

**COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF MEDIA MANIPULATIONS:
‘WAG THE DOG’ MOVIE AND IRAQ WAR EXAMPLES IN THE CONTEXT OF
POLITICAL DISCOURSES AND SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

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Abstract: This study examines the role of media manipulation in shaping public opinion. The parallels between the movie “Wag the Dog” (1997) and the Iraq War (2003) are examined to explore how media-construed realities influence public perception. While the movie “Wag the Dog” tells the story of the process of manipulating public opinion by creating a fake war with the cooperation of the media and politicians after the sex scandal of the American President, the Iraq War is a similar example in real life where the United States (U.S.) legitimizes the war by constantly keeping the allegations of weapons of mass destruction on the agenda in the media. The study examines how the media frame both events and shape public perception by applying media theories, including Agenda Setting Theory, Framing Theory, the Propaganda Model, and the Spiral of Silence. In the movie “Wag the Dog”, a fake war is created in Hollywood to ensure that the U.S. President’s scandal is forgotten, strategically manipulated to divert the agenda, and presented in the media. The study highlights the significant similarities between the methods and theories employed in the media strategies of the Iraq War and the film, which aimed to suppress anti-war voices within the U.S. globally, as well as create the justifications for the war.

Keywords: *Public Opinion, Manipulation, Wag The Dog, Iraq War, Shaping Public Opinion.*

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SİYASİ SÖYLEMLER VE KAMU ALGISININ ŞEKİLLENDİRİLMESİ**BAĞLAMINDA MEDYA MANİPÜLASYONLARI:****‘WAG THE DOG’ FİLMİ VE IRAK SAVAŞI ÖRNEKLERİNİN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI
İNCELENMESİ**

Öz: Bu çalışmada, medya manipülasyonunun kamuoyunun şekillenmesindeki rolü ele alınmaktadır. “Wag the Dog” (1997) filmi ile Irak Savaşı (2003) arasındaki paralellikler üzerinden, medya aracılığıyla kurgulanan gerçekliklerin toplumsal algıyı nasıl etkilediği araştırılmaktadır. “Wag the Dog” filmi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) Başkanı’nın seks skandalı sonrası medya ve politikacıların iş birliğiyle sahte bir savaş yaratarak kamuoyunu yönlendirme sürecini anlatırken, Irak Savaşı da ABD’nin, kitle imha silahları iddialarını medyada sürekli gündemde tutarak savaşın meşruluğunu sağlandığı gerçek yaşamdaki benzer bir örneği teşkil etmektedir. Çalışmada, Gündem Belirleme Teorisi, Çerçeveleme Teorisi, Propaganda Modeli ve Sessizlik Sarmalı gibi medya teorileri kullanılarak, her iki olayın medya tarafından nasıl çerçevelendiği ve halkın algısını nasıl şekillendirdiği incelenmektedir. “Wag the Dog” filminde, sahte bir savaşın ABD Başkanı’nın skandalının unutulmasını sağlamak amacıyla Hollywood’da yaratılan ve stratejik olarak gündemin başka bir yöne çekmek için manipülasyon yapılarak medyada gösterilmesi sağlanmıştır. Çalışmada, film ile Irak Savaşı’ndaki medya stratejilerinde ABD’nin kendi halkındaki ve dünyadaki savaş karşıtı seslerinin bastırılmasını hedefleyen ve savaşın gerekçelerini oluşturulurken kullanılan yöntem ve teorilerin önemli benzerliklerine işaret edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kamuoyu, Medya Manipülasyonu, Wag the Dog, Irak Savaşı, Kamuoyunu Şekillendirme.*

Introduction

“Wag the Dog” (1997) is regarded as a seminal film that illustrates how Hollywood producers and political consultants exploit the media to manipulate the public and influence public opinion through collaboration. The film tells the story of a fake war created to cover up the President’s sexual scandal, with 11 days left until the presidential election. The media presents this fake war as real and convinces the public of the reality of the war. “Wag the Dog” is a significant film that thoroughly examines the relationship between media and politics, highlighting the power of media manipulation and its impact on public perception.

In the film, the media techniques used to shape public perception are directly related to the real world. In particular, the 2003 Iraq War has been an important example of the similarities in the context of the manipulation strategies implemented by the U.S. (United States) government using the media to convince the public to go to war. In the Iraq War, the U.S. government used the power of the media to bring the claims of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to the agenda extensively and presented these claims as evidence to both the U.S. public and the entire world, including the United Nations (UN), as a tool to prove the necessity of war. The fact that the media plays an important role in such manipulations has a remarkable parallelism with the narrative in the movie “Wag the Dog”.

This study aims to examine the relationship between the media and public opinion by comparing the media manipulations in the movie “Wag the Dog” with the Iraq War. The issues of how the public is manipulated through the media and how the war gains public support in the film and reality will be discussed. A detailed comparison will be made of how the media manipulation techniques in the film attempt to influence the public during the Iraq War in reality.

The study aims to answer two questions: “*How is media manipulation in the movie ‘Wag the Dog’ similar to media manipulation in the real world?*” and “*How do agenda-setting, framing, minimal effect, and around-the-flag effect theories function in this context?*”. This article aims to highlight the significance of media manipulation and its role in shaping public opinion during political processes. While the movie “Wag the Dog” illustrates how the media is used as a tool, the reality of the Iraq War also demonstrates the effectiveness of these manipulations. How were the strategies in the movie implemented in real life, and how were their effects on public opinion directed? In search of answers to these questions, an analysis

will be made based on media theories. In this context, the theoretical framework is shaped by the theories used in the formation of media and public opinion.

In international relations, while states determine their foreign policies with a rational approach, realist theorists emphasize the importance of power and interest relations. According to Morgenthau² and Waltz³, the most important motivation of states in international relations is the protection of their national interests. In this context, the Iraq War is evaluated as an intervention carried out by the U.S. to protect its national interests in the Middle East. The U.S. used the media as a tool during the war to accept the legitimacy of its interests. State interests have been supported through the media and reflected in public opinion. Similarly, in the movie “Wag the Dog”, media manipulation for the protection of interests, strategies used to manage the crisis and protect political interests were reflected on the silver screen with a symbolic expression. In this context, the media plays a crucial role in the protection and defense of state interests in international relations. In this context, the study drew on the following theories and literature to analyze the relationship between the media and public opinion.

Agenda Setting Theory is based on the study of which issues the media presents to the public, highlighting and directing the public’s interest and focus. This theory was effectively applied both in the movie and in the Iraq War, which served as a case study. In the movie, the news that emphasized that the country was under threat was put on the agenda in order to mask the President’s sex scandal, and the chemical and nuclear weapon threat in Iraq was used to legitimize the war by using the media.

Framing Theory was used in the comparison of the movie and the Iraq War in the study. This theory enables comparisons to be made, explaining how the media shapes and presents events or subjects during the study, and how the audience perceives and views them.

This is a part of the political life of leaders in which they direct public opinion. Especially in times of crisis, leaders utilize the media to promote various agendas. In this context, the “*Minimal Effect*” theory will be used to analyze the movie “Wag the Dog” in the study. The “*Minimal Effect Theory*” argues that the media’s power to create a direct effect on the public is limited. According to the Minimal Effect Theory, the media is more effective in reinforcing the existing views of the public rather than changing their attitudes and values. The study

² Hans Joachim Morgenthau (1948), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Knopf.

³ Kenneth Neal Waltz (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley.

conducted by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet revealed that the media effect is limited and that individuals process the information they receive from the media by making it compatible with their existing attitudes. According to the Minimal Effect Theory, the agenda is created in two ways.⁴

One of these is the Diversion Effect, which refers to the solution of a problem or crisis experienced by the leader or government in domestic politics by creating an artificial problem in foreign policy. This type of approach is understood by analyzing the relationships between events. A real or artificial problem created in foreign policy is also used to ensure the unity of citizens and to create the perception that the country's integrity is under threat, which is often amplified by the media. In this context, another component of the Minimal Effect Theory, the "*Rally 'Round the Flag Effect*" method, is used. This method is primarily used to address any problems experienced within the country or to implement any desired application by the government, while also addressing agenda with the issue in foreign policy. Although this method is simple, it is an approach with a strong impact. Minimal Effect Theory is a method by which leaders direct public opinion.

When using information that comes to the media, everyone is treated the same. While standardization is being carried out, the levels of standards are restructured by the media to create a perception, thereby imposing events on the public or creating an agenda as the government desires. In this method called "*Priming*", some events are strongly constructed to attract attention to the agenda, while some problems are ignored and not given space in the media.

1. Theoretical Approaches Used in Media Manipulation

The primary purpose of including the theories of Agenda Setting, Framing, Propaganda Model, Spiral of Silence, Diversion Effect and Rally 'Round the Flag Effect to explain the processes of media manipulation, propaganda, and public opinion management is important in terms of creating the theoretical infrastructure based on literature for the comparison of the movie "*Wag the Dog*" and the Iraq War (2003). However, while political leaders' communicators manipulate the media, they sometimes use one of these methods and sometimes a combination of them. In the movie and the real world, during periods of national and international crisis, political communicators attempt to save politicians or leaders and divert the public's attention to another phenomenon or event.

⁴ Paul Felix Lazarsfeld & Bernard Berelson & Hazel Gaudet (1944), *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, Columbia University Press.

In this context, it would be beneficial to briefly outline the theories employed. The Agenda Setting Theory is an approach that suggests that mass media determine which issues will be discussed in public.⁵ According to this theory, the media shapes societal priorities by selecting news and allocating more space to specific issues. Especially during wartime, the media can influence public opinion towards a particular point of view in a manner that serves the strategic interests of governments. For example, before the Iraq War, the American media increased support for the war by keeping the U.S. government's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) claims on the agenda.⁶ A similar process is also depicted in the movie "Wag the Dog", where a fake war scenario is presented as real to the public through the media.

Framing Theory is an approach that examines how the media presents certain events and issues and how this presentation style shapes public perception.⁷ In his Framing Theory analysis, Erving Goffman (1974) examines how the media gives meaning to social events and the effects of these meaning-making processes on the public.⁸ In this sense, the media determines how the public perceives events by placing them in a specific context. The media can influence the way the audience perceives events by highlighting certain events or using certain discourses. As can be seen in the example of the Iraq War, the media tried to justify military intervention by using positive frames such as "*we are bringing freedom*".⁹ A similar Framing strategy is applied in the movie "Wag the Dog", where a political scandal is attempted to be covered up by diverting the public's attention to a fake war.

The Propaganda Model, developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, explains how the media operates within the capitalist system and how it protects the interests of the government and large capital groups.¹⁰ According to this model, media content is determined and reflected to the public based on five basic elements: media ownership, advertising revenues, news sources, criticism mechanisms, and ideological control. As in the example of the Iraq War, it was seen that large media organizations supported government policies by

⁵ Maxwell.E. McCombs & Donald L. Shaw (1972), "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36, no: 2, pp. 176-187.

⁶ Richard Matthew Entman (1993), "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, no: 4, pp. 51-58.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Erving Goffman (1974), *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, Harper & Row.

⁹ Noam Chomsky (2002), "Restoring rights: The assault against freedom and democracy", *Contemporary Justice Review*, Vol. 5, no: 2, pp. 103-119.

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky & Edward. S. Herman (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon Books.

reporting pro-war news.¹¹ In the movie “Wag the Dog”, the media is also depicted as a propaganda tool directed by the government.

The Spiral of Silence Theory, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, posits that individuals tend to avoid expressing opinions that contradict the majority and remain silent due to a fear of social isolation.¹² This is an important theory that explains how dominant discourses supported by the media can suppress dissenting opinions. In this sense, voices opposing the war in the U.S. during the Iraq War were marginalized by the media, either defined as isolated incidents by the mainstream media, or could not find enough space for themselves among dissenting voices.¹³ In the movie “Wag the Dog”, as well, the media suppresses dissenting voices by insisting on broadcasting a particular narrative and discourse regularly, choosing the method of forcing the public to accept it, and not giving space to dissenting voices.

The Diversion Effect is an approach that suggests the media deliberately creates alternative agendas to divert the public’s attention from major political and economic crises.¹⁴ The application of this strategy is demonstrated in the movie “Wag the Dog”. In the movie, a fake war agenda is created to cover up the sex scandal involving the U.S. President. In comparison, a similar strategy was used before the Iraq War, in order to prevent domestic political problems from being discussed in the U.S., by creating the phenomenon of external enemies and terrorism and ignoring them.¹⁵ This theory suggests that the public’s support for their leaders tend to increase during times of crisis.¹⁶ Wars can increase the popularity of governments and Presidents by increasing national unity and solidarity.

According to Hetherington and Nelson, the rapidly increasing approval rate of George W. Bush after the September 11 (9/11) attacks is a good example of this effect.¹⁷ Similarly, in the movie “Wag the Dog”, a fake crisis was created to increase the leader’s support in the public.

¹¹ Robert E. Kelley (2023), “Twenty years ago in Iraq, ignoring the expert weapons inspectors proved to be a fatal mistake”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Date of Accession: 02.02.2025 from <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2023/twenty-years-ago-iraq-ignoring-expert-weapons-inspectors-proved-be-fatal-mistake>.

¹² Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), “The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion”, *Journal of Communication*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x>.

¹³ Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2004), “Understanding: The Second Casualty”, in (eds. by Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer) *Reporting War*, London: Routledge, pp. 25-42.

¹⁴ Jon D. Miller (2004), “Public understanding of, and attitudes toward, scientific research: What we know and what we need to know”, *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 13, no: 3, pp. 273-294.

¹⁵ Deepa Kumar (2006), “Media, war, and propaganda: Strategies of information management during the 2003 Iraq War”, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, no: 1, pp. 48-69.

¹⁶ John E. Mueller (1973), *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, New York: Wiley.

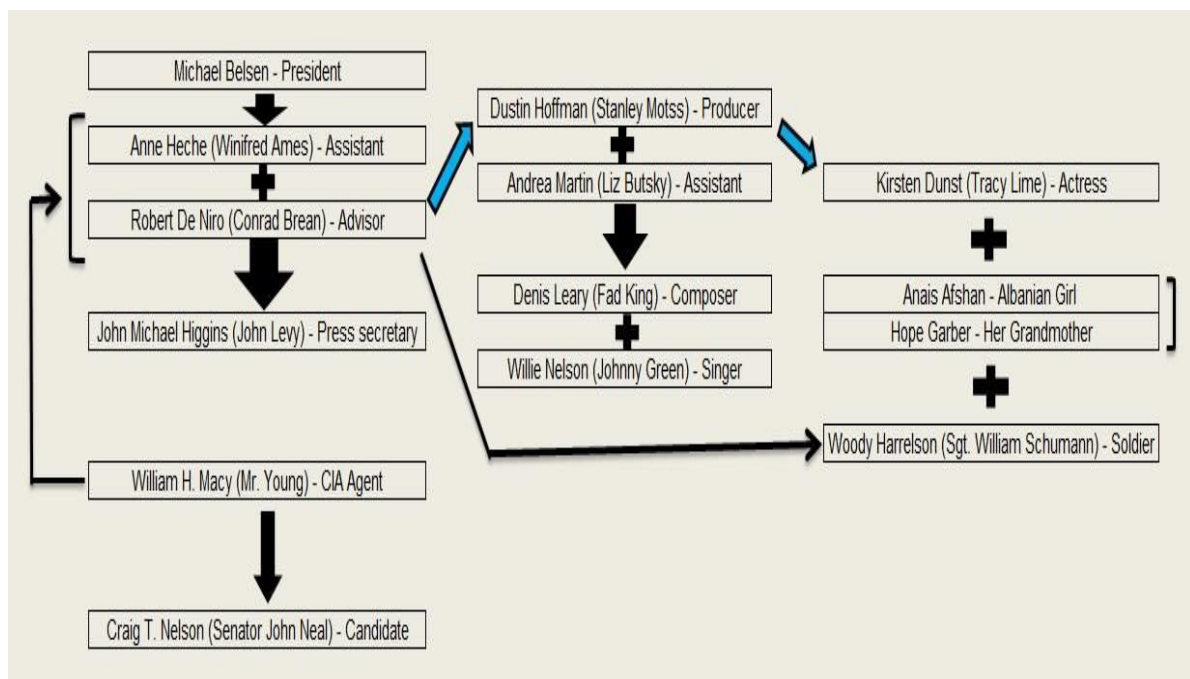
¹⁷ Marc J. Hetherington & Michael Nelson (2003), “Anatomy of a rally effect: George W. Bush and the war on terrorism”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 36, no: 1, pp. 37-42.

According to the literature review and theoretical context, media manipulation is seen as a powerful political tool for leaders and governments. Strategies such as Agenda Setting, Framing, Propaganda Model and Distraction were used effectively both in the real world and in the movie “Wag the Dog”.

2. Examination of Main Themes and Manipulation Strategies in ‘Wag the Dog’ Movie

The similarities between the media manipulation strategies of the war in Iraq (2003) and the studies on shaping public opinion will be examined by the theoretical framework. The findings will be presented at the end of the section, following a discourse and content analysis conducted using the qualitative research method. First, the subject and story of the film are given, and the main themes and manipulation strategies are examined in comparison with the Iraq War. At the beginning of the movie, there are eleven days left for the presidential elections in the U.S. A crisis arose when it was learned that the news of one of the daughters of the “*Firefly*” delegation visiting the President, that the President had sexually harassed her, would be reflected in the media. The President went on a trip to China and left the solution of the incident to his team. After the news that the President’s team would be reflected in the media, it is seen in the film that experienced consultant Conrad Brien was brought to the head of the team to cover up the sex scandal and divert the public’s attention. After this stage, Brien’s solution approaches emerge. The plot of the events and the relationships between the characters are schematically shown in **Figure I**.

Figure I. Relationships Between Characters in ‘Wag the Dog’ movie¹⁸



¹⁸ **Note:** The figure was created by the author.

Brien first prefers to gain time and has the press explain that the President will arrive in the country a day late due to illness. After this, the advisor, who primarily wants to draw attention to a different direction than the sex scandal, creates a fictional war and directs people's attention from the sex scandal to the war. In this context, it is seen that the Priming Theory is applied firmly in this example at the first stage. The President's illness did not take up much of the agenda. The public cannot be distracted by an illness for 11 days, and the agenda needs to be changed with a strong and convincing event. By this method, the news that the non-existent bomber plane B3 was sent with the assumption that there was a nuclear bomb in Albania, even though there was no such bomb in Albania, was leaked to the media.

However, the news needs to be convincing. Thereupon, the advisor goes to Hollywood producer Stanley Motss to create a fictional war. The U.S. media made a similar manipulation regarding the issue of weapons of mass destruction in the Iraq War. This manipulation was carried out in both the U.S. and world press and initiated the process that resulted in the UN delegation going to Iraq to investigate whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. **Figures II** and **III** below reflect the press reports from the investigations conducted by UN officials in Iraq in 2002. Even though the investigations determined that there were no such weapons, it was understood in later years that the news reflected in the media was manipulated by the interests of the U.S. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that the Iraq War was started by using media manipulation tactics.

Figure II. An IAEA inspector is taking smear samples at a machine factory in Iraq during weapons inspections in 2002



Figure III. An IAEA inspector is taking smear samples at a machine factory in Iraq during weapons inspections in 2002



Motss' team begins to prepare the visuals of the Albanian war and the war scenarios to make them believable. During the preparation phase, the dialogues between the consultant and the producer on how and in what way the shots will be edited are important. In the movie, dialogues are presented about the fact that the public only remembers a part of the wars and that it is essential for the media to include believable scenes in order to influence the public. What is understood from the dialogues is that the consultant and the director successfully applied the Diversion Theory. During the brainstorming for believability in the first stage of the editing of the war; *"We made a 1/10 scale model in the First Gulf War and bombed it"*, the consultant said, *"We were there for real"*, and when the director asked the question, *"Maybe we were there, maybe we never went"*. Then, the idea that there was an atomic bomb in Albania was put forward, but since it was thought to be unrealistic, the suitcase bomb was edited. Similarly, during the 2003 Iraq War, news of the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in Iraq was regularly reported in the media. At the same time, media reported on the TV or other communication tools that Albanian terrorists placed the bomb on the U.S.-Canadian border.

In the movie, a victimized village girl escaping from the bombardment with her cat was used in a studio environment to increase the credibility of the war and to manipulate the media. These fictional images, as reflected in the media, were supported by a press release. In addition, the President's sex scandal not only became an incident ignored in the press, but also the President's vote rate began to increase. After it was determined that there was no suitcase bomb on the Canadian border and the CIA leaked information to the rival presidential

candidate that there was no war, it became impossible for the fictional war to remain on the agenda for a long time. In this case, after the President's team understood that the fictionalized victimized girl image could not keep the agenda on long enough, a scene was prepared with the little girl and her grandmother holding out the first ear of harvest to the President, in which the Albanian people would show their sympathy for the President. According to this scenario, the little girl will hand the first ear of the harvest to the President who returned from China, which is traditional in Albania, at the airport, and the President will give his coat to the grandmother who got wet in the rain, thus America will show respect for Albanian traditions and express that it approaches the civilian population with compassion and protects them.

After this, the rival presidential candidate was forced to state through the press that the war was over, as he could not claim there was no war due to his presidential election strategy. This statement, which was made seven days before the elections, brought a new scenario to the agenda. In the new scenario, the 3.0.3 Company, which was secretly deployed to Albania, was established, and a soldier from this company was taken prisoner behind enemy lines. An operation was then organized to rescue the soldier and bring him back to the country. Within the scope of the scenario, the message written on the sweater of the captured soldier in Morse code was served to the media, appealing to the people's patriotic feelings. The message on the sweater was sloganized as "*Mother Courage*", and the name of the soldier was chosen from among the units conducting Pentagon special operations to be fictionalized in propaganda. A song was composed to stimulate patriotism and aimed to gather the public's perception under the American flag.

It is seen that all the media studies conducted above are based on the "*Rally 'Round the Flag Effect*" theory. The effective construction and implementation of this method yield good results. As will be seen in the rest of the movie, the hero soldier's name was chosen as Schuman, and patriotic feelings were given a second priority. The second slogan was determined to be "*thrown aside like an old shoe*", and old sports shoes were hung on all American streets as part of the campaign. The well-constructed campaign was strengthened by the slogan and the song "*Good Old Shoes*", which was created as an image from the 1930s, inspired by people throwing shoes at sports matches.

The most important feature of "*Rally 'Round The Flag Effect*" is that it is an effective method despite its simplicity. The constructions mentioned above in the movie are aimed at strengthening the effect of efforts to bring the captured soldier back to the country five days

before the election. The producer conveys this effect in the film by stating that the captured soldier should appear after the election results are received, and that support for the President depends on the soldier not being revealed to the public. As the President's vote rate increased and the sex scandal began to be forgotten, the rival presidential candidate's insistence on showing the soldier to the public began to appear in the media. Thereupon, the press spokesperson informed the media that the captured soldier would be brought to the military airport, Andrews Air Base, and would be personally greeted by the President. The plane crashed due to adverse weather conditions, and the press was informed that the soldier had survived with injuries. However, a change was made to the script as a result of the soldier being shot and killed outside of the plan. The producer designed this change in a way that would increase the public's loyalty to the American president. The scenario of the rescued captured soldier was replaced by a magnificent military funeral ceremony for the heroic soldier who died while being brought in due to his injuries. After the final scenario was staged skillfully, the President's vote rate increased in the remaining days, and he gained election success. The images between the military funeral ceremony scene in the film and the real scene are the same. The similarities between the scene in the movie (**Figure IV**) and the real scene (**Figure V**) are compared in the photographs below.

Figure IV. The hero soldier ceremony scene in the movie



Figure V. The hero soldier's ceremony scene in real life

The U.S.-Albania war, which was fictionally designed in the film studio, is seen at the end of the film as the bombing being claimed by a group of Albanian terrorist organizations. Similarly, before the Iraq war in 2003, U.S. leaders and UN representatives used their media power to convince the UN and allied countries that there were Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. After 9/11, the U.S. tried to convince the public with publications emphasizing the relations of Al-Qaeda members with Iraq and Afghanistan. This was understood years after the war that the U.S. carried out these manipulations. In fact, in the next elections in the U.S., these manipulations and military losses caused political difficulties for Bush's party as a propaganda tool. "Wag the Dog" contributes to our understanding of and making sense of the complexities of the relationships between the media, government, and politics through popular culture. The main characters in the film, Conrad Brean and Stanley Motss, created a fake war to cover up a scandal created involving the President just before the election and presented it to the press through their personal relationships. The media manipulation used in this film is one of the simplest and most effective methods used to shape public perception. The fake war in the film, scripted and shot in a studio, presented the audience with a reality that was organized by the media and shaped by the security threat to the public.

When examining the Iraq War, it can be said that the U.S. government employed a similar strategy to the manipulation method depicted in the film. While the U.S. media continued to inform the public about the threats against Iraq constantly, it frequently included news about Saddam Hussein having chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction in its agenda. The aim of constantly spreading such news was to ensure the legitimacy of a war with Iraq

among the public. This parallelism between the media strategies in the film and the real world is significant in highlighting the power of media manipulation and its influence on public opinion.

In the first stage of the comparative analysis of the content and discourses used in the film *Wag the Dog* and the Iraq War, the Media Manipulation Analysis used in the film and the Iraq War was included.

2.1. Media Manipulation Analysis in *Wag the Dog*

The “*Wag the Dog*” movie begins with a fictional war created to cover up the President’s sex scandal. The war, created by the scriptwriters at the film studio, was announced to the public through the media to cover up the President’s scandal. This method illustrates the formation of public opinion and the media’s impact on the public. The power of media manipulation in the movie is based on how war is presented as a “*real*” event in news bulletins and how the public is convinced of this news. The film provides an important example of the effective use of propaganda tools and how the public’s thoughts can be directed by political communicators and leaders through the media in the direction they want. The most effective strategy used in the movie is to reflect the war to the public through visual media. The reality of the war is shaped by the President’s political communication staff and producers, and this reality is presented to the public through media outlets with which they are in contact and are considered reliable by the public. At the same time, the film reflects that media manipulation is not only a product of political discourse but also culturally influenced by the public. The manipulation strategies between the film and the Iraq War in 2003 are compared in **Table I**.

Table I. Comparing Manipulation Strategies in *Wag the Dog* and the Iraq War

Manipulation Strategies	<i>Wag the Dog</i>	Iraq War (2003)
Creating Fake Threats	Creating a fake war to cover up the scandal.	Creating threats through weapons of mass destruction and Saddam’s terrorist connections.
Use of Media	The media is used to create a fictional reality of war.	The media is used to justify and legitimize war.
Directing the Public	The public is convinced of the movie’s fictional war.	Public approval of war is based on government evidence.

In the movie, a fake war was planned to cover up the scandal and divert public attention. It can be seen that the method used in the movie was also applied in a similar way in the Iraq War. The public was convinced by regular broadcasts through the media that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that Iraq posed a terrorist threat. However, the truth that emerged in later years was that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that there was no terrorist threat. Despite this, the media continued to make these broadcasts, as will be seen in the next heading.

2.2. Media Manipulation in the Iraq War

During the Iraq War, the U.S. government conducted intense propaganda through the media. This propaganda was designed to constantly share with the public the claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The written and visual media used news that constantly emphasized that Iraq posed a threat, and ensured that the people in the U.S. and some NATO allied countries approved the war. In this strategy, the U.S. press and media were constantly provided with news about weapons of mass destruction in order to start the war, and the justification and legitimacy of the war were created. In this context, the media and press organs shaped public perception of the subject by disseminating the justifications for the war, as seen in the movie. For example, Colin Powell's well-known presentation at the United Nations was made to ensure the legitimacy of the war. The media was used as an important tool to spread this presentation and influence public opinion by constantly broadcasting it. The media constantly emphasized the threats in Iraq, and with this method, they aimed to convince the public of war through the media. The manipulation of the media in the Iraq War and the manipulation in the movie are compared in **Table II**.

Table II. Characteristics of Media Manipulation in the Iraq War

Manipulation Feature	Wag the Dog	Iraq War (2003)
The Media's Threat	The media is manipulating the public by creating a fake war.	The media convinced the public to go to war using Saddam's threats.
Constructing the Reality of War	The public was led to believe in the reality of the war through the media's portrayal of a fake war.	The claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was constructed by the media, creating public legitimacy.
Manipulation of Public Opinion	The media has convinced the public of the legitimacy of the war.	The media convinced the public of the war's necessity and legitimacy.

2.3. The Blurred Area Between Reality and Fake

In both the "Wag the Dog" movie and the Iraq War, the line between reality and fakeness is seen to be blurred. "Wag the Dog" manipulates the audience's perception of the reality through the media, challenging their beliefs about the nature of war. In the Iraq War, the media increased the public's support for the war by presenting the war and threats in a way that would lead to the perception that they were real. Media manipulation in the film is as one of the important tools used to construct reality. While performing this manipulation, it is observed that war images shape the public's perception and significantly influence the public's social and cultural perceptions. During the Iraq War, news prepared by the media was disseminated using a similar method to influence public support for the war. **Table III** shows how the construction of the blurred areas between reality and fakeness is shaped.

Table III. Construction of the Line Between Reality and Fake

Criteria	Wag the Dog	Iraq War (2003)
Reality Formation	The reality of the fake war has been constructed through the media.	By sharing the reasons for the war with the public, the media created reality and legitimacy.
Audience Perception	The audience is led to believe that the fictional war is real.	Public opinion believed that Iraq posed a threat.
Power of the media	The media has presented a fictional reality to the public.	The media shared the reality of the war with the public.

3. Media Manipulation and Discourse Comparison

In this section, the similarities and differences between media manipulation and propaganda techniques in the movie “Wag the Dog” and the war discourses in real international politics and the world are analyzed. Using the discourse and content analysis method, the events and discourses in the film are compared with historical examples.

3.1. Media Manipulation and Agenda Setting

According to the Agenda Setting Theory, the media shapes public perception by determining which issues will be brought to the public’s attention and from which perspectives they will be discussed. In the movie “Wag the Dog”, the media creates a fake war to cover up a scandal and imposes the perception that this war is real on the public.¹⁹ In the real world, a similar strategy was employed by the U.S. government prior to the 2003 Iraq War. The claim of weapons of mass destruction was constantly emphasized through the media, and public support for the war was ensured.²⁰ Agenda-setting strategies appear to be used as a means of directing the masses in both cases.²¹ **Table IV** below shows that agenda-setting strategies were used as a means of directing the masses in both cases.

Table IV. Agenda-Setting Strategies: Movies and the Real World

Strategy	Main Discourse Structure of Wag the Dog	Iraq War Main Discourse Structure
Creating a fake crisis	Declaring a fictitious war in Albania	Allegations of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq
Presentation via media	War propaganda with fake images Liberation of Albania	Presenting the Iraq war as a “freedom operation” on <i>CNN</i> and <i>Fox News</i>

3.2. Framing and Discourse Comparison

Public perception is influenced by the way events are presented to society from specific perspectives through the media. While war is framed in discourses of “*heroism and sacrifice*” in the movie “Wag the Dog”, it is evident that the same discourse language is also used in the real world. In **Table V**, according to the discourse analysis, the idea that the war is just and

¹⁹ Maxwell.E. McCombs & Donald L. Shaw (1972), “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media”.

²⁰ Douglas Kellner (2005), “Media propaganda and spectacle in the war on Iraq: A critique of U.S. broadcasting networks”, *Critical Discourse Studies*, Vol. 2, no: 1, pp. 41-64.

²¹ *Ibid.*

inevitable is supported by visuals in both the film and the written press and media during the Iraq War.²²

Table V. Framing Discourse Comparison

Discourse Type	Discourses Used in the “Wag the Dog”	Discourses Used in the Iraq War (2003)
The Discourse of Heroism	“We need brave soldiers”	George W. Bush’s “ <i>Heroic soldiers who defend freedom</i> ” speech
Emphasis on Sacrifice	“War is necessary for the good of our country”	Tony Blair’s statement “ <i>This war is being fought for world peace</i> ”

3.3. Diversion Effect Comparison

The Diversion Effect is described as a strategy to create alternative agendas to cover up political scandals.²³ The Diversion Effect is an effective strategy in media manipulation, and it is observed to be applied both in the movie and in real-world situations. In the movie “Wag the Dog”, a fake war is created to forget the scandal of the President. Similarly, media manipulations for distraction are frequently used in the real world. **Table VI** below includes a comparison of the movie and the Iraq War.

Table VI. Using the Diversion Effect: Movie vs. Real World

Strategy	Example from the Movie ‘Wag the Dog’	Examples of the Iraq War (2003) and the Clinton Sex Scandal
Cover-up of political scandal	Creating a war to forget the President’s scandal	Clinton’s attack on Sudan and Afghanistan to take the Lewinsky scandal off the agenda
Direction of the media	Media broadcasts fake war footage	The use of “ <i>shock and awe</i> ” propaganda in the 2003 Iraq War

²² Richard Matthew Entman (1993), “Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm”, pp. 51-58.

²³ Jon D. Miller (2004), “Public understanding of, and attitudes toward, scientific research: What we know and what we need to know”, pp. 273-294.

3.4. Rally 'Round the Flag Effect

Mueller states that during times of war, the public's support for their leaders tends to increase, as does the leaders' political popularity.²⁴ One of the example that parallels the increase in the President's approval rating due to the fake war in the movie "Wag the Dog" is the sudden rise in President George W. Bush's approval rating after the 9/11 attacks.²⁵ This effect appears to be directly related to the way governments manage crises.²⁶ In this context, the "*Rally 'Round the Flag Effect*" is frequently used by leaders in times of crisis.

Table VII. Rally 'Round the Flag Effect Samples

Leader	The Structure of the Crisis Situation	Change in Approval Rates in the Presidential Election
The President (Movie)	Creating a fake war	20 % increase
George W. Bush	9/11 attacks	35 % increase

According to the analysis results, the media manipulation techniques depicted in the movie "Wag the Dog" largely overlap with those used in real-world war propaganda. "*Agenda Setting*", "*Framing*", "*Diversion Effect*", and "*Rally 'Round the Flag*" effect stand out as strategies frequently used in crisis periods in both the movie and historical events. The analysis tables reveal the critical role that the media plays in shaping public perception. In addition, while free media has a crucial place in democratic countries in setting the agenda, informing the public, and forming public opinion, it is equally important for the media to comply with fundamental ethical principles, such as verifying the information receives and not publishing confirmed misinformation. However, the impartiality of the media is also an important issue, and the press must maintain its impartiality.

On the other hand, the media makes an event mentally constructible, causing everyone to perceive it in the same way. It is also seen that media tools are open to manipulation when used today. In the scenes from the movie examined in this study, it is evident that the media is susceptible to manipulation, allowing leaders or their teams to direct the media to report a manner that suits the leader's interests.

²⁴ John E. Mueller (1973), *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*.

²⁵ Marc J. Hetherington & Michael Nelson (2003), "Anatomy of a rally effect: George W. Bush and the war on terrorism", pp. 37-42.

²⁶ John E. Mueller (1973), *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*.

One of the dialogues in the movie includes the phrase “*If the TV says it, it is true*”. Based on this principle, the scandals and crises in which the leader is involved can be reported in the direction the leader wants, using various methods. It is clearly understood in the movie how the “*Diversion Effect*” approach is implemented with a skillfully constructed scenario. In the movie, the President’s sex scandal was intended to be forgotten, and a major event was needed for this. This major event was a war that was determined and planned within the framework of foreign policy. While the war was being planned, concepts such as democracy and human rights were highlighted. The fictional war was animated using cinema technology. In the Iraq War, it was seen that discourses were developed based on the concepts of “*democracy*”, “*human rights*”, and “*terror*” in the movie, and “*Weapons of Mass Destruction*” were used as the main discourse in the Iraq War.

In the movie, after the war plot was revealed, a new scenario was produced by using the “*Rally ‘Round the Flag Effect*” approach, highlighting the people’s sensitivities towards their country, flag, and fighting soldiers. As can be seen in the movies’ scenes, every detail was meticulously calculated and presented to the media. It focused on details, including the process from the introduction of a newly composed song from the 1930s to the rescue of the heroic soldier. Solutions were also produced to the disruptions in the plans at the same speed. One of the elements that emerged at the end of the movie and would shake the public most deeply was staged masterfully. An ordinary soldier who was a prisoner was portrayed as a heroic soldier and managed to gather the public under the flag with a magnificent military ceremony held in his honour after his death from wounds. It is known that similar heroic stories in the film were reflected in U.S. written and visual media throughout the Iraq War and were disseminated to the world media. Additionally, the U.S. government made continuous broadcasts through the media to ensure the support of its people for the war effort.

As a result, politicians and leaders often employ Minimal Effect Theory, knowingly or unknowingly, to address problems in their political lives and ensure that the public supports them. However, politicians manipulate the media’s public opinion formation processes in various ways. The public’s trust in the media and the media’s effect on the public can be skillfully managed by politicians or their teams. As seen in the movie, to ensure the plot was reflected in the media and the scandal was covered up, one of the team members used his personal relationships to leak the news to a *Washington Post* reporter.²⁷

²⁷ Peter Baker (2003), “Following is the full text of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech to the United Nations on Iraq”, *The Washington Post*, 05.02.2003, Date of Accession: 17.05.2025 from

The examples of “Wag the Dog” and the Iraq War help understand the power of the media and its role in shaping public perception. Both the media manipulation in the film and the media manipulation strategies employed in Iraq underscore the media’s power to influence the public. It also demonstrates how the media is utilized as a tool in constructing justifications for wars and shaping public opinion.

This study examines the media manipulation processes between the movie “Wag the Dog” and the Iraq War, revealing how the media has become a political tool and shapes social perception. Both the media manipulation in the film and the justifications for the war in the real world reveal the creation of a fictional reality through powerful media strategies and how the public accepts this reality. In this context, suggestions on what the public can do to counter manipulations, based on the findings and theories presented, are included in the conclusion section.

Conclusion

The study is important in demonstrating the close connection between the media and public opinion, and how this connection is utilized as an effective tool, particularly in political processes. The media manipulation in the movie “Wag the Dog”, and its similarities to current events in the real world, as well as the role the media plays in shaping public opinion, are evident. The connection between the main characters in the movie, who collaborate with the media to create a fake war and put pressure on them, and the reality can also be seen in the strategic approach planning applied during the Iraq War.

In the Iraq War, the U.S. government and the media used similar strategies to justify the reasons for the war. They convinced the public to go to war, especially with threats such as weapons of mass destruction. By instilling these threats in the minds of the masses, the media created a strong perception that the war was legitimate, leading the majority of the public to support the war. Similarly, in the movie “Wag the Dog”, the media presented a fake war as real and caused the audience to accept this structure.

Framing Theory played an important role in the analysis of the study. In both the movie and real life, media outlets used events to shape the public’s perception within a specific frame. In the movie “Wag the Dog”, a fake war is created in the media, and the war is based on the necessity of being presented as an “*other reality*”. In this sense, a similar approach is

observed in the Iraq War. During the Iraq War, depending on the basic argument that Saddam Hussein posed a threat through the media, a frame was created through the existence of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist connections, and it was constructed on convincing the public about the necessity of war.

When the analysis is made in the context of the Spiral of Silence Theory, which emphasizes the power of the media in shaping social perception, it is seen that in the Iraq War, the one-sided narratives and discourses presented by the media prevented opposing or alternative views from finding a voice in the media, and directed the majority of the public to the dominant view that war was necessary. It can be said that the fiction created through the portrayal of heroism and security threats in the media manipulation of the film had a similar effect on the public. In both the film and the Iraq War, it is evident that there is no mechanism for the public to question the media's news and the current situation, and successful manipulation techniques are employed to divert their full attention to the necessity of war.

The propaganda model is one of the basic theoretical frameworks of this study. In both the "Wag the Dog" movie and the Iraq War, the media were shaped by powerful political and economic interests, and the public's support for the war was directed in line with these interests. In the Iraq War, the media served to legitimize the war in order to protect the interests of powerful groups such as the U.S. government and the defense industry. Similarly, in the film, media power was utilized as a tool for manipulating interest groups. The "Wag the Dog" movie stands out as a production that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. By presenting a fictional reality to the audience, the media prevented them from distinguishing between a fake war and a real war. During the Iraq War, the media shaped the public's perception through constantly repeated news and content, aiming to convince the public, who had difficulty distinguishing between real and imagined situations, about the reasons for the war. As a result, cinema and the media are considered important tools that shape society and contribute to the formation of public opinion. Since cinema, written and visual media have a significant impact on the formation of public opinion, governments and states effectively utilize both instruments as part of their cultural hegemony. The cinema and media sectors have the ability and power to manipulate. For this reason, the movie "Wag the Dog" examined is important in terms of illustrating the effects of the methods applied during the Iraq War (2003) on our real lives, despite being a political satire. Although the film is seen as an entertaining simulation, these applications in real world cause destructive effects ranging from state to individual lives.

The section will conclude with a few suggestions on how the public can distinguish between real and virtual agendas and how to counter manipulative methods based on disinformation. When discussing the concept of media today, the possibility of media being used as a tool for political manipulation becoming more widespread in the future, especially in the digital age, is an increasingly important issue. In this context, developing measures to limit the manipulative power of the media has become an important necessity. Individuals should increase their media literacy, protect the independence of the media, and develop alternative sources.

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