of them, like Hamid Karzai, knew all along the way about the surrender. He was at least 150 times interviewed, but if we look at these interviews, they are about Western themes. Hamid Karzai's position after his surrender was blocked and he was under heavy surveillance by the United States. This influenced the plans coming from the palace. *The New York Times* was free to choose any topic but mainly chose to focus on elections, Taliban and al-Qaeda, and later on corruption. But while Karzai was under heavy surveillance, his entourage of governors who were interviewed regularly dis also know about the surrender.

Another way of knowing was by talking to civilians. They have much more freedom to talk, especially in the first fifteen years of the war. Though the plan to surrender was maybe three days alive, and surely only known by a select few at the top of the Afghan and U.S. government, in Kandahar many still remember hearing the announcement on the radio, as the

story was on the street. We do see that *The New York Times* interviews Afghan civilians, but those interviews fit mostly within the frame of witnessing the American war: progress, no progress, eyewitness accounts of dead family members, and prognoses about elections, which is also a very Western narrative.

This is a choice *The New York Times* made themselves. Nobody was forcing them to ask particular questions. The journalists of *The New York Times* were in charge of formulating the questions, and deciding on the topics and frames they want to talk about. Despite this freedom, there is hardly any diversity in those quotes of the government or the Afghan civilians: it is a very conservative narrative.

Independently gathered historical context could also have helped to find the suppressed narratives. As for any country or human being, the past is important for the understanding of current affairs. In a recent piece on the role of journalism 'in the age of Metaverse wars', Australian professor John Keane said the following: "When we are ignorant of the past, we invariably misunderstand the present; awareness of the past helps us grasp the measure of things" (2022). The past can thus tell us something about the acts of now. But despite coverage of twenty years, we also see that most articles do not include any historical context. After 9/11, the reader plummets into the conflict, in a country that mostly nobody knows how to pinpoint on a map. Small references to history that we see, are also embracing the U.S. government narrative. But information about the historical events was available. *The New York Times* bureau was properly staffed, and there were periods whit no attacks to report on, so there was more time for context.

One major historical narrative that was soon corrected by experts and witnesses, but was steadily ignored by *The New York Times*, was the one about al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban. The U.S. government had portrayed them as one enemy, allies of each other. However, in 2009, a team of the most regarded experts in Afghanistan, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn published a new book. They debunked the U.S. government line and showed that Taliban-leader Mullah Omar did not support al-Qaeda, but did not expel them either because of a failure in U.S. diplomacy to convince them. Though the book did not sell a lot of copies, these two experts were known in Afghanistan. Despite that, we do not see any doubt about the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban in *The New York Times*. Besides peace, this is another missed opportunity for understanding. The close alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda was the main reason for the U.S. army to go to Afghanistan. It could have been *The New York Times* that reported about the loose connection between the Taliban, and

stories that the Taliban had tried to expel Osama bin Laden. But besides an op-ed about this, there was no one on the well-staffed, well-paid journalist team – who had all the time and freedom in Kabul – to look out for these more nuanced, complex narratives that would go against the U.S. government (narrative).

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined which sources *The New York Times* used for its coverage of the Afghanistan conflict after 9/11 and which narrative(s) dominated this coverage. In the chapter on change, we reflected on how *The New York Times* (and the media in general) can become a more cosmopolitan, global entity that structurally includes diverse (not only Western) narratives.

To answer the first two research questions, we did a quantitative analysis of a select corpus of 690 articles. This corresponds with nearly ten percent of *The New York Times'* coverage of the Afghanistan conflict. The corpus started in January 2002, when the first extreme media attention in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks calmed down. It stopped in March 2021, when the final version of the corpus was drafted.

The timeline of the coverage, which was generated by applying an API to the dataset, revealed certain peaks of media attention. We analyzed these peaks and linked them to important events. We found out that these events were mostly related to the American, military narrative. Large peaks in attention corresponded with a surge in American troops or with high numbers of American deaths. Whereas, this was not the case when the Afghan (civilian) deaths started to rise. Moreover, the moment *The New York Times* loses interest was the moment 'her' U.S. military started leaving. The timeline thus shows how American/nationalist/patriotic *The New York Times* was when it comes to coverage of the Afghan situation.

Then, we analyzed the WordSmith results, which showed the (top 20 of) most used words in the corpus. This allowed us to search for the suppressed narrative(s), but we clearly saw how this top 20 was dominated by terms related to officialdom (more specifically to security officials) and violence. These results correspond with the research findings of The London School of Economics and Political Science and the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group in 2014. The authors of this topical-oriented research found that the attention to aid and development in British media coverage of Afghanistan was minimal. The same can be seen in our corpus, where more 'soft' and developmental terms only appear much later in the list with WordSmith results.

The results of the source analysis do confirm our hypothesis. The Afghanistan coverage of *The New York Times* showed a strong Western and international allied eliteness in the selection of sources. The media's docility in this conflict and the strong reliance on American and official sources proved to be extremely problematic. Journalists merely verified if the claims the

American government and military were spreading were true. One of the basic principles of journalism, namely hearing both sides of a story, was often neglected. Overall, in our corpus, we clearly saw a lack of cross-checking.

The New York Times' coverage of the Afghanistan conflict fits in the war journalism frame, as defined by Lynch and McGoldrick. The strong focus on two opposing sides (the West versus the terrorists) left no room for the complex Afghan reality, as described above with multiple actors like tribesmen, warlords, government officials, Taliban etcetera. As said, war journalism also favors 'elite-orientated' sources. This thesis has clearly shown a structural preference for official sources, which are perceived as 'neutral' and 'objective', despite being themselves stakeholders in the conflict.

The Western elite bias we discovered corresponds with the 'structural bias', defined by Noorzai and Hale as "the product of a number of factors, including news values, professional routines, resources, and dependence on sources" (2020, p. 3). This bias or framing embraced the American idea of what Afghanistan is after 9/11. The used sources paint a picture of a country with almost ubiquitous violence, fragmented along ethnic and tribal lines, and whose few attempts at what is presented as democratic progress have failed. Afghanistan is, as part of the War on Terror ideology, represented as a hotbed of religious extremists. The 'fear filter' described by Chomsky and Herman in their Manufacturing Consent-theory is salient for the dichotomous frame the American media used for Afghanistan after 9/11: namely 'us' versus 'the terrorists'. In the corpus, we saw some rare and marginal criticism towards the United States. However, as we have seen with Bennett's indexing norm hypothesis, this criticism could not break free from the War on Terror narrative or frame in which it operates. The official sources were still the ones that dominated the debate and set out its boundaries.

The coverage of the country is overwhelmingly focused on macro-narratives and denies the realities of diverse field experiences. We did not expect that the Afghan sources would make up slightly more than half of the total sources used. However, as said, the Afghan government strongly depended on Washington D.C. Therefore, it was following the American narrative, and criticism towards it, did not resonate strongly in the corpus. Interviews with Afghan civilians also do not form the basis of an analysis of a situation that journalists should approach without presuppositions. Rather, they validate preconceived ideas that allow these narratives of violence to be perpetuated without deep questioning. The articles continue to link the subjects covered mainly to violence, the Taliban, the war, etcetera. Interviews with Afghan civilians are therefore part of a self-perpetuating vicious circle. Moreover, we do not see any interviews with Afghan representatives of justice or those who could speak about a variety of

topics like peace, development, and diplomacy, but also about injustice. We also see that the Taliban were only rarely interviewed. When this is the case, it was predominantly about violence, leaving them little space to comment on their beliefs and their political stances.

In our audience, there is not a common understanding of what has happened in Afghanistan. To enable change, this is a problem. The conflict in Afghanistan is driven by a confusing aggregation of so-called 'micro-conflicts'. The recurrence of conflict in Afghanistan during the last thirty years can be traced to these more personal feuds. Their constancy is one of the several reasons to understand the last three decades of conflict in Afghanistan as a civil war with multiple phases. People choose sides, factions within the government, factions within the insurgency, drug cartels, or a mixture based on the position of their enemy, their own family loyalties, and where they believe they can best access resources to prevail against their local opponents. Mainly sources that have a stake in the Afghan conflict have thus been presented to the reader. But this practice has not been explained, for example with the case of Dad Mohammed. The problem with these articles is that the journalists/editors do not question often enough who the enemy is. In reality, we know the enemy is sometimes the Taliban. But as often as that, it is also non-Taliban who have private, economical, or social reasons to attack other Afghans or foreigners – even if they are allies on paper. *The New York Times* did not include these realities and mostly used the American and Afghan government sources to assume attacks, fights, and explosions as terrorism, while often these same sources are involved in so-called 'false reports' or denunciation.

To discover these suppressed stories, this first of all requires knowledgeable journalists who are aware of the 'micro' practices at play. In our opinion, these journalists should adopt a different approach to interviewing Afghan civilians. Because when Afghans were interviewed, they were mainly portrayed as a witness to violence to add emotion to the story. Instead, a journalistic openness towards the 'why' of the attack/violence can unravel the underlying complexity, or the suppressed narrative(s), which were previously neglected.

There are a few limitations to this research. First, we decided on the main theme for each article. The dominant theme proved to be 'violence', which corresponds with our hypothesis that the reporting is mainly focused on the American military narrative. However, a discourse analysis of (a part of) the corpus could provide a more detailed analysis of this theme and its dynamics. This type of analysis could also nuance the dominance of the violence theme, as articles often contained multiple topics and thus, themes. Moreover, a critical discourse analysis of the

articles where Afghan government officials got a voice, could give insights into the degree of their docility towards the U.S. government and its military master narrative.

Another limitation was the category 'Press quoting Afghans'. We did not make source distinctions within this category. As a result, multiple source actors were included, for example, both Afghan civilians and Afghan government officials. We did single out the Taliban sources, who were quoted by other media in the category 'Press quoting Taliban'.

Further, we made a few distinctions within the governmental codes, especially within the American (unnamed) category. However, for the Afghan civilians, we only singled out Afghan women. This was useful to reflect on their representation, but in further research other subcategories for the Afghan civilian could be interesting to see in which role they were portrayed, and again which civilian(s) gets a voice.

During our research, we have adapted the source categories a few times when stumbling upon new categories. Each time, we had to revise the articles which were already coded. The coding process is a process of trial and error, and certainly, with a large coding team, it is quite logical that new insights should be taken into account, meaning that previous work should be revised. However, this was often inconvenient. Taking more time to reflect on the code book and its categories, could have prevented this.

This research has shown that the American media who in their mission statements claim to be global, actually are not. They are very American and their news focus is placed on the American side of the story. Journalists and editors thus 'domesticate' their foreign reporting, as stated by Van Leuven et al.

In the next step of her research, Bette Dam will present these findings to the journalists and editors of *The New York Times*. During these interviews, she will ask them about their working routines to get an insight into how these articles were constructed and produced. In the fifth chapter, we already envisioned what would convince journalists to see the problem of bias. However, by representing these findings as an attack on their journalistic practice, the chances of cooperation with the newspaper are small. Therefore, when addressing these journalists, it is important to focus on maintaining an open dialogue. This is a necessary step for comprehension, and eventually for change, the main goals of Dam's research.

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8. Appendix

8.1 List with remarks on the coding process

- Descriptors:
    - Every article has a (main) theme.
    - Byline: fill it in as complete as possible. If there are two authors and one location, please fill in the same location in 'secondary location' as in 'location'. If there is no location, please select 'No byline'. If there is no indicated author, please type 'No author'
- Always code the selected sentences in the lowest child code possible. Also, make sure you do not double code something in a parent and child code (for example, double coded in parent code "US Gov Named" and child code "US Gov Named in the field").
- If an Afghan woman is quoted, please make sure to code it in the FEMALE or WOMAN child code. The parent code of this code is meant for men.
- We code sources in each new paragraph. Even if that means that the same source is used in ten consecutive paragraphs. Even a new sentence (between blank spaces) is considered as a new paragraph and thus, coded if there is a source.
- If the journalist tried to reach a source, but the source would not comment/respond, we still code this paragraph. For example, "US Senator X declined to give a comment." = coded as US Gov Named…
- 'Statements' are seen as the source itself, meaning you code it as the source from which the statement originates but unnamed. For example: "In a statement NATO announces to…": code = NATO Unnamed…
- When a source is referred to as "former", for example "a former US general", we code it as if the person would still be a general so (US GOV security unnamed…).
- For the location (in the field, in the US/France/UK…, unclear location), only choose in the field (Afghanistan/Pakistan…) or in the US/France/UK when this is indicated in the text. Do not make assumptions of where the journalist could have reached the source. When not sure (75% of the time), indicate 'location unclear'.
- Experts versus think tank: If a source speaks for a think tank/research institute, code it as 'think tank'. For example: "Bette Dam from the Afghan Analysts Network" = think tank. But when someone speaks individually and is not linked to an organization, code it as an expert. For example "Archeologist Bette Dam says…".

- "The (American/US-led) Coalition", "The international alliance", "International Security Assistance Force", "ISAF" all refer to NATO troops so we code it as NATO. Even if for example an American General works for the NATO-mission, we code it as NATO and not US.
- Afghan warlords = coded as "Afghan commanders".
- Afghan politician = a politician who does not belong to the government, for example a losing presidential candidate, someone in the opposition…
- Unidentifiable experts are for example "Analysts/experts say…" ⇒ which analysts, who are they? ⇒ unidentifiable.
- Online solo activism = a code for online citizen initiatives about the conflict/War on Terror. For example the website icasualties.org is a single person initiative that gives an overview of killed soldiers throughout the years.
- Other media: Western >< non-Western ⇒ press agency or not (papers, magazines, television, websites…) ⇒ quoting who? When they quote themselves ("The Washington Post says that the accident happened around 10 am."), it is in the category Other media.
- Rarely Used Sources is a category for sources which do not fit in an already existing code, but they are so rare or specific that it would not be worth it to create another code for them.