

Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents

by Robert M. Entman

By de-emphasizing the agency and the victims and by the choice of graphics and adjectives, the news stories about the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane called it a technical problem while the Soviet downing of a Korean jet was portrayed as a moral outrage.

On September 1, 1983, a Soviet fighter plane shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007, killing its 269 passengers and crew. On July 3, 1988, a U.S. Navy ship, the *Vincennes*, shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing its 290 passengers and crew. In both cases, military officials identified a passenger plane as a possibly hostile target; in both cases, the perpetrating nation's officials claimed the shooting was justifiable under the circumstances. This article examines the contrasting news frames employed by several important U.S. media outlets in covering these two tragic misapplications of military force. For the first, the frame emphasized the moral bankruptcy and guilt of the perpetrating nation; for the second, the frame de-emphasized guilt and focused on the complex problems of operating military high technology.

Comparing media narratives of events that could have been reported similarly helps to reveal the critical textual choices that framed the story but would otherwise remain submerged in an undifferentiated text. Unless narratives are compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably, because many of the framing devices can appear as "natural," unremarkable choices of words or images. Comparison reveals that such choices are not inevitable or unproblematic but rather are central to the way the news frame helps establish the literally "common sense" (i.e., widespread) interpretation of events.

By demonstrating that different words and images were consistently chosen in the two stories to depict similar phenomena, this article suggests exactly

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which dimensions of the KAL and Iran Air coverage carried the information that comprised the frame. In this way, it aims to illuminate in some detail the nature of the frame in the foreign news text. It also speculates upon the interactions between the frames in the text and the thinking of journalists, audiences, and political elites.

News frames (see 19, pp. 6–7; 20; 34, pp. 7, 192–195) exist at two levels: as mentally stored principles for information processing and as characteristics of the news text. Examples of frames as internalized guides are the cold war frame imposed on international affairs and the horse race frame imposed on election campaigns; in this sense frames are information-processing schemata (see 1; 10, chap. 4; 15; 16; 22).

But frames also describe attributes of the news itself, and that is the focus of this article. Frames reside in the specific properties of the news narrative that encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them. News frames are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images emphasized in a news narrative. Since the narrative finally consists of nothing more than words and pictures, frames can be detected by probing for particular words and visual images that consistently appear in a narrative and convey thematically consonant meanings across media and time. By providing, repeating, and thereby reinforcing words and visual images that reference some ideas but not others, frames work to make some ideas more salient in the text, others less so—and others entirely invisible. The frame does not eliminate all inconsistent information; texts inevitably contain some incongruent data. But through repetition, placement, and reinforcing associations with each other, the words and images that comprise the frame render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others.

The mental representations that result from contact with a news frame can be conceived as an “event-specific schema,” an understanding of the reported happening that guides individuals’ interpretation of initial information and their processing of all succeeding information about it (for a related conceptualization of event schema cf. 37, pp. 95–111). There is a reciprocal relationship between frames in the text and these event schemata or frames in the audience’s thinking (cf. 23). News organizations shape their reports to elicit favorable reactions from readers and viewers, and the anticipated reactions of the public also affect the rhetoric and actions of political elites, who are the primary “sponsors” (17) of news frames.

But for entirely new breaking events, it is the initial interactions of sources and journalists that set the framing process in motion. This view suggests, for example, that based upon initial U.S. government descriptions of the KAL downing, and upon pre-existing cultural expectations (prototypical schematic understandings [37, p. 96] of the Soviet Union and international affairs, journalists quickly developed a new event-specific schema, “the KAL attack.” The schema encouraged them to perceive, process, and report all further information about the event in ways supporting the basic interpretation encoded in the schema. To be sure, all journalists did not possess identical event schemata,

and, as the story evolved, many sought information that challenged certain aspects of the dominant story line. But in general, when constructing KAL texts, journalists' cognitive habits and constraints (and those of their organizations), combined with heavy dependence on elite sources, would predictably lead them to make frame-confirming data more salient in the news text—and to de-emphasize contradictory data (cf. 19, pp. 49–52).¹

The frame thus makes opposing information more difficult for the typical, inexpert audience member to discern and employ in developing an independent interpretation. This does not mean that every American interpreted the two incidents identically, but it does suggest the hypothesis that, when a single frame thoroughly dominates a narrative, politically impressive majorities will come to congruent understandings. That hypothesis is supported by poll results cited below. The necessary condition for media influence on policy or politics is not that everyone interpret a story alike; it seems necessary only that significant majorities are thought to do so (cf. 10, chap. 4). Even though contrary data inevitably make their way past the frame and into the text and the thinking of many Americans, the dominant frame seems most likely to affect political outcomes.

The frame must include only those elements of the message that are critical to its presumed impacts on information processing; otherwise there would be no distinction between frame and text. The analytical goal should be to determine which of a narrative's words and images are components of the frame and which are not, and we need a theoretical basis for making these distinctions. For the purposes here, the frame analysis should emphasize what is *politically* important in news texts, given then-current policy agendas and disputes. The political frame² comprises those message dimensions likeliest to promote a common, majority response to the news event as measured in public opinion polls. This view shaped the frame analysis reported below.

This study analyzes the two issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* following the KAL and Iran Air incidents, along with the "CBS Evening News" for the same two-week period. The newsmagazines³ arguably summarize the dominant news and editorial emphases of the national media in the United States; their less frequent deadlines usually allow them to canvass official sources (and other media) thoroughly, distilling the results in a narrative reflecting the prin-

¹ Whether there is a single dominant event schema depends heavily on the degree of consensus among elite news sources (see 3, 11). Where a significant elite faction contests the dominant news frame, the text might promote conflicting event schemata, and the audience's processing of information will change. In the cases under study, however, there was little elite contestation.

² Media texts may contain a variety of frames. Other frames might be extracted from the KAL and Iran Air coverage if one were interested, say, in the underlying model of human nature that the media promote.

³ The dates on the magazines are September 12 and 19, 1983, and July 18 and 25, 1988. The newsmagazines come out on a Monday but carry the dates of the following Monday, so that, for example, the September 12 issue actually was released on September 5, four days after the shootdown.

cial themes in the news (see 18, p. 4). CBS can be safely treated as broadly representative of the other two commercial networks (see 10, 18, 21; cf. 17, pp. 23–24). Data are also cited from an analysis of all articles on the events in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, perhaps the two most influential newspapers, for the same period. It would be improper to generalize to all mass media from these outlets; even within the group analyzed here, there are differences in content. But the strength of the findings, and previous research on the KAL flight alone (7, 31, 38), suggest that a larger data base would reveal similar framing in most U.S. mass media coverage.

The comparison of the two constructed realities does not require an assumption that the underlying facts of KAL and Iran Air were minutely analogous. Both were complicated events open to varying interpretations, and no doubt part of the reason for the contrasting frames lies in elements of the reality that were quite different. But there is no way to establish as a factual matter, for example, that the United States was less morally responsible for the fate of the Iranians than the Soviet Union was for the KAL passengers, and therefore that the media's emphasis on Soviet guilt and denial of American guilt was somehow predetermined.

Consider that the *Vincennes* had only a few minutes to decide whether to shoot down the Iranian plane, which was flying over an area that had just experienced combat. This context could morally justify the shooting. Yet one could argue that the Navy's knowledge of constant civilian air traffic traversing the Gulf imposed a moral imperative to arrange procedures for handling predictable situations like that posed by Iran Air Flight 655, making the shootdown morally indefensible. For its part, the Soviet Air Force had over two hours to decide how to treat its intruding plane, in a context free of combat. While these facts could be read as condemning the U.S.S.R., the KAL jet was flying over perhaps the most sensitive Soviet military installations, around the time of a scheduled missile test and just after an American spy plane had overflown the area (26). One could argue that by holding off nonetheless for two hours in hopes of identifying the plane positively, the Soviets demonstrated moral sensitivity. Or one could blame civilian air traffic control systems and international aviation organizations rather than either country's government. The argument could go on indefinitely but, for analysis, the crucial point is to establish comparable message potential (10, chap. 3): Nothing inherent in the reality of the events compelled the starkly different framing that the data demonstrate.

The essence of framing is sizing—magnifying or shrinking elements of the depicted reality to make them more or less salient. The first and in some ways most critical sizing choice involves the overall salience of the event in the flow of the news. Aside from the words and images used to depict the event, how much material on the event is available, and how prominently is it displayed? This is the event's *importance*. The frame of a news portrait can be enlarged so that media reports may penetrate the consciousness of a mass public that is minimally aware of most specific issues and events. Or the frame can be shrunk to miniaturize an event, diminishing the amount, prominence, and

Table 1: Coverage of KAL and Iran Air incidents in three categories of media

	KAL	Iran Air
<i>Time and Newsweek</i>	51 pages	20 pages
CBS ^a	303 minutes	204 minutes
<i>New York Times</i>	286 stories	102 stories
<i>Washington Post</i>	169 stories	82 stories

^a Data are from the *Vanderbilt Television News Archives Indexes*.

duration of coverage, and thus mass awareness. The frame in this way measures and helps determine a news event's political importance.

In the two cases here, KAL was portrayed as far more important than Iran Air.⁴ Table 1 displays some comparisons. Beyond giving the KAL incident more time, the network evening news emphasized it in other ways; the story led 27 of 43 broadcasts during the two weeks after the incident and received some coverage on every one. With a single exception (CBS on the eighth day), KAL was the lead nine days in a row on every network evening news show telecast. Iran Air led the news on 14 of the 48 programs aired. On 12 programs (25 percent), there was no Iran Air story at all. It served as the lead on all three networks for just the first two days and two other (nonconsecutive) days.

If both events were tragedies, KAL was configured as a larger, more important misfortune, and the heightened media attention created more opportunities for audience contact with messages reinforcing the news narrative's central, moralizing theme. To be sure, Americans would have reacted much more strongly to their compatriots' deaths on the KAL flight than to Iranians' deaths even if the volume of reporting had been the same. But the judgment of importance likely made a political difference: A continuing high degree of mass awareness of KAL pressured potential elite opponents to the Reagan administration to remain silent or hop on the "Evil Empire" bandwagon. In the second case, lower mass awareness of the Iran Air incident diminished a political resource White House foes might otherwise have used to convince other elites to abandon the administration's Persian Gulf policy.

The circumstances did not require the judgments of importance to be so different in these two cases. After all, the core, indisputable fact is similar: In each incident, deadly military force was applied against nearly 300 innocent human beings. The malleability of importance judgments is suggested by the fact that the names of President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz appeared 697 times in the *Post*'s KAL coverage but only 111 times in its Iran Air reporting; for the *Times* the figures are 771 times and 150 times, respectively. KAL received about twice as much coverage, so the comparison reveals that refer-

⁴ The Iran Air incident came in the midst of a presidential campaign, which may help explain the lower volume of coverage. But it stretches credulity to argue that this is the whole explanation of the difference in attention. In any case, the chief concern here is the contrast in the two event frames, whatever the reasons, and the competing news explanation does not apply to the other dimensions of the text.

ences to the two top foreign policy officials were about three times more common in the KAL story.⁵ That the administration would try to distance the president from the Iran Air tragedy is predictable; but this political strategy also helped size the news frame and attenuate the event's importance in comparison with KAL.

Beyond the frame's size are the specific messages themselves. The components of the frame often tend to cohere with an established *discursive domain*, a series of associated idea clusters that form a way of reasoning about a matter that is familiar to audiences from other cultural experiences. Certain words and images are used repeatedly and together, thereby rendered more salient in the texts; they evoke ideas typically associated with a particular kind of public discourse. Although not every news event calls forth such a discursive script, in the cases here, the framing words and images inserted KAL into a moral discourse, while confining Iran Air to a technical one.

We can distinguish four separate (though related), salient aspects of the text that helped create the moral or technical frame: the consistent use of words and images that portrayed responsibility for the reported action, or *agency*; that encouraged or discouraged *identification* with those directly affected by the act; that advanced a particular *categorization* of the act; and that stimulated or suppressed broad *generalization* from the act.

Agency answers the question of exactly who did it—what causal force created the newsworthy act? By convention, agency is an especially common attribute of headlines. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the headlines in the newsmagazines depicted agency in ways bolstering the respective frames. The first *Newsweek* cover after the KAL incident (September 13, 1983) was headed "Murder in the Air"; the title on the lead article was "A Ruthless Ambush in the Sky." The *Time* cover headline that week was "Shooting to Kill/The Soviets Destroy an Airliner"; the lead story, "Atrocity in the Skies/The Soviets Shoot Down a Civilian Airliner." The view propounded in the KAL frame was that the Soviet government knowingly acted to annihilate a civilian airliner. The event was defined as yet another instance of Soviet evil, a callous act of violence confirming established moral assessments of the U.S.S.R. The second week's coverage continued in this vein; for example, *Newsweek*'s cover (September 19, 1983) was headlined "Why Moscow Did It/Inquest on Flight 007/The World's Outrage/The Diplomatic Impact/The Soviet Stonewall." Notice who committed the act: not an Air Force pilot out in the Siberian sky but "Moscow" or the "Soviets," implying that the entire U.S.S.R. government actively caused the incident.

In contrast, as Figure 2 shows, the *Newsweek* cover (July 18, 1988) promised to disclose, about Iran Air, "Why It Happened." Construction was passive,

⁵ A word count is not available, so the average length of the stories cannot be compared. But, for example, the *Post*'s 169 KAL articles took up 1.02 megabytes of disk space, while the 82 Iran Air items occupied 536 kilobytes. This suggests that average story length was slightly greater for Iran Air, bolstering the inference.



Figure 1: *Time* and *Newsweek* covers the week of the KAL incident



Figure 2: *Time* and *Newsweek* covers the week of the Iran Air incident

agency obscured. *Time* relegated the Iran Air shootdown to the corner flap, which said, "What Went Wrong in the Gulf." Again, no agency, passive voice, abstract language—not who did wrong but what went wrong. (The *Time* editors judged the space program, the main cover story, more newsworthy that week.) In both magazines, the second week's covers failed to feature the Iran Air incident.

Beyond the covers and headlines, the KAL texts repeatedly attributed guilty knowledge to the Soviet leaders. In the magazines and on CBS there were several references to the notion that Premier Andropov "must have" known, or that the fighter pilots "knew" or "should have known" their target was a passenger plane. This reached an extreme in *Newsweek* (September 19, p. 30): "By every law of Soviet psychology, 269 lives was not too high a price to pay for the assurance that the sacred borders were being well protected." Thus the text implied that Soviet decision-makers knew not only that there were civilians aboard the doomed plane, but exactly how many.

Attributions of knowledge were strikingly opposed in Iran Air stories. For example, when the *Time* story (July 18, 1988) noted that the *Vincennes* did not maintain detailed information about civilian air schedules over the Persian Gulf, the reason given was that "Nobody thought it necessary to do so." The story contained no ethical assessment of this omission, no conclusions about the moral nature of U.S. society or the American psyche based on the oversight.⁶ Instead, the story offered the explanation that the U.S. Navy "is just not used to operating" in the Gulf environment. Assertions that the *Vincennes* crew "should have known" the identity of the Iran Air flight did not appear; on the contrary, central to the narrative from the very first words about the incident on the "CBS Evening News" was the understandable absence of guilty knowledge.⁷

The magazines' cover art and the graphics inside also confirmed the agency depictions for each event. As shown in Figure 1, *Newsweek* portrayed the center of a target pointing at the words "Korean Air Lines" on the 747, and both magazines pictured the fighter plane apparently close enough to read those words. The paintings validated the Reagan administration's claim—later shown to be a misrepresentation (26, 36)—that the Soviet government knowingly ordered destruction of a civilian airliner. CBS news visualized the incidents similarly. Its initial graphic resembled that of *Newsweek*, showing a large KAL plane with target superimposed. In other graphics repeatedly shown over several days, CBS stories depicted the Russian and KAL planes in apparent close proximity. This attribution of agency was the centerpiece of the Reagan admin-

⁶ In fact, the *Vincennes* did possess a civilian air schedule, but checked it only in the rush of events after the unidentified plane was first discovered on the radar screen, at which point crew members failed to spot the listing of Flight 655.

⁷ The newscast opened with Admiral William Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, saying: "We believe that the cruiser *USS Vincennes*, while actively engaged with threatening Iranian surface units and protecting itself from what was concluded to be a hostile aircraft, shot down an Iranian airliner over the Straits of Hormuz."

istration's rhetorical construction of the problem (38) and the key catalyst of the moral discourse.

The magazines and the news program used corresponding logos to illustrate the beginnings of each KAL-related story during the second week. The separate *Newsweek* stories in the second week were headed by a sickle with an air-to-air missile in place of the hammer. The logo for *Time* in the second week was a silhouette of the KAL plane inside a sickle. CBS's continuing logo was a large side-view of the KAL plane, with the KAL logo and "Korean Air Lines" visible, superimposed over flags with the hammer and sickle. The predomination of the hammer and sickle symbolism suggests that, by associating the event with the central, most familiar symbol of communism, the incident was traceable to the Soviet system itself. And by showing the KAL logo, the CBS story subtly confirmed that the Soviets knew the plane was civilian.

On the *Time* cover dealing with the Iran Air case, the corner illustration—so small it is difficult to discern in reproduction (Figure 2)—showed a man sitting before numerous control panels holding his head in apparent exasperation and confusion. The illustration supported the agency attribution contained in the technical frame, implying that the incident was traceable not to moral failure but to inadequacies of technology and of humans to cope with it. Explicitly, the *Newsweek* cover neither affirmed nor denied the frame; it showed the *Vincennes* after it had shot a missile during maneuvers. But by not employing a picture of an exploding passenger plane on the cover (as it had done for the KAL incident), *Newsweek* implied that the central newsworthy problem revolved around the officers and technology on the *Vincennes*, not the Iran Air passengers. The cover did, however, imply agency on the part of the *Vincennes*.

The CBS story, on the other hand, shifted agency to the Iranians through its Iran Air graphics. The animation of the flight path shown on three of the first five days depicted the plane appearing to dive toward the *Vincennes*. Central to the initial framing was the Pentagon's claim that the ship's instruments showed the Iran Air jet to be heading straight for the Americans. Such circumstances explained and justified the shootdown and confirmed its moral neutrality. Although by the fourth day after the attack CBS did raise doubts about the initial claim that the Iran Air flight was descending toward the ship (doubts announced by the Navy itself in a brief to Congress), these doubts were belied by the graphics and by the initial frame, the effectiveness of which is suggested by public opinion surveys discussed below.

Time's logo for the Iran Air incident was a small red plane silhouette inside a black circle. The *Newsweek* logo again reflected the framing of the event as a tragedy of technology. It showed a stylized radar screen with a small, jagged, starlike splotch presumably indicating the explosion of the Iran Air plane, with the words "Tragedy in the Gulf." On CBS the continuing logo showed a largely head-on, front view of the plane, which obscured the Iran Air markings, superimposed over a map of the Persian Gulf region. In all three media, unlike in the KAL illustrations, the perpetrator (the United States) was not symbolized at all, and the civilian identity of the plane was not clear, again obscuring

agency while subtly justifying the difficulty of the *Vincennes* in identifying the plane.

The contrasting ways that victims were identified encodes and exemplifies the difference in discursive domains. The KAL victims were humanized in the verbal and visual messages, encouraging identification with them (cf. 25, chap. 2). The Iran Air victims were much less visible, the information less centered on the humanity they shared with audience members, and thus less likely to evoke empathy. The de-emphasizing of the victims helped make the Iran Air story a technical one.

Graphics helped create a differential distribution of moral empathy. Thus, for example, two weeks in a row the magazines featured detailed drawings of the flight path, chase, and destruction of the KAL plane. They also engaged in a kind of verbal litany, describing and redescribing the shootdown throughout the coverage. Figure 3 shows the graphics from the second week's issues taking up a full page of *Time* and about three-fourths of a page in *Newsweek*. As Figure 4 shows, such details were barely visible in the Iran Air coverage, and only for the first week.

There were 239 square inches of graphics showing an exploding KAL plane in the two magazines (including the material in Figures 1 and 3). Johnson (27, p. 36) asserts that the plane probably did not explode or burn when first hit by the missile; none of the recovered wreckage showed fire damage, and at 32,000 feet the air was too thin, he argues, to allow combustion. Also, radar showed that the plane was still in one piece as it fell to the ground. On the other hand, the Iran Air plane was at a relatively low altitude where it could explode and burn. Yet no graphics showed the impact of the missile on the Iran Air plane. There were 18 square inches depicting the Iran Air plane in any guise, most of these filled by a photo of the nose and other wreckage of the jet. All the drawings of the Iranian plane were about one inch square or less.

The *Newsweek* story depicted the actual impact of the American missile on the Iranian plane as a jagged starlike figure. As Figure 4 shows, the illustration implied an explosion, but the passengers' suffering was reduced in salience, since the picture did not even depict an airplane. *Time* had no picture of the Iran Air plane, only small lines ending in dots, tracing the intersection of the plane route and the ship-to-air missile—no representation of an explosion, let alone a passenger plane.

The striking difference between a full-page drawing of an exploding KAL plane and a tiny dot representing the Iranian plane offers a powerful demonstration of how thoroughly the frame suffused the visual dimension and promoted moral evaluation in one case but not the other. This finding also supports the notion that the essence of framing is sizing—making individual idea elements more or less salient, in this case literally by making the KAL but not Iran Air victims' fate loom visually large in the graphics.⁸

⁸ The point also illustrates the importance of comparative research to frame analysis; without the comparison, the size of the airliner illustration might have escaped notice as an important framing device.

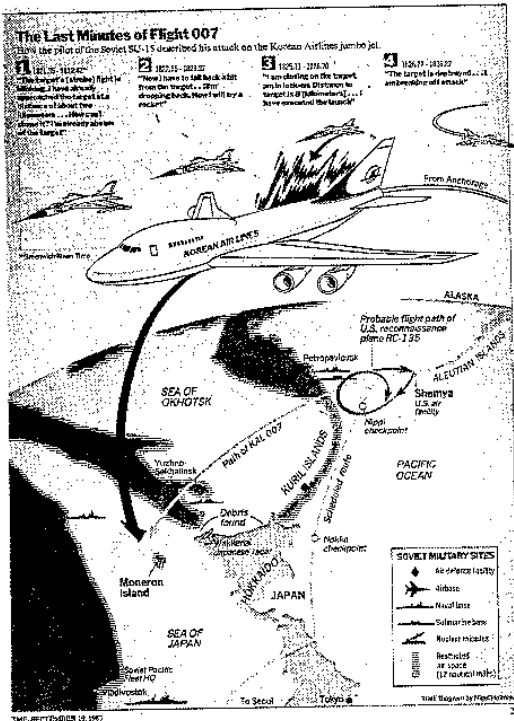


Figure 3: Graphics used in *Time* and *Newsweek* stories on the KAL incident

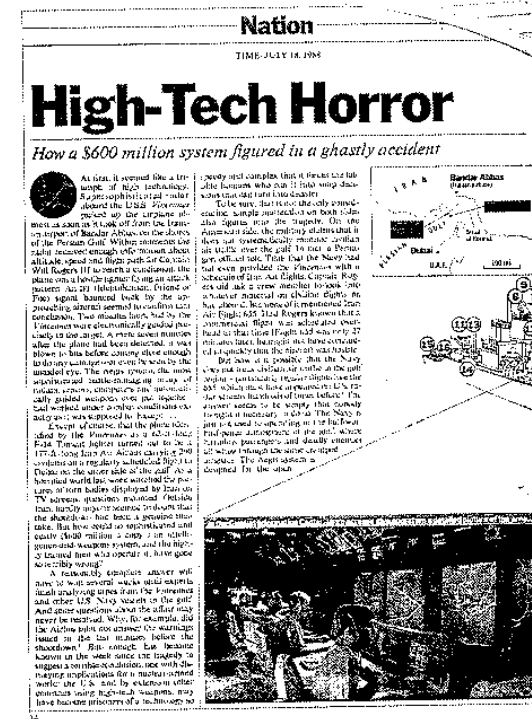


Figure 4: Graphics used in *Time* and *Newsweek* stories on the Iran Air incident

The contrasting visualizations were mirrored in CBS coverage, which showed repeated animations of the KAL flight path on every day for a week after the incident but gave the Iran Air flight path much less time on screen. CBS graphics represented the instant of contact between the missile and the KAL plane as a jagged, red, starlike figure representing an explosion; the analogous symbol of the Iran Air incident was a jagged green figure. The use of a color symbolizing both fire and blood for the KAL incident and a more neutral color for the Iran Air case enhances the contrast.

Finally, the magazines and CBS offered pictures of named victims on the KAL flight and of identified grieving relatives. These visual embodiments of the victims as identifiable human beings were absent in the Iran Air coverage.

In the newsmagazines' verbal content, emphasis on the physical facts helped humanize KAL victims and distance Iran Air casualties. For one thing, the KAL reports offered copious descriptions of the weather, the cold sea, and other physical elements. The reports provided imagined details of what was going on in flight, encouraging identification with passengers; for example: "After reaching cruising altitude. . . many passengers took off their shoes, reached for pillows, and stretched out for sleep" (*Time*, September 12, p. 12). And the stories described the terrified passengers in the damaged airliner cartwheeling to earth for minutes.

This rich detail compares with spare and plain language describing the fate of the Iran Air plane. The actual shooting and aftermath were described in their entirety as follows by *Newsweek* (July 18, p. 21): "Rogers gave the order to fire. Two missiles homed in on their target: at least one hit. The threatening symbol disappeared from the CIC screens, and the Aegis [computer system] reported the target destroyed."

The reasons for the contrasts are varied. The U.S. media appear generally to encourage more empathy with American than with foreign victims of disaster or violence, responding to and reinforcing Americans' notorious ethnocentrism (cf. 14). Production constraints reinforced this tendency, for U.S. journalists could more easily obtain pictures of KAL victims from relatives in the United States than pictures of Iran Air victims.

The ethnocentric slant inherent in the humanizing moral discourse of the KAL frame is reflected in the specific words chosen to represent the victims. The magazines' KAL coverage contained 38 references to them, using two kinds of language. They used humanizing words that implied or said explicitly that the victims were human beings 17 times; among the phrases used were "innocent human beings," "269 stories of personal poignancy," "loved ones," and "269 people." They used neutral terminology—terms like "travelers," "civilians," "passengers," "victims," "those who died," and "269 lives"—21 times. As Table 2 reveals, the synonyms employed for the Iran Air passengers differed significantly. On CBS and in the magazines, about half of the words reminded the audience that the KAL victims were human beings, but only about one-fifth of the words did so for the Iran Air victims. Coverage in the newspapers was less imbalanced, though skewed in the same direction.

Table 2: Use of humanizing and neutral terms in coverage of KAL and Iran Air incidents

	KAL		Iran Air	
	Humanizing n	Neutral n	Humanizing n	Neutral n
<i>Time and Newsweek</i>	17	21	4	16
<i>CBS</i>	27	25	10	36
<i>New York Times</i>	149	159	44	68
<i>Washington Post</i>	105	116	53	76

Table 3: Use of words "attack" and "tragedy" in coverage of KAL and Iran Air incidents

	KAL		Iran Air	
	"Attack" n	"Tragedy" n	"Attack" n	"Tragedy" n
<i>Time and Newsweek</i>	38	21	0	23
<i>CBS</i>	10	9	12 ^a	15
<i>New York Times</i>	99	48	30 ^b	32
<i>Washington Post</i>	66	43	24 ^c	40

^a Two quoting or citing Iranian responses.

^b Seven quoting or citing Iranian, Soviet, or Libyan responses.

^c Ten quoting or citing Iranian responses.

The discursive domain also inhered in the choice of labels for the incidents, which tended to place them in categories that conventionally either elicit or omit moral evaluation. The KAL descriptors promoted moral judgment—even outrage—at the incident and its perpetrators by placing them in the category of criminal evil; Iran Air coverage used a more abstract and technical vocabulary, placing the event in the category of an accident.

In naming the acts themselves, the most common synonyms were "tragedy" and "attack." Table 3 displays the different uses of the terms in the two narratives. The print media described the KAL incident most frequently as an attack, the Iran Air incident as a tragedy. Although the Iran Air shooting was equally an "attack," the print media downplayed this word, with its implication of activity and responsibility. CBS News stories actually used "attack" and "tragedy" about equally for KAL and Iran Air, which suggests that television might enjoy somewhat greater autonomy from the frame as propounded by the administration and reflected in the print media studied.⁹

The Soviets were further condemned through the use of descriptors for the event that attributed intentionality (see Table 4). Aside from the magazines'

⁹ This point is being followed up in continuing research to be reported in *Projections of Power: Media and American Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (cf. 11).

Table 4: Use of assertions portraying Soviet action in the KAL incident and U.S. action in the Iran Air incident as deliberate or a mistake

	KAL		Iran Air	
	Deliberate n	Mistake n	Deliberate n	Mistake n
<i>Time and Newsweek</i>	39	2	2 ^a	13
CBS	6	0	7 ^a	6
<i>New York Times</i>	79	6	15 ^a	50
<i>Washington Post</i>	51	16 ^b	13 ^c	40

^a All citing or quoting Iranians or other hostile foreign sources.

^b Five citing or quoting Soviets.

^c Twelve citing or quoting hostile foreign sources.

use of "attack," their labels for the incident implied 39 times that the Soviets acted with deliberate cruelty and only twice that they made a mistake (the most frequent words were "atrocious," "crime," "kill," "massacre," and "murder"). The magazine stories implied twice that the United States acted deliberately (both times quoting hostile foreign sources) and 13 times that it acted mistakenly. The *Washington Post* and *New York Times* stories also emphasized Soviet guilt and American innocence.¹⁰ While the CBS coverage too presumed Soviet culpability, the charges were made comparably less than the print media, and the coverage of Iran Air was more evenhanded. Here again, television seemed slightly more independent of the dominant frame.¹¹

In *Time and Newsweek*, 44 adjectives or adverbs described the act of shooting down the Korean plane. Among these the most common were "wanton-ly," "brutal(ly)," and "barbaric/barbarous" (each used 5 times). All but 3 of the 44 implied Soviet guilt. The description contrasted with the Iran Air reporting, where the only emotional rhetoric came from quotes of illegitimate sources. A total of 22 adjectives or adverbs described the termination of the Iran Air flight. Among these the most common were "ghastly," "tragic," "fatal(ly)," and "understandable." Six of the descriptors implied U.S. guilt, but all came from illegitimate sources (Iran and the Soviet Union).

The contrast was similar in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. In the *Post* articles, the most common modifiers in the 169 articles mentioning the KAL incident during the sample period¹² were "barbaric/barbarous" (14 times),

¹⁰ The *Post* and *Times* analyses count only the words "atrocious," "crime," "kill," "massacre," and "murder" as guilt attributions, and the words "accident," "blunder" and "mistake" as exculpatory.

¹¹ This sort of comparison might arguably call for percentages rather than absolute numbers, since there was twice as much text on KAL. However, the absolute number of words is more pertinent, in my view, because one important feature of framing that the comparison reveals is precisely the volume of coverage: Iran Air generated much less copy than KAL. In any case, those asserting U.S. guilt were most often foreign sources with little credibility in the United States.

¹² Full-text databases for the *Post*'s and *Times*'s coverage during the sample periods were drawn from NEXIS by selecting all stories containing any form of the words "Korea" or "Iran" within 50 words of any word beginning "air."

"deliberate(ly)" (10 times), and "murderous," "brutal(ly)," and "wanton(ly)" (8 times each); in the *Times*, "brutal(ly)" (18 times), "horrible/horrifying(ly)" (14 times), and "deliberate(ly)" and "wanton(ly)" (11 times each) led the list. In the *Post* and *Times* articles mentioning Iran Air, "murderous," "wanton," and "brutal" did not appear, although a few other words connoting guilt did, almost all from quotes of Iranians, Libyans, or Soviets. The most common descriptors for the Iran Air incident in the *Post* were "mistaken(ly)" (used 28 times), "tragic" (15 times), and "justified" (9 times). In the *Times*, the most common were "tragic(ally)" (20 times), "mistaken(ly)" (15 times), and "understandable" (4 times).

In CBS's coverage, 23 adjectives or adverbs were used, of which all but 3 suggested Soviet guilt. Sixteen descriptors appeared in the Iran Air narratives: 8 exculpating ones coming from legitimate sources, and 8 implying guilt coming from Iranians. Television stories offered a higher percentage of negative judgments of the United States than newsmagazine or newspaper coverage. Although the charges were voiced by illegitimate sources, the greater volume of moral accusation suggests again TV's greater independence.

The moralizing frame in the KAL reports but not in the Iran Air coverage was also reinforced by the degree of generalization from the attacks to the nature of the two political systems. KAL news frequently attributed the act not simply to a Soviet pilot or the Soviet military but to the (immoral) Soviet Union or government as a whole (on enemies, cf. 9). Moreover, the narrative employed the action as a metonymic symbol (cf. 7) of much larger truths about the nature of the Soviet government and culture. Generalization about the United States was essentially absent from coverage of the action against the Iran Air jet.

In the KAL case, the newsmagazines conveyed 53 judgmental generalizations of the Soviets, 51 of them negative.¹³ The following examples give the flavor: The Soviets suffer from "national paranoia" and "a national gospel of secrecy and suspicion" (*Newsweek*, September 19, pp. 23, 24); the "Soviet Union. . . is essentially evil" and "They place highest priority not on human lives but on preventing penetration of their airspace" (*Time*, September 12, pp. 11, 18). In the Iran Air case, there were just three judgments of the United States, of which one was positive and two (from Iranians) negative. If the magazine stories had drawn conclusions about alleged American paranoia and inhuman priorities from the Iran Air mishap, which occurred nowhere near U.S. airspace, judgments might have been equally harsh—and equally problematic. But they drew none. CBS News offered 16 generalizations about the Soviet Union, all unfavorable, and no generalizations about the United States.

The stories also generalized in their identifications of the actor that shot down the plane. In the KAL case, the magazines contained 62 references to the

¹³ The two that can be interpreted positively came in a column by Meg Greenfield in which she quoted hypothetical defenders of the Soviet Union, but then said that whether the Soviet Union is evil is irrelevant.

actor, 33 implying that the Soviet government or nation as a whole was responsible and 24 implying only the individual pilot or fighter planes. (The Soviet military as a whole was implicated 4 times, and Premier Andropov was described as shooting down the plane once.) In the Iran Air reporting, there were only 11 uses of a term denoting the actor, just 2 attributing the act to the U.S. government or nation as a whole, both in quotes from an Iranian general. The other 9 references were to the “USS Vincennes,” the “U.S. Navy,” or “Captain Rogers of the *Vincennes*,” all more precise attributions.

Although framing does not banish all contradictions and challenges, the usefulness of such information can be subverted by the form of presentation. Only those with expertise in international relations and bureaucratic politics (or with previously internalized oppositional schemata) were likely to have developed an event schema for KAL or Iran Air that facilitated perception and processing of the contradictions. At least in the cases under study, while framing does not eliminate challenges to the dominant story line, it subverts their influence by diminishing their salience.

One telling example of subverted contradiction involved a challenge to the depictions of moral responsibility suffusing the KAL narrative. In the second story of *Newsweek*’s second issue (September 19, p. 24), readers were told that the Soviet interceptors might not have approached near enough to identify the KAL plane visually. The text also mentioned that Andropov and other top officials not only were unaware beforehand but would have had compelling reasons for preventing such a disaster; the story traced the incident in large part to “military confusion and bureaucratic rigidity” (p. 22). But the *Newsweek* story did not cite this as a contradiction to its cover graphics and claims of the previous week—which said that the Soviets committed “murder in the air” (September 12). Nor did it link this bureaucratic interpretation to its lead story in the very same (second) issue, which included the familiar charges that the Soviets committed deliberate murder and did not care about human life. The headline on the cover of this second issue read, “Why Moscow Did It”—despite the information inside showing that “Moscow” did not.

The bureaucratic explanation did not challenge the frame but instead reinforced a set of stereotypes about the Soviet “national gospel of secrecy and suspicion” and its bureaucratic inefficiency. This example illustrates several properties of subverted contradiction and reveals how the dominant event schema can obscure contrary information. The new information on KAL came on later pages, even though such data might have been judged the most startling and newsworthy just because they contradicted the dominant interpretation; it came in news reports removed in time from the event itself, after the initial frame and schema had been set; and, far from posing an overt challenge, the new material was not even presented as calling the frame into serious question.

To take an example from the Iran Air case, both *Time* and *Newsweek* offered individually signed essays on the incident that were sympathetic to the Iranian victims. But the coverage neither attributed moral responsibility to the United

States nor criticized U.S. leaders' failure to apologize for the incident.¹⁴ Instead, the essays separated the act from the nation committing it; while implicitly contesting the basic technical frame by considering the event in moral terms, the essays ultimately reinforced it.

The essay in *Time* was called "When Bad Things Are Caused By Good Nations." In this opinion piece, placed after all the news reports, the author said, "Grief stricken voices were distressingly few, and there was almost no compelling sense of shame" (July 18, p. 20). This sophisticated essay argued that the limited expression of guilt in the United States was probably due to cognitive dissonance and "conflict with the nation's self-image." Still, in what appeared itself to be a dissonance-reducing move, the author repeatedly offered the notion that U.S. intentions were good; for example: "Sometimes—in a disorderly world—grand intentions produce grotesque results." His description of the intentions of the U.S. presence in the Gulf as "grand" rationalized a policy whose purposes were highly controversial even among U.S. elites.

The major thrust of both opinion pieces was to blame the public at large for moral insensitivity. The irony was that the newsmagazine coverage itself contributed to the absence of empathy in the numerous ways already discussed. The essays in both magazines were complex, and in certain respects did challenge the dominant frame, but their moral questions were set apart from the news narrative, not at its center, the place occupied by the moral discourse of the KAL story. And the guilt laid was for a lack of empathy and penitence after an accident, not for committing a malevolent act.

Scholars and journalists often interpret such examples of "polysemy" in the news text as evidence that audiences have an adequate opportunity to learn all sides of an issue and resist any single dominant coding. The framing perspective suggests that such inferences are problematic. These examples indicate that, for those stories in which a single frame thoroughly pervades the text, stray contrary opinions that expert readers might pick up from careful analyses are likely to possess such low salience as to be of little practical use to most audience members (cf. 4, 6, 19, 23).

Several political outcomes document the impact of the dominant frames for both stories. The House and Senate both voted unanimously (416–0 and 95–0) to denounce the KAL shootdown as a "brutal massacre," the result of a "cold-blooded barbarous attack," and "one of the most infamous and reprehensible acts in history." This seeming elite consensus is probably traceable in part to politicians' fear of not seeming tough on communists (see 32, p. 41) in the highly charged political environment that the news frame engendered. Beyond the extreme rhetorical stance, Congress took concrete steps, authorizing production of both the MX missile and nerve gas, as messages to the Soviets. Neither of these policy decisions had been expected to pass before the shootdown (cf. 26; 27, p. 154). At about the same time, the momentum of

¹⁴ The Soviets' failure to apologize after the KAL downing was a major theme of the coverage.

the nuclear freeze movement, which had been building, dramatically slowed or disappeared, and chances for Senate passage of a freeze resolution apparently died too (27, p. 153; cf. 12).

The KAL story convinced the public. A poll showed 52 percent saying Reagan's responses were not tough enough, 37 percent saying they were tough enough, and only 3 percent saying they were too tough, suggesting that almost everyone with opinions accepted the Soviets' moral guilt and hardly anyone rejected it (*Newsweek*, September 19, p. 21). The 52 percent who said Reagan was insufficiently tough actually bolstered his position; such "criticism" could hardly damage his hawkish image and made the administration's responses seem reasonable rather than overzealous. Dallin (8, p. 94) reports that "the Gallup Poll showed the Soviet Union at its worst ranking in American opinion since 1956." A poll also found that 61 percent thought the government was holding back information people ought to know (27, p. 171); but this skepticism did not prevent acceptance of the harshly anti-Soviet line. Most people apparently thought that it was legitimate for the U.S. government to keep some information secret (cf. 38) but that they knew enough to answer the toughness question just cited.

In the Iran Air case, news coverage helped contain the possibility that the event might unravel support for American policy. The frame de-emphasized information suggesting that the human cost was not worth the (controversial) benefits of the U.S. presence, by reducing its salience in the text and making it harder to discern in the onrush of news. A Washington Post-ABC poll found that 71 percent believed the naval cruiser was justified in shooting down the plane; 74 percent believed Iran was more to blame than the United States; and 82 percent wanted to maintain U.S. military presence in the Gulf. Perhaps most tellingly, 65 percent approved specifically of the Reagan administration's Gulf policy—the highest proportion since the question had first been asked in May-June 1987 (5). Thus, rather than causing a deterioration in support of administration policy, the incident was followed by an increase in support. These responses suggest that large majorities accepted the technical explanation and rejected any analogy to the KAL incident.¹⁵ Gulf policy persisted without significant challenge or change after the incident.

It could be argued that political socialization rendered news frames in these two instances superfluous. In this view, the killing of Americans by the Soviet Union, then the primary national enemy, inevitably produced mass outrage; and the Iran Air tragedy was so threatening to the national self-image that a well-socialized public and news corps would naturally fail to consider its disquieting implications.

Yet public outrage after the KAL downing was not preordained. Rather, here and generally, the public's responses were susceptible to a range of media

¹⁵ In the same poll, taken after publication of Seymour Hersh's book (26) and House committee reports exonerating the Soviets of evil intent (36), respondents who remembered the KAL incident said that the Soviet action was not justified by a large margin of 69 to 24 percent. These figures do suggest that a significant minority of the public had modified their KAL event schema by mid-1988—by then, of course, the Reagan administration had become quite friendly to the Soviet government.

frames. If the KAL incident had occurred in 1988, for example, the Reagan administration's initial rhetoric might well have encouraged a technical frame, since the administration knew shortly after the incident that the Soviets, hampered with inferior radar technology and poor lines of communication, mistakenly assumed the intruder was a spy plane (26, 36). Far from pumping the crisis to heighten tension (see 29), the administration might have employed it in 1988 to promote the value of its revised policy thrust, which was by then to reach arms limitation and other agreements with the Soviets.

As for the Iran Air shootdown, elite opponents have in the past used moral rhetoric to undermine public support for U.S. policy. While denial and rationalization in the face of dissonance would have presented potent barriers, elite opponents (including the 1988 Democratic presidential candidate) might have had some success with a morality-based critique of U.S. Persian Gulf policy based on this incident, had it not been for the further barrier presented by the technical frame in the media coverage.

The cases suggest that the news frame itself can help render resistance by elites futile and politically foolhardy. The Iran Air incident makes the point best. Persian Gulf policy already had been criticized by many Washington elites; yet even with that advantageous context, the frame apparently discouraged opponents from exploiting the incident to expand elite opposition and mobilize public pressure. Thus can a news frame reinforce itself.

As further, though indirect, evidence for the power of a frame in the media's and audience's information processing, consider the *deliberate* bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, over Lockerbie, Scotland, on December 21, 1988, in which 270 died (188 Americans). Almost immediately it became clear to U.S. officials that this was an act of terrorism; and soon thereafter the United States learned that it had been the work of an adversary, "terrorist" state, probably Iran, Libya, or Syria. But for diplomatic reasons the government decided not to make a major issue of an actual instance of premeditated murder—this time mostly of Americans, not Koreans—by enemy forces (13). Informal observation suggests that reporting did not reach the same volume or pitch as in the KAL affair. For example, in the two weeks following the incident, Flight 103 made the cover of *Time* or *Newsweek* only once, and the total pages devoted to it in the four issues came to 17, just one-third the total for KAL.

The findings raise at least three significant questions for future research. First, the cases suggest the need for more research on audience autonomy. Members of the mass audience are theoretically free to draw their own varied meanings from media messages. But the cases indicate that when newsmaking elites offer scant challenge to a dominant frame, an authorized position tends to permeate the news text (cf. 1, 11, 25). Such dominant frames tend to obscure rather than highlight opposing information. On the evidence of these two cases, thinking among the politically relevant bulk of the audience will tend to go along (cf. 30) despite the inevitable polysemy of the texts.

The second focus for more research is media autonomy. While these two cases may be extreme in the dominance of a single frame heavily favoring the incumbent administration, we currently have little theoretical basis for predict-

ing or understanding the degree or frequency of administration dominance of news frames. The flow of power over the news frame is no doubt reciprocal, but these cases suggest that for breaking foreign news, official sources in the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and other administration outposts hold the commanding influence (cf. 1, 2, 24, 25). Journalists often resist or overtly challenge the official line, as do opposing elites, but in these two cases the news frame coincided closely with the administration's interests, and much of the congruence appears traceable to the rhetoric and media strategies employed by the Reagan administration.¹⁶ The conditions that promote administration control over frames, versus more autonomous journalistic control, merit research, especially since journalistic autonomy is so critical to democratic theory (cf. 11, 30, 32).

Finally, the analysis of these two narratives suggests that frames are composed of at least five traits of media texts: importance judgments, agency, identification, categorization, and generalization. Two cases do not provide a sufficient basis for determining whether these framing devices are common to most media texts, whether they have the effect hypothesized, or whether others are more important to politics. More content analysis explicitly informed by theories of framing and of information processing should be on the research agenda.

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¹⁶ Previous research supports the assumption that conscious political calculation guides administrations in the release of information on foreign affairs, and that executive branch officials are the most important sources of foreign news (cf. 21, 24). And virtually every description of recent presidencies certifies that public relations has become an inescapable component of leadership and a central preoccupation of the White House (28, 35). On KAL specifically, see (38, p. 11), which states: "The destruction of KAL 007 was handled as a crisis because Reagan's advisors made it into one. It was their premise that the behavior of the Soviet government had followed the 'rational-actor' model. This assumption created a false reality that accorded with their preconceptions" (cf. also 26; 36; 38, chap. 2). Also, Smith (33) documented the words Ronald Reagan used most frequently to describe the KAL incident ("massacre," "tragedy," and "attack"), which the present study reveals to be key components of the media text. All in all, it seems safe to assume that news management played a vital though not exclusive role in shaping the media's versions of the two incidents.

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