

WATERBOARDING IS ONLY TORTURE IF JOHN MCCAIN SAYS SO

Time for another blogger ethics panel. Or maybe just a bloggers' style guide, one that states unequivocally that waterboarding is torture. Because—as Glenn reported earlier—the dead tree press only calls waterboarding torture when others do it. And they stopped referring to it as torture **as soon as** it became clear it had become US policy.

The results of this study demonstrate that there was a sudden, significant, shift in major print media's treatment of waterboarding at the beginning of the 21st century. The media's modern coverage of waterboarding did not begin in earnest until 2004, when the first stories about abuses at Abu Ghraib were released. After this point, articles most often used words such as "harsh" or "coercive" to describe waterboarding or simply gave the practice no treatment, rather than labeling it torture as they had done for the previous seven decades.

One of the most telling details from the study is the description of how newspapers admitted that waterboarding is torture without their omniscient editorial voice describing it as such: they quoted other people.

All four papers frequently balanced their use of softer treatment by quoting others calling waterboarding torture. Except for a brief spate of articles in 1902-1903 in the NY Times which quoted mostly military officials and senators, almost all of the articles that quote others calling it torture appeared in 2007 and 2008.

More telling still, newspapers barely began to do **that** until 2007, three years after they started talking about torture, and they most often relied on John McCain to state what—before it became clear the US engaged in such torture—their own pages had stated fairly consistently beforehand.

When quoting others who call waterboarding torture, there is a shift in who the LA Times and the NY Times quoted over time.

Before 2007, the NY Times had only scattered articles quoting others. However, beginning in 2007, there is a marked increase in articles quoting others, primarily human rights groups and lawmakers. Human rights representatives predominate during the first half of the year. However, beginning in October, politicians were cited more frequently labeling waterboarding torture. Senator John McCain is the most common source, but other lawmakers also begin to be cited. By 2008, the articles' references are more general such as "by many," or "many legal authorities." Stronger phrases such as "most of the civilized world" also begin to appear.

The dead tree press, apparently, couldn't find an expert they believed could adequately voice the long-standing consensus that waterboarding is torture—a consensus recorded in their own pages (at least those of LAT and NYT)—until after McCain started speaking out on the topic.

One more point. The study only examined the four papers with the greatest circulation: NYT, LAT (both of which had extensive archives the study measured for previous uses of torture), USA Today, and WSJ (which didn't have the same range of archives). So it did not include the WaPo in its study—the paper notorious for torture apology from both the newsroom and Fred Hiatt's

editorial page. So the numbers could be even worse!

What a remarkable measure of the cowardice of our press. And what a remarkable measure of how it happened that torture became acceptable. It's not just that the press failed in their job, but it's clear that's a big part of it.