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the 'War on Terror' Discourse:  
Competing Visions of an Iraq/al  
Qaeda Connection**

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# The Political Economy of Truth in the “War on Terror” Discourse: Competing Visions of an Iraq/al Qaeda Connection

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The textual analysis in this paper examines an interview with Vice-President Dick Cheney by Gloria Borger on CNBC's 2004 Capital Report. The interview took place on 17 June 2004, the day after the 9/11 Commission released Staff Statement No. 15, a twelve page preliminary report that concluded no “collaborative relationship” existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda. The aim of the analysis is to show how the struggle over “truth” unfolds in micro-level discursive interaction and to underscore the way this process is embedded within and contributes to the circulation of truth claims associated with the macro-level War on Terror Discourse (WoTD).

*Keywords* Discourse; extextualization; adequation; truth; micro/macro; war on terror

## Introduction

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States has provided a fertile example for scholarly critique in attempts to understand the way a democratic government effectively builds public consent for war. At issue in this paper is the way semiotic resources are employed to construct and circulate “truth”, taking as an example the ability of the Bush administration to assert its vision of the world as a valid truth claim in American public discourse.

The notion of “truth” in this analysis draws from Michel Foucault's (1980, 131) discussion of truth as “a thing of this world.” As Foucault stresses, “Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (1980, 131).

In outlining five traits that characterize the political economy of truth, Foucault (1980) points out that dominant apparatuses such as the media play

a vital role in the production and transmission of “truth.” Thus, Foucault (1980, 133) posits the following proposition concerning truth and power: “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it”.

I take this proposition as the starting point for the current analysis in an attempt to show how the *regime of truth* associated with what I call the War on Terror Discourse (WoTD) is produced, circulated and reinforced through micro-level discursive interaction. The semiotic resources harnessed in what is often called “micro-level” interaction are integrally linked to “macro-level” discourses, in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Language in and of itself is insufficient to produce larger consequences; language must be accompanied by what Jan Blommaert (2005) describes as *voice*. Simply put, voice is the ability to be understood. In other words, it is “a capacity to generate an uptake of one’s words as close as possible to one’s desired contextualization” (Blommaert, 2005, 68). In the case of this analysis, it is the ability for the Bush administration to assert its vision of the world, one particular ideological perspective, as the “truth.”

The wielding of voice, therefore, is linked with the political economic conditions under which certain voices are imbued with the power to be heard and believed versus other voices that are ignored or simply dismissed. Social actors position themselves within micro-level interactions so that their voices are heard and accepted. Local relations of power in discursive interaction produce global consequences in so far as macro-level discourses gain traction as part of “common-sense” cultural understandings through micro-level discourse. At issue in this analysis, therefore, is the way micro-level interaction both draws from and further expands macro-level understandings. On the one hand, how do social actors leverage common understandings currently in circulation to position their “truth” claims as within the bounds of commonly accepted wisdom; and, on the other hand, how does their success in bolstering such a position reinforce the circulation of “common-sense” understandings and beliefs? More pointedly stated, how does the interplay between the micro and macro give language the capacity to persuade, mislead and even take a nation to war?

### Truth and the War on Terror Discourse

The textual analysis in this paper examines an interview with Vice-President Dick Cheney by Gloria Borger on CNBC’s Capital Report (CNBC 2004). The interview took place on 17 June 2004, the day after the 9/11 Commission released Staff Statement No. 15, a 12-page preliminary report that concluded no “collaborative relationship” existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda (NC 2004a, 5).<sup>1</sup> The report’s

1. This assertion was also later included in the final report by the commission, released on 22 July 2004: “But to date we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in the developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States” (NC 2004b, 83).

assertion seemingly refuted a Bush administration rationale for war against Iraq; namely, the notion that Iraq (thought to have possessed weapons of mass destruction) was a grave threat to the United States because it had significant links with terrorist organizations — specifically, al Qaeda.<sup>2</sup>

The release of the report received widespread media coverage that focused on the discrepancy between the report's findings and administration justifications for attacking Iraq. More specifically, the controversy centered on ideas about the nature of an Iraq/al Qaeda relationship conveyed (largely implicitly) in administration rhetoric and called into question by the report.

Ideas about the nature of an Iraq/al Qaeda relationship rest at the heart of the macro-level WoTD, a powerful set of assumptions that have formed the backdrop to discussion and debate in the United States post 9/11. The WoTD stems from the neo-conservative perspective on foreign policy that marks the Bush administration's stance in international relations. There are various threads that contribute to the WoTD. For example, one aspect is the guiding assumption that terrorism, in general, and the response to 9/11, in particular, is to be primarily dealt with as a *war*, as opposed to, say, a crime where justice is pursued through criminal investigations, an international court of law or other means. Hodges (2004a) examines the discursive shift in presidential responses to terrorist acts, showing a marked change in the rhetoric of former President Clinton's language that conveys a conceptual framework for understanding terrorism as crime versus President Bush's framework of war represented in the language of the "war on terror." In short, the "struggle" against terrorism of the Clinton years becomes the "war on terror" in the Bush years. The discursive shift is representative of the ideological change it entails.

Another important aspect of the WoTD is the linkage of Iraq and al Qaeda as one and the same target against which to wage war. Starting in Cincinnati in October 2002, President Bush began to reiterate a compelling narrative about the "war on terror" in presidential speeches and addresses. In the narrative, the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq is positioned as an ally of al Qaeda, and the war against Iraq is legitimized vis-à-vis the events of 9/11. Hodges (2004b) uses Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's (2004) concept of *adequation* in their model of identity formation to analyze how similarities are imposed and differences are erased on behalf of Iraq and al Qaeda to identify these otherwise disparate entities as a cohesive enemy alliance. *Adequation*, as defined by Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 383), is a relation in which "potentially salient differences are set aside in favor of perceived or asserted similarities that are taken to be more situationally relevant."

2. It is also interesting to note that on the 21 June 2004 broadcast of *The Radio Factor*, host Bill O'Reilly (an avowed defender of the Bush administration's foreign policy) discussed the administration's rationale for war in light of the release of Staff Statement No. 15: "And why is this important? Well, it's important because the rationale for going to war in Iraq was that the regime of Saddam, if they had WMDs [weapons of mass destruction]—and everybody thought they did... could have given them to [Jordanian-born terrorist Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi and Al Qaeda, and then used them here, of course. That was the rationale" (Media Matters 2004).

The adequation of these two entities in presidential speeches, while never *explicitly* stating that the two collaborated in the events of 9/11, provides a compelling narrative that lays the foundation for their joint culpability in possible future attacks (and opens the door to an *implicit* potential for joint culpability in 9/11). Thus, war against Iraq is justified in terms of the logic that stems from the consequence of adequation within the WoTD: a strike against Iraq equates to a strike against al Qaeda.

The effect of the adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda repeated in presidential speeches and circulated in the WoTD has had profound consequences on American views about the nature of such an alliance. On 22 April 2004, the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland released a study that showed “a majority of Americans (57%) continue to believe that before the war Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda, including 20% who believe that Iraq was directly involved in the September 11 attacks” (Program for International Policy Attitudes 2004). Such public belief remained consistent since the February 2003 build up to the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in October 2002 showed that two-thirds of Americans believed “Saddam Hussein helped the terrorists in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2002).

These are the views that are contested in the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission’s report released on 16 June 2004. Thus, the “truth” at stake in the public debate that followed concerns the nature of a relationship between pre-war Iraq and al Qaeda. Both President Bush and Vice-President Cheney made appearances in front of television audiences to defend administration policy, refute the way the media interpreted the report’s conclusions and reinforce the ideas inherent in the WoTD. The next section moves to a close analysis of the issues raised in the report and the subsequent interview of Vice-President Cheney by Gloria Borger on CNBC’s Capital Report.

## Analysis

Staff Statement No. 15, released on 16 June 2004, provides a 12-page examination of the roots of al Qaeda, its operations in Sudan and Afghanistan, its sources of funding, and its preparations for the 9/11 attacks on the United States.<sup>3</sup> The report outlines a vivid description of collaboration between Bin Laden and the regimes in Sudan and Afghanistan; one paragraph is dedicated to the commission’s conclusions on Iraq’s purported ties to al Qaeda, which follows.

Bin Laden also explored possible connections with Iraq during his time in Sudan, despite his opposition to Hussein’s secular regime. Bin Laden had in fact at one

3. The report examines various countries, which include Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Oman, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia, and Eritrea.

time sponsored anti-Saddam Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Sudanese, to protect their own ties with Iraq, reportedly persuaded Bin Laden to cease this support and arranged for contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda. A senior Iraqi intelligence officer reportedly made three visits to Sudan, finally meeting Bin Laden in 1994. Bin Laden is said to have requested space to establish training camps, as well as assistance in procuring weapons, but Iraq apparently never responded. There have been reports that contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda also occurred after Bin Laden had returned to Afghanistan, but they do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship. Two senior Bin Laden associates have adamantly denied that any ties existed between al Qaeda and Iraq. We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States. (NC 2004a p.5)

Three distinctions emerge in the report concerning the nature of a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda. First is the issue of *contacts*. The report notes that “contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda” had occurred, stating that Bin Laden had “explored possible connections with Iraq during his time in Sudan, despite his opposition to Hussein’s secular regime.” Second is the question of *collaboration* in general. After investigating the various reports of contacts, the commission explicitly concludes that “they do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship.” Third is the question of whether Iraq *cooperated* in the 9/11 attacks. The report states, “We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States” (NC 2004a, 5). This three-way distinction of Staff Statement No. 15’s conclusions is summed up in Table 1.

This characterization is notable when juxtaposed with the way Cheney frames the issues in the interview in order to challenge the report’s findings and legitimize the adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda. Cheney first categorizes the issue in a way that erases the distinction between *contacts* and *collaboration*. This categorization of the issue then acts as a platform for the adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda, where the enumeration of contacts effectively signifies collaboration. Throughout the micro-level interaction of the interview, Cheney leverages *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) to legitimize the administration’s perspective as a valid truth claim in American political discourse. Each of these elements is examined in turn.

**Table 1** Characterization of issues concerning Iraq and al Qaeda in Staff Statement No. 15

At issue	Staff Statement No. 15’s conclusion
1. Contacts	Yes
2. Collaboration in general	No
3. Cooperation in 9/11	No

## Issue Categorization

In the struggle over the categorization of the issue, Cheney begins to outline his characterization in the opening turns of the interview provided in Excerpt 1.<sup>4</sup>

### Excerpt 1

**BORGER:** But, obviously, first the news of the week is the 9/11 commission report. And as you know, the report found, quote, “no credible evidence that al-Qaeda collaborated with Iraq or Saddam Hussein.” Do you disagree with its findings?

**CHENEY:** I disagree with the way their findings have been portrayed. There’s been enormous confusion over the Iraq/al-Qaeda connection, Gloria. First of all, on the question of—of **whether or not there was any kind of relationship**, there clearly was a relationship.

*Issue categorization*, according to Thomas Nelson and Elaine Willey (2001, 264), is the ability of those who have power to set the definitions concerning political debate. While the choice of topic in this interview was a given in light of Staff Statement No. 15’s release, *how* the topic was to be characterized was not; and political discourse is marked by the jockeying over issue categorization. Borger begins the interview by quoting the conclusions from Staff Statement No. 15 in Excerpt 1. Cheney responds by framing the issue as one of “enormous confusion.” He then positions himself to clear up this confusion, and begins to sketch out the questions at hand. The first question he outlines is whether “there was any kind of relationship.” No distinction is made between *contacts* and *collaboration* in this categorization. Instead, these two issues are merged into one denoted by the general term “relationship.”

After naming a series of contacts, Cheney introduces the second question in his categorization of the issue as seen in Excerpt 2.

### Excerpt 2

**CHENEY:** There’s clearly been a relationship. There’s a **separate question**. The separate question is, was Iraq involved with al-Qaeda in the attack on 9/11?

The “separate question” concerning cooperation in 9/11 that Cheney introduces in this excerpt is juxtaposed with the vague notion of a “relationship” noted earlier. Thus, whereas three distinct issues can be found in Staff Statement No. 15’s conclusion, Cheney makes only two distinctions. The separate issues of *contacts* and general *collaboration* are simplified into the vague notion of a *relationship*, represented in Table 2.

4. I have chosen to use a literary representation of the data for ease of reading. The transcripts are based on those provided by CNBC and found on the LexisNexis database. I also watched the interview several times and added additional information where needed for the analysis. The use of boldfaced type indicates areas of particular interest highlighted in the discussion.

**Table 2** Characterization of issues concerning Iraq and al Qaeda according to Cheney

Cheney's characterization of issues	Cheney's conclusion
1. Relationship contacts/collaboration in general	Yes
2. Cooperation in 9/11	No

Once this two-way distinction is introduced, Cheney emphasizes this binary characterization, as seen in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

**CHENEY:** Now, it's very important that people understand these two differences.

Experts are often called upon in media interviews to provide an authoritative analysis of topics. Cheney's position as Vice-President places him in a similar position. One might interpret Cheney's introduction as a "neutral formulation" of the issues, or even see him as a "neutral observer" above the fray who takes responsibility for alleviating the confusion surrounding an issue on which he has special knowledge. However, language is never neutral. As a site of ideological struggle, issues of power intersect with language use to shape the representation of topics. The discursive interaction in this interview is framed by the larger political struggle in which it is found. By obscuring the distinction between *contacts* and *collaboration*, Cheney suppresses the discrepancies between Staff Statement No. 15 and the administration view.

Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000, 38) use the term *erasure* to refer to "the process in which ideology ... renders some persons or activities ... invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away." The conflation of the notion of *contacts* with that of *collaboration* is a prime example of erasure.

In response to Cheney's categorization of the issue, Borger attempts to introduce the distinctions found in Staff Statement No. 15, as seen in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

**BORGER:** Well, my reading of the report is that it says that, **yes, contacts were made ...**

**CHENEY:** **Absolutely.**

**BORGER:** ... between al-Qaeda and Iraq. But they could find no evidence that any relationship in fact had been forged between al-Qaeda and Iraq.

**CHENEY:** And you're talking generally now, not just 9/11.

**BORGER:** Not just 9/11. And let's talk generally, and then we'll get to 9/11.

**CHENEY:** OK.

**BORGER:** But . . .

**CHENEY:** Talk generally.

**BORGER:** . . . generally.

**CHENEY:** That's not true.

**BORGER:** So you disagree.

**CHENEY:** Absolutely.

Local interactions produce local consequences that tie into larger discourses. In Excerpt 4, discursive resources enact the struggle over the issue of categorization, which itself is underpinned by the larger ideological struggle over the nature of an Iraq/al Qaeda relationship. Cheney interrupts Borger at the beginning of the excerpt to emphasize her assertion “that, yes, contacts were made.” “Absolutely,” Cheney inserts. Borger finishes, and then Cheney reiterates his two-way distinction between a general relationship and 9/11, “And you’re talking generally now, not just 9/11.” This *strategic clarification* results in Borger accepting Cheney’s two-way distinction in her response, “Not just 9/11. And let’s talk generally, and then we’ll get to 9/11.” In this response, Borger reiterates Cheney’s categorization of the issue and abandons (at least temporarily) the three-way distinction she began with. The distinction between *contacts* and *collaboration* is replaced by their conflation under the vague category of a general relationship.

### Adequation: “It’s interchangeable . . . same–same”

The erasure of the distinction between *contacts* and *collaboration* opens the door for accepting the logic endemic in the administration’s rhetoric of adequation: that contacts are sufficient to *imply* collaboration. The legitimization of an Iraq/al Qaeda alliance rests on this logic. Cheney’s enumeration of contacts as “evidence”, as seen in Excerpt 5, builds upon this logic.

#### Excerpt 5

**CHENEY:** [...] there clearly was a relationship. It’s been testified to; the evidence is overwhelming. It goes back to the early ‘90s. It involves **whole series of contacts**—high-level **contacts** between Osama bin Laden and Iraqi intelligence officials. It involves a senior official; a brigadier general in the Iraq intelligence service going to the Sudan before Sudan—before bin Laden ever went to Afghanistan [...]

Coupled with a categorization of the issue that fails to recognize a distinction between contacts and collaboration, the series of contacts enumerated throughout the interview build a dossier of circumstantial evidence that implies guilt by association. The circumstantial evidence is then strengthened through a *logic of complementarity* that positions the roles played by terrorists vis-à-vis

the nation-state of Iraq as mutually compatible. For example, emphasis is placed on Iraq as a potential *source of shelter* for terrorists, and terrorists as a potential *recipient* of such shelter, as illustrated in Excerpt 6.

#### Excerpt 6

**CHENEY:** [...] Mr. Zarqawi, who is in Baghdad today, is an al-Qaeda associate who **took refuge** in Baghdad and **found sanctuary** and **safe harbor** there before we ever launched into Iraq. There's Mr. Yassin, who was a World Trade Center bomber in '93, who fled to Iraq after that. And we found since, when we got into Baghdad, documents showing that he was put on the payroll and **given housing** by Saddam Hussein after the '93 attack. In other words, **provided safe harbor and sanctuary**. There's clearly been a relationship.

In this excerpt, Cheney variously describes the individuals, Zarqawi and Yassin, as terrorists who “took refuge,” “found sanctuary and safe harbor,” and were “given housing by Saddam Hussein.” Or, as Cheney sums up, “In other words, provided safe harbor and sanctuary.” Thus, the logic of complementarity builds upon the enumeration of circumstantial contacts to achieve an adequation of terrorists with Iraq.

The next step is to adequate terrorists (in general) with al Qaeda (specifically) in order to achieve the linking of Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. In Excerpt 7, the notion of complementarity is first coupled with the adequation of various terrorists with al Qaeda, and eventually the adequation of al Qaeda with Iraq.

#### Excerpt 7

**CHENEY:** Look at the Zarqawi case. Here's a man who—he's Jordanian by birth, he's described as an al-Qaeda associate, he ran training camps in Afghanistan back before we went to war in Afghanistan. After we went in and hit his training camp, he fled to Baghdad, found **safe harbor and sanctuary in Baghdad** in May of 2002. He arrived with about two dozen other supporters of his, members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which was Zawahiri's organization. He's the number two to bin Laden, which was merged with al-Qaeda. **It's interchangeable, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, same-same.** They are all now part of one organization; they merged some years ago. Zarqawi, living in Baghdad, we arranged for information to be passed on his presence in Baghdad to the Iraqis through a third party intelligence service. They did that twice. There's no question but that Saddam Hussein knew he was there. He was allowed to operate out of Baghdad. **He ran the poisons factory in northern Iraq out of Baghdad**, which became a **safe harbor** for Ansar al-Islam, as well as al-Qaeda fleeing Afghanistan. There clearly was a relationship there that stretched back over that period of time to at least May of '02, a year before we launched into Iraq.

The adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda in this segment (Excerpt 7) is obtained via intermediaries in the chain of facts and events strung together by Cheney. The

linchpin of the chain is the proposition that Zarqawi operated in Iraq with the aid and abetment of Saddam Hussein. Cheney notes, “He [Zarqawi] ran the poisons factory in northern Iraq out of Baghdad.” Therefore, his presence in Iraq and affiliation with a group *in turn* affiliated with al Qaeda builds a situationally relevant chain of links that allows Cheney to connect Iraq with al Qaeda. Erasure is again apparent in this excerpt. Not only are differences between various terrorists and terrorist organizations ignored; but, most importantly, differences between terrorists (such as Zarqawi) and nation-states (such as Iraq) are overlooked. Instead, situationally relevant contacts—or simply being in the same geographic region—are highlighted and used as the basis for sameness, while motives and actions are not mentioned. The logic of adequation is illustrated well when Cheney states, “It’s interchangeable, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, same-same.” Similarly, in the WoTD, it is interchangeable—al Qaeda, Iraq, same—same.<sup>5</sup>

### Building Credibility with Symbolic Capital

Throughout the interview, Cheney reiterates circumstantial evidence previously played up by the administration (such as the presence of Zarqawi in Iraq) as proof of an Iraq/al Qaeda link. Yet the resulting adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda is challenged by the 9/11 Commission’s findings. In short, the issue comes down to who is closer to the “truth”: Cheney or the 9/11 Commission? Or, as seen in Excerpt 8, who knows more?

#### Excerpt 8

**BORGER:** But you say you disagree with the commission.

**CHENEY:** On this question of whether or not there’s a general relationship.

**BORGER:** Yes.

**CHENEY:** Yeah.

**BORGER:** And they say that there was not one forged and you are saying, yes, that there was.

**CHENEY:** I think there was.

**BORGER:** Do you know some things that the commission does not know?

**CHENEY:** Probably.

5. The CIA sent a report to policy-makers in August 2004, which concluded that Zarqawi was not aided by Saddam Hussein. Knowledge of this assessment was reported in the American media in October 2004 (for example, Jehl 2004). Borger also points out to Cheney in the interview the information that was already in circulation among intelligent experts: the idea that Zarqawi did not correspond with al Qaeda until after Saddam Hussein was deposed.

**BORGER:** [3 sec pause] And do you think the commission needs to know them?

**CHENEY:** I don't know what they know. **I do know they didn't talk with any original sources** on this subject that say that in their report.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *symbolic capital* provides a framework for understanding issues of power tied in with credibility. In this excerpt, Cheney's social and cultural capital as Vice-President become an issue in establishing the validity, or lack of validity, of Staff Statement No. 15. After Cheney asserts his disagreement with the 9/11 Commission on the issue of a general relationship, Borger poses a question that might provide insight why: "Do you know some things that the commission does not know?," she asks. As Vice-President, Cheney has considerable *social capital* in the form of acquaintances and networks that give him access to special information and classified intelligence, in addition to considerable *cultural capital* in the form of his political credentials and experience in government. This symbolic capital is leveraged in Cheney's one-word response: "Probably." Neither affirming nor denying Borger's question, this equivocal response opens the door for a powerful implication: Cheney, by virtue of the symbolic capital he possesses, is in a position to know *more* than the 9/11 Commission. The consequence of this implication casts doubt on the credibility of the commission.

The political circumstances require Cheney to effectively delegitimize the 9/11 Commission's findings (in favor of the administration perspective), yet without delegitimizing the commission itself, since the commission possesses a certain amount of import and stature in the political landscape. The politic way to cast doubt is to do so indirectly; that is, implicitly rather than explicitly. Cheney achieves this by calling into question the "sources" used by the commission rather than the commission itself. He says, "I do know they didn't talk with any original sources." This places fault in the methodology. The commission is working with intelligence gathered by other governmental agencies, such as the CIA, and is attempting to piece together the evidence. Cheney highlights this layer of removal from the "truth." An additional implication is that Cheney, with his symbolic accreditations of capital, is *closer* to the "truth."

The exchange continues in Excerpt 9 as Cheney further leverages symbolic capital to make his case.

#### Excerpt 9

**BORGER:** They did talk with people who had interrogated sources.

**CHENEY:** Right.

**BORGER:** So they do have good sources.

**CHENEY:** Well, Gloria, the notion that there is no relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda just simply is not true. **I mean, there are reams of material here. Your show isn't long enough for me to read all the pieces of it.**  
[Cheney leafs through a stack of papers]

**BORGER:** Sure, it is.

**CHENEY:** But in the fall of '95 and again in the summer of '96, bin Laden met with Iraqi intelligence service representatives at his farm in Sudan. Bin Laden asked for terror training from Iraq. The Iraqi intelligence service responded, they deployed a bomb-making expert, a brigadier general in the Iraqi intelligence service.

**BORGER:** **OK, but now, just let me stop you there because what this report says is that he was not given the support that he had asked for from Iraq, that he had requested all of these things, but in fact did not get them.**

**CHENEY:** He got this. This is—we know for a fact—this is from George Tenet's testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, February 12, 2003, etc. I mean, it's there. **There clearly is a reception.**

Symbolic capital, like economic capital, accumulates over time with privileged access to resources. Symbolic capital as an indicator of credibility depends upon the depth of those resources. Deep access to resources, presumably intelligence data in this instance, is leveraged by Cheney in this exchange. He states, "I mean, there are reams of material here," as he leafs through a stack of papers in front of him. "Your show isn't long enough for me to read all the pieces of it," he continues. Potential implications from these remarks include the notion that Cheney has greater access to material than the 9/11 Commission, as well as the positioning of Cheney in a supposedly more "objective" position from which to judge the issues at hand by virtue of this greater knowledge. Cheney's access to such "documentary evidence" symbolically manifests itself through the stack of papers in front of him, along with his reference to "reams of material."

Borger challenges the evidence Cheney presents and directly confronts him with counter-evidence from Staff Statement No. 15 as she says "OK, but now, just let me stop you there because what this report says is that he was not given the support that he had asked for from Iraq, that he had requested all of these things, but in fact did not get them." Cheney counters by drawing upon further symbolic resources to legitimize his position. He invokes the director of the CIA, George Tenet, and the symbolic capital associated with Tenet's position. In addition, Cheney reads a specific place and a specific date of Tenet's testimony from a document in front of him, pieces of information that add "facticity" to the statements. That is, the specific citation of facts is often associated with credibility in discourse, and the credibility of Cheney's account is enhanced by harnessing Tenet's symbolic capital through these precise references.

In addition, Cheney backs up his statements of evidence throughout the interview with global assertions, or what Peter Adams, Alison Towns, and Nicola Gavey (1995) refer to as axiom markers. Seen in the various excerpts presented above, Cheney makes statements such as, "there clearly was a relationship", "there's clearly been a relationship", and "there clearly was a relationship there" (e.g. Excerpts 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7). Global assertions such as these can be used to qualify adjacent statements as self-evident. That is, axiom markers work

to position an assertion as beyond doubt, as an absolute claim to truth. In addition to holding up the notion of a relationship as self-evident throughout the interview, Cheney characterizes challenges to his truth claim as “simply not true,” as seen in the last excerpt: “Well, Gloria, the notion that there is no relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda *just simply is not true.*” These global statements about reality add conviction to the surrounding pieces of evidence presented by Cheney. In the case where a picture of collaboration relies on circumstantial evidence, axiom markers can help paint the evidence as less circumstantial and more self-evident, especially when propped up by accompanying symbolic capital.

### Interplay Between the Micro and the Macro

Language is a site of ideological struggle where local discursive interactions link to larger discourses in a dialectical relationship. Emergent from local struggles are broader visions of social reality and “truth.” In the micro-level interaction of the interview analyzed in this paper, we see a struggle over the “truth” of an Iraq/al Qaeda relationship. The 9/11 Commission’s conclusions in Staff Statement No. 15 note that reported contacts between Iraqi officials and members of al Qaeda “do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship.” This conclusion is at odds with the administration view that Iraq and al Qaeda were involved in a relationship significant enough to rationalize war against Iraq vis-à-vis a struggle against al Qaeda, a key pillar of the macro-level WoTD outlined earlier.<sup>6</sup>

The fascinating aspect of this conflict is not that two competing visions of the world are in competition, but that one perspective—that of the Bush administration—receives widespread acceptance even *in the light of* refutation from credible sources, such as the 9/11 Commission. As recently as March 2005—well after the July 2004 release of the 9/11 Commission’s full report—an ABC News–*Washington Post* poll found that 61 percent of respondents still believed that Iraq provided direct support to al Qaeda before the war (ABC 2005). These numbers are similar to previous studies cited in the introduction from the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland and the Pew Research Center. Importantly, these figures illustrate the widespread acceptance among Americans of the macro-level WoTD espoused by the Bush

6. Two key reasons have been put forth publicly by the Bush administration as justifications for waging war against Iraq: the issue of Iraq’s supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. Given the overwhelming evidence against the presence of weapons of mass destruction, the issue of links between Saddam Hussein and terrorists becomes all the more important in administration rhetoric. The following statement from a speech given by Bush on 12 July 2004 at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee is representative of this rhetoric: “Although we have not found stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, we were right to go into Iraq. We removed a declared enemy of America, who had the capability of producing weapons of mass murder, and could have passed that capability to terrorists bent on acquiring them. In the world after September the 11th, that was a risk we could not afford to take” (Bush 2004).

administration, where pre-war Iraq and al Qaeda are positioned as an opposing alliance in the putative “war on terror.” How does a particular perspective like this one gain the status of “truth” over alternative but equally viable claims? Specifically, why should a large portion of Americans accept and continue to believe the truth claims put forth by the administration in the light of contradictory evidence, such as the 9/11 Commission report?

The discursive construction of “truth,” played out in the currency of symbolic capital at the micro level, works to legitimize or delegitimize visions of the world at the macro level. The voices represented in the particular interview examined above—and in additional media reportage after the release of the 9/11 Commission’s preliminary report—jockey for control over the *decontextualization* of Staff Statement No. 15 and its subsequent *recontextualization* into their own voice. This process of *entexualization*, as described by Jan Blommaert (2005, 47; cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990, Silverstein and Urban 1996), “provides a sort of ‘preferred reading’ for the discourse.” In this case, the discourse being read is Staff Statement No. 15, and it is interpreted in the interview by Cheney in line with the assumptions that underlie the macro-level WoTD. The jockeying for issue categorization described earlier in the textual analysis provides a conspicuous example of entexualization played out at the micro level, which feeds into the macro-level cultural understandings of the WoTD.

The symbolic power leveraged by Cheney in the interview, and by the administration more broadly to gain positive uptake of its perspective, is, in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977, 13) words, “*worldmaking* power” in that it can impose a “legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions” (cf. Swartz 1997, 89). As seen in the interview, Cheney builds upon his categorization of the issue to legitimize the adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda, a vision central to administration foreign policy objectives. This reiteration of previously rehearsed administration rhetoric draws from the inertia of the established WoTD. A powerful macro discourse takes less effort to sustain once in motion, even in the face of challenges, than to construct from scratch. Thus, as Cheney legitimizes the adequation of Iraq and al Qaeda in the interview, he has the weight of that previous acceptance behind him. In turn, the symbolic capital used by Cheney in the interview to position himself as the one who holds the most informed perspective on Staff Statement No. 15 reinforces the underpinnings of the WoTD. If Cheney discursively positions himself as closer to the “truth” in the micro-level interaction, then the consequences for the macro-level WoTD is that it remains (or becomes) a legitimate vision of the world. In this way, “truth” and knowledge are inseparable from power. “Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to *make itself true*” (Hall 1997, 49).

The aim of this paper has been to show how the struggle over “truth” unfolds in micro-level interaction and to underscore the way this process is embedded within and contributes to macro-level discourses. However, it is also worth noting that the interplay between the micro and macro in this study takes place on the media stage. The impacts of micro-level interactions such as this interview are

incomplete without their insertion into the media and concomitant amplification in the public sphere. “Truth”, notes Foucault (1980, 131–132), “is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses,” of which he includes the media. The ability to insert one’s voice and perspective into this apparatus not only relies on the power of language, but the systems of power that spread that language in what Bourdieu (1998, 23) dubs the “circular circulation of information.” In other words, the media play an obvious role in the way micro-level discourse feeds into and plays off of macro-level discourses. While a close examination of the purely economic structures that underlie media discourse is beyond the scope of this study, it remains a factor in need of exploration for a broader understanding of the politics of “truth.”

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