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The American media and the Iraq war at its tenth anniversary: Lessons for the coverage of future wars

ABSTRACT

On the tenth anniversary of the Iraq War of 2003, most scholars agree that the war had serious consequences for the Middle East and the United States. Some journalists now believe that the war coverage constituted a 'mini-Alamo' for American journalism. Deficient war coverage damaged the reputation of the American media as a source of reliable news about the United States because of the way it covered the Bush administration's case for going to war, and the way it reported war's devastating effect on the Iraqi population. This study analyses how the Bush administration managed to get media compliance for its verbal and visual narrative of the war, thus co-opting American journalism (and by extension, that of other countries that relied on it). The study also illustrates how Arab historical master narratives disseminated by the frames introduced by Al Jazeera through its reporting from the scene challenged and sometimes foiled CENTCOM's narrative and its psychological operations. Finally, the study illustrates the role of cartoonists in culture-jamming the official narrative by publishing on the Internet, thus undermining the Bush administration's main Orwellian message that 'war is peace'. This study suggests that the examination of what went wrong for the media in Iraq provides a cautionary tale about the dangers of acting as government stenographers during wartime.

KEYWORDS

occupation of Iraq
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Michael Massing, describing how the press was starting to question the justifications for war in Iraq in 2004, said he was tempted to ask, 'where were you all before the war? Why didn't we learn more about these deceptions and concealments in the months when the administration was pressing its case for regime change – when, in short, it might have made a difference?' He then went on to illustrate how enterprising journalists who did not follow the official line had their stories relegated to the back pages, if published at all. Those who tried to publish stories on what one intelligence analyst called 'faith-based intelligence' did not make the first page. For instance, C. J. Chivers's story that Kurdish officials in northern Iraq were puzzled by Powell's claims of a poison-making facility in the area was published on page A22. A Joby Warrick story, which raised questions in the *Washington Post* about Powell's claims regarding the aluminum tubes, was relegated to page A29 (Massing 2004). So, yes, what happened to the press? This study attempts to answer that question by describing how the Bush Administration successfully managed the press, neutralizing its important role in peace and war.

The website and film, 'How did the U.S. government lead its people to war?' listed ten false assurances spun by the Bush administration to convince the American public that the war was necessary for the security of the United States; among them are the following: that it was noble in its desire to improve the lives of people in the Middle East, that the administration had planned well for it, that its execution would be relatively easy and that the results would transform not only Iraq, but the whole region. None of those claims turned out to be true except for the last one: The war did transform the Middle East, but not in the way the Bush administration had intended (Leading to War n.d.). Ten years after the start of the invasion, the verdict on the war is harsh. Lara Jakes concluded that 'Baghdad's streets are still cowed by near-daily deadly bombings. A quarter of the country's 31 million population lives in poverty, and few have reliable electricity and clean water'. In other words, 'Ten years and \$60 billion in American taxpayer funds later, Iraq is still so unstable and broken that even its leaders question whether U.S. efforts to rebuild the war-torn nation were worth the cost' (Jakes 2013). The British military officials who participated in the war severely criticized its conduct, and had choice names for Rumsfeld (Norton-Taylor 2013). By 2006, retired American generals started to talk about the Iraq War. Retired Lt. Gen. William Odom said that the invasion of Iraq 'might be the worst strategic mistake in American history' (Solaro 2006). So now that the ten-years' verdict is in, it is useful to review what happened shortly before the war started, and how journalists responded to the administration's explanations for the urgent need to invade Iraq.

UNHEEDED WARNINGS AGAINST GOING TO WAR

On 15 February 2003, 'over 8 million people marched on five continents to express their dissent' to no avail (Couldry and Downey 2004: 266). Many Arab leaders and world leaders warned against the war before it even started. Pope John Paul II decried the need for Gulf Wars I and II (Zwick and Zwick 2007: 355). On 15 August 2002, Brent Snowcroft, national security advisor under US presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush urged against attacking Iraq in an opinion piece published in the *Wall Street Journal* under the title, 'Don't Attack Saddam'. On 6 September 2002, Amr Musa, head of the Arab League, said after a two-day meeting of Arab foreign ministers, 'We

will continue to work to avoid a military confrontation or a military action, because we believe that it will open the gates of hell in the Middle East'. On 29 July 2002, even Washington's friend, King Abdullah of Jordan, warned that 'military action against Iraq would really open Pandora's Box and destabilize American strategic interests even more in the Middle East' (Leading to War n.d.). But the Bush administration chose to ignore those warnings. Even worse, he excluded from the decision-making process '[e]very [American] military and civilian professional with actual current cultural and military knowledge of the Middle East' and, instead, relied on 'that inner decision-making circle' [of neo-cons] who prepared 'talking points explaining to the unwashed how the upcoming invasion of Iraq was liberation for humanity and democracy not a territorial and economic expansion of American-and by extension, Israeli-influence in the region', as Lt. Col Karen Kwiatkowski, USAF (ret.), wryly explained (Kwiatkowski 2007: 199).

After describing the 'information environment' in the United States before the war, I describe the verbal and visual rhetoric the administration used to justify the invasion of Iraq, then explain why American journalists did not perform the role expected of them as the 'Fourth Estate'.

THE CONTEXT OF THE IRAQ WAR ENVIRONMENT THAT PREVENTED JOURNALISTS FROM DOING THEIR JOBS

The domestic US environment

Post-September 11 journalism reflected a number of ideological assumptions: Those who did not rally around the flag, and those who questioned the role the United States played in the Middle East, were apologists to the enemy, and that despite rhetoric of tolerance towards Muslims, the demonization of the Muslim world in which the American press indulged over recent decades had been vindicated (Navasky 2012). This type of coverage spilled over from 9/11 to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The reasons for the constraints imposed on independent inquiry are many, but a few are worth mentioning. 'In times of trauma', says Michael Schudson, 'not only are the mainstream media not in fact as objective as they claim to be, but also they tend to internalize the official line'. Schudson listed 'three conditions under which dissent and the ideal of objectivity are suspended: Tragedy, danger, and a threat to national security' (Navasky 2012: xxi). And 'the Bush administration used its post-9/11 political capital to smuggle its pre-existing anti-Saddam Hussein agenda to the fore', according to Samantha Power, then professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard (Power 2007). From that point on, those who waged war 'equated Iraq its 20 million people and vast resources with one individual' (Ismael and Haddad 2004: 3).

More than 3000 correspondents were covering the War on Iraq (Bromley 2004), yet they were so heavily dependent on official sources that they might as well have stayed home. An analysis of the early articles published in Great Britain, revealed the 'limited range of interpretive sources that were treated as credible. All newspapers reported extensive quotations from official speeches by US and UK politicians, the obvious 'primary definers' in the buildup to the war (Couldry and Downey 2004: 275). The Spanish press used official US and UK sources, and followed their editorial lead, despite the fact that the Spanish population was solidly against the war (Paz and Aviles 2009). The Australian media also was hampered by its ownership profile. The 175 newspapers

owned by Rupert Murdoch, including seven of the twelve national and metro dailies in Australia, 'espoused editorially his personal support for the invasion of Iraq' (Bromley 2004: 227). And just as troubling was the way the press in the United Kingdom as well as the United States 'naturalized certain frameworks of interpretation of great relevance to the official US/UK position on events' (Coudry and Downey 2004: 277).

Another factor that shaped coverage was that 'American journalism has been Foxified essentially, especially television,' as former CNN Vice President Sesno put it. He explained, 'the overall presumption in America that the media have leaned terrifically left, have made it harder for tough questions to be asked' (Smolkin 2003).

THE SHADOWS OF VIETNAM AND 9/11

Andrew Bachevich, now professor of history and international relations at Boston University, who had previously taught at West Point and served for 23 years in the US Army, retiring with the rank of colonel, notes that the older generation of generals who were fighting the 2003 Iraq War were haunted by what transpired in Vietnam, and wanted 'to reverse the verdict of Vietnam. More specifically, they have sought to purge war of politics, reconstituting the conception of war as the exclusive province of military professionals' (Bachevich 2004). But the way they went about waging war in Iraq was harmful because of their refusal to pay attention to the master narratives of the Middle East, to its history, culture and previous relation to the West. That was exactly what many journalists did. In the next segment, I describe the textual strategies the Bush administration used either to gain the assent of journalists, or to silence them in its march to war.

THE NAMING OF THE IRAQ WAR

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, noted that the most important acts of judgment that a leader has to make is to establish 'the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature' (Bernardi et al. 2012). The names various countries and entities chose to call the Iraq War speak volumes about their state of mind. The Bush administration called its war, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. The repetition, combined with the visual quality added by television networks, was effective (Gardiner 2007: 613) in stirring nationalism. In contrast, most TV stations in the Arab world called the war, 'The Invasion of Iraq'. Instead of fluttering American flags, the Arab media showed battle scenes and Iraqi civilians in distress. The American and British war planners characterized the invasion as an 'armed conflict', rather than the full-blown war it was, and called the Iraqi government 'a regime'. Iraqi irregular troops became 'the terrorist death squads' as part of the 'big lie' to tie them to 9/11 (Gardiner 2007: 613, 616).

If war is merely some *thing* that exists independently in the world or some natural *state of being*, then killing is transformed from an acted (and therefore agent-requiring) process into a static (and therefore agentless) object – and, as result, violence and war are naturalized.

(Boaz 2005)

Thus, the language describing the war followed the logic of the war: Troops '[a]re being deployed', a weapon 'was tested' and '[s]ome of the batteries are

reported to be moving with troops toward the front lines'. What journalists did not ask, says Boaz, is 'Who deployed the troops, who tested the "bunker buster"? Who used F-16 to attack airfields? Jets (with technical names) drop bombs, not people'. 'Who piloted them? What happened after the bombs were dropped?' (Boaz 2005). Those questions were not asked or answered except by Al Jazeera, as this study later illustrates. The tactical use of passivizations, which made the agents behind violent actions disappear from view, effectively relieved the unnamed actors of moral obligation or responsibility.' (Haridakis, Hugenberg and Wearden 2009: 196–97). Furthermore, Iraqis fell under the category of victims that were not grievable (Butler 2010).

THE VERBAL MANAGEMENT OF THE WAR: MISUSE OF LANGUAGE, OR 'WAR IS PEACE'

'If war is to be opposed', says Judith Butler, 'we have to understand how popular assent to war is cultivated and maintained, in other words, how war waging acts upon the senses so that war is thought to be' something good, or even 'a source of moral satisfaction' (Butler 2010: ix).

The Bush administration was heavily engaged in framing the war long before it started. As early as August 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) that 'President Bush has often spoken of how America can keep the **peace** by redefining war on our terms'. On 21 March 2002, President Bush said, 'We understand history has called us into action. And we're not going to miss this opportunity to make the world more **peaceful** and more **free**'. And on 27 September, President Bush declared, 'If you want to keep the **peace**, you've got to have the authorization to use force' (Purdum and Bumiller 2002). On 26 February 2003, the president noted that 'America's interests in security and America's belief in **liberty**, both lead in the same direction: to a **free** and **peaceful** Iraq'. Bush promised that 'America will seize every opportunity in pursuit of **peace**, and the end of the present regime in Iraq would create such an opportunity' (American Enterprise Institute 2003). He was not content with making promises only for Iraq but said that the United States 'will make this an age of progress and liberty. **Free** people will set the course of history, and **free** people will keep the **peace** of the world'. Even as he had prepared for war, President Bush in a White House Press Conference on 6 March 2003 used the word 'peace' eighteen times (Leading to War n.d). For example, on that same day, just thirteen days before he officially declared war, the president, in a speech of no more than 575 words, managed to mention 'peace' three times, 'freedom' twice, 'to free' once, 'to defend' three times and 'defense' once. After Army Captain Russell Burgos returned from the occupation of Iraq, he told the *Washington Post*, 'The "peace" has been bloodier than the war' (Kwiatkowski 2007: 199).

LINKING IRAQ WITH AL-QAEDA AND SUGGESTING IRAQ WAS A DANGER TO THE UNITED STATES

The president and other government officials deployed the rhetorical strategy of invoking the memory of 9/11 just before talking about the dangers posed by Iraq. Senior Bush officials would often utter 'al-Qaeda', 'terrorists' or '9/11' in the same sentence as 'Saddam Hussein' or 'Iraq' – tying them together by implication. For example, two weeks before the war started, he invoked 9/11 and al-Qaeda at least a dozen times. Invoking fear was the order of the day.

For example, on 8 September 2002, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice warned on CNN, 'We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud' (Bernardi et al. 2012: 79). Some in the military did their part in warning about the dangers of inaction, which, according to General Tommy Franks, head of the US Central Command, might lead to 'the sight of the first mushroom cloud on one of the major population centers on this planet' (Bernardi et al. 2012: 79). The prevailing wisdom took for granted that war should exist and that any attempt to discuss it or stop it was not only unpatriotic but endangered American security.

TAINTING THE EXPERT POOL IN CHARGE OF WAR COMMENTARY

A study of two weeks of US media pre-war coverage concluded that the networks were 'megaphones for official views' in which 26 per cent of all sources were current or former officials, leaving little room for independent and grass-roots views.

At a time when 61 percent of US respondents were telling pollsters that more time was needed for diplomacy and inspections, only 6 percent of US sources on the four networks were skeptics regarding the need for war. Sources affiliated with anti-war activism were nearly non-existent (less than 1%).

(Artz and Kamalipour 2004: 200–01)

Once the war started, the official source pool of 'experts' was drawn almost entirely from the establishment and the military intelligence community, without any regard to self-interest that may be at play (McChesney: 97).

THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE WAR: THE 'THEATRE' OF WAR

'Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war', says Judith Butler, 'delimit public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself-including what can be seen and what can be heard'. When that happens, one should ask whether these limitations to what is visible or audible 'serve as a precondition of war waging, one facilitated by cameras and other technologies of communication' (Butler 2010: xi and xii). Some management by the military appears to have been designed to make journalists feel close to events, even though they were far away, while others deliberately blocked their view, by 'disappearing' the dead and wounded on both sides of the war.

The most important managing of the visuals of war started with the Qatar Media Center sets in which journalists assembled to hear the news, instead of getting it themselves. According to *Army Times*, the military media centre, designed by Hollywood art director George Allison, is a high-tech stage set covering around 17,000 square feet. The set, while giving the impression of proximity, is constituted for journalists working at distance from the actual hostilities' (Lewis 2005: 153–54). That set cost taxpayers \$1.5 million (O'Huallachain and Sharpe: 597).

The second major media set was a US aircraft carrier, the Abraham Lincoln. On 1 May 2003, Bush, dressed in a naval flight suit, was flown out to the carrier to declare the end of hostilities (Lewis 2005: 153–54). While deployment of propaganda processes is nothing new, 'the corporatization and branding model clearly acknowledg[es] the transformation of democracy and the public sphere into a media sphere' (Lewis 2005: 153). It is only natural that

the army had to turn to Hollywood for help because war was turned into a form of bloodless entertainment.

Stahl observes that the shift to the interactive war 'is ultimately an exercise in describing changes in the construction of the citizen subject', because, in a democratic society, citizens have a say in the approval and authorization of war (Stahl 2010: 4). Warlike video games have proliferated in the United States since 9/11. Huntemann (2003) finds 'that newer video games tend to emphasize "covert-ops", undertaken secretly, without international sanction, and with no moral or ethical questioning'. In such games, no questions are asked about why terrorists do what they do, and no limits are placed on 'neutralizing' them (Biernatzki 2003). Furthermore, the American military have produced or adapted video games for training purposes, including 'Doom', which had been a favourite game of the two students who shot and killed their classmates at Columbine (Perse 2001: 199). And not coincidentally in 2003, the word 'militainment' defined as 'entertainment with military themes in which the Department of Defense is celebrated' entered the public lexicon (Stahl 2010: 6). It is no accident that the same companies that carried out corporate energy policy overseas were responsible for 'conditioning the home front citizen. In this milieu, the terms 'military-industrial complex', 'military-industrial-media-entertainment networks', the 'military information-entertainment complex' and others are used to describe broad changes in the 1980s and 1990s that drew mass media into alliance with military interests. So those trends 'challenged the meaningfulness of the active, legislative citizen, cultivating instead a citizen-spectator fed directly from executive branch public relations. Under these conditions, 'war' took place as much on the screen of public perception as in the battlefield. Such structural changes resulted in three types of rhetorics, or three foundational tropes: clean war, technofetishism and support-the-troops (Stahl 2010: 25).

THE CLEAN WAR

To have a clean war, one must remove the viewer from the carnage of war 'to maximize the war's capacity to be consumed' (Stahl 2010: 25). This type of war has unsurpassed power to keep death out of sight. Der Derian worries that in such a simulation of war, 'one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it. In virtuous war we now face not just the confusion but the pixilation of war and game on the same screen' (Der Derian 2001: xvi).

The clean war seeks to 'disarm,' the citizen because the 'disappearance of death' neutralizes the citizen's moral culpability in the decision to unleash state violence. Amidst the glow of the clean war, the citizen-spectator, like the pooled journalist, realizes that the process involves death. Such knowledge becomes immaterial, however, once death itself becomes unreal.

(Stahl 210: 27)

TECHNOFETISCHISM

Der Derian discusses the concept of a 'virtuous war' which is the end product of a new alliance of the military-industrial-media-entertainment network. He finds that it is characterized by the production of a new configuration

of power in which ‘made-for-TV wars and Hollywood war movies blur, military war games and computer video games blend, mock disasters and real accidents collide’ (Der Derian 2001: xi). At the heart of what Der Derian calls ‘the fifth dimension of U.S. global hegemony’ is the ability through technological superiority ‘and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance-*with no or minimal casualties*’. Such a war ‘cleans up the political discourse as well as the battlefield’ because it appears bloodless, and hygienic. ‘Such wars have few casualties on the American side, compared to the casualties of the other side that we choose not to tabulate’ (Der Derian 2001: xv).

SUPPORTING THE TROOPS: EMBEDDING AND IDENTIFICATION

American generals objected strenuously to the airing of any material that may affect the morale of the US troops. In the US media, photos of death were kept at bay, and the military unsuccessfully tried to pressure other international networks to follow suit. For example, General John Abi Zaid objected on 23 March to Al Jazeera’s airing of pictures of US prisoners, describing it as ‘disgusting’ (Ayish 2006: 140) at a time when US TV was showing Iraqi captives with bags on their heads and showing US soldiers humiliating Iraqis inside and outside their homes.

In reporting, the skillful use ‘of the ambiguous pronoun *we*, creates the impression of inclusion and solidarity necessary for successful recruitment of an audience to a speaker’s or writer’s cause’. But the best way of drawing assent to the war is involving citizens in supporting the troops the way they were not supported in the Vietnam War. The Pentagon appreciates the fact that ‘many people – the ‘accidentally attentive public’ – don’t regularly read newspapers or watch television news, but receive information through feature-led ‘soft news’ formats such as talk shows and lifestyle magazines (Baum 2003; Purdum and Rutenberg 2003, in Carruthers 2011: 228). And nothing warms the heart as much as stories about the bravery of the troops, and the hardships they face while away from their families. The embedding of 600 reporters with the troops ensured that those reporters were sympathetic to the subjects with whom they shared those hardships. Furthermore, when their country is at war, many citizens demand that war stories are presented exclusively from their own side’s point of view. So discussion is circumscribed in name of ‘supporting the troops’. As Major Tim Blair, Media Operations, Department of Defense, explained, embedding teaches the media to understand ‘military speak’ and the hardships of military life; it teaches the troops more about how the media function, and it provides the American public with a bird’s-eye view of the ‘trials and tribulations’ military personnel go through as they perform their duties’ (Sylvester and Huffman 2003: 59).

‘YOU’RE WITH US OR AGAINST US’

Bush administration officials would state that ‘you’re either with us or with the enemy.’ This ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy created an atmosphere ‘where people, including many journalists and elected officials – were reluctant to challenge the administration’s arguments for war, for fear of being seen as unpatriotic’ (Crowley 2003). In the next segment, I explain how those three tropes described above affected war coverage.

THE 6 MARCH 2003 BUSH PRESS CONFERENCE: 'THE MINI-ALAMO OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM'

Schechter wonders how the watchdog became a lap dog, and then answers his own question by noting that the administration 'worked hard- and with the connivance and complicity of many in the media [...] to transform the historic concept of the "Fourth Estate" into what commander Tommy Franks called a "fourth front" in his war plan' (Schechter 2006: x). The view that the media had abdicated their responsibility in discussing Iraq before the war started and in its early stages was also addressed by several scholarly books. Their conclusion: 'the American media failed to ask the tough questions of an Administration that seemed determined to go to war' (Dadge 2006: 1). Furthermore, scholarly inquiry united in its charge that mainstream press coverage in the United States, at the very least, 'suffere[d] from a lack of balance and context required for comprehension of the most serious of political issues, [leaving] Americans confused about the reasons for invading Iraq and unable to offer informed consent in response to the current occupation' (Fraley 2007: 43-44, in Haridakis, Hugenberg and Wearden 2009). Some journalists challenged the president, but they were not many.

Terry Moran, White House correspondent for ABC News, told President Bush at that press conference that his

policy on Iraq has generated opposition from the governments of France, Russia, China, Germany, Turkey, the Arab League and many other countries, opened a rift at NATO and at the U.N. and drawn millions of ordinary citizens around the world into the streets into anti-war protests.

Moran wanted to know 'what went wrong that so many governments and peoples around the world now not only disagree with you very strongly, but see the U.S. under your leadership as an arrogant power?' Bush deflected the question by noting other occasions where allies agreed with the United States, namely, on the UN vote.

That exchange was important because some saw it as indicative of how the Bush administration has cowed the American press. Bush began his remarks about 'our war against terror' and claimed that Saddam Hussein 'possesses weapons of terror' and that he and his weapons 'are a direct threat to this country', with no questioning of the accuracy of those statements. Afterwards, the *New York Observer's* Michael Crowley penned a piece titled, 'Bush Eats the Press'. Moran said that President Bush's hyper-management left the press corps 'looking like zombies' (Crowley 2003). Letters posted on Poynter's Romenesko Weblog described the news conference as a 'sorry spectacle'. One observed that 'the pack appears to have been totally domesticated'. Bush himself acknowledged that the event was 'scripted' when he called on CNN's John King from a predetermined list of reporters (Smolkin 2003). To be sure some reporters rose to the occasion before the war started, but their reports were not given priority. For example, when on 17 March President Bush ordered President Saddam Hussein to leave within 48 hours or face invasion, the *Washington Post* national security reporter Walter Pincus and White House correspondent Dana Milbank wrote that the administration was preparing to attack Iraq based on a number of allegations 'that have been challenged – and in some cases disproved – by the United Nations, European governments and

even U.S. intelligence reports'. Among the evidence 'refuted by subsequent discoveries' was Bush's assertion that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium. Yet, the story, headlined 'Bush Clings To Dubious Allegations About Iraq', was buried on page A13, while coverage of Bush's ultimatum appeared on the front page – but it was one of the few stories to challenge the administration's evidence at the outset of war (Smolkin 2003). In May 2003, Dana Milbank, the White House correspondent for *The Washington Post*, told an audience at Yale that 'about 40 percent of the Washington Post newsroom [...] is now taking some form of antidepressant', which he called the 'Prozac Newsroom' (Hagan 2004). Former CNN Vice President Sesno did not find the broadcast media to be 'sufficiently rigorous.' There was not sufficient discussion as to why several nations did not think the administration's case was strong. Sesno himself was told by a network producer that 'there were not more international voices put on the air because it would have been a ratings killer' (Smolkin 2003). In fact, many journalists have tried to 'outfox Fox', while others 'self-censored for fear of being attacked as apologists for terrorism' (Schechter 2006: xi).

In a critique of the press going along with names suggested by the military, De Grand Pré, a retired colonel, gave the example of *The Christian Science Monitor's* agony over what to call the Iraqi resistance. The term 'Guerilla' was rejected because it took on the shades of Che Guevara; the term 'rebel' was rejected because it was too politically radical; the term 'resistance' was considered, but was also rejected because 'positive association with the French Resistance during World War II make it too positive a term'. The Monitor settled on the word 'insurgents' and considered it neutral. De Grand Pré was mystified by that choice of words, 'as if the spilling of blood and brains could be written in neutral terms' (De Grand Pré 2007: 688–89). On the same subject, Norman Solomon chided the media for their dishonest portrayal of the Iraqis fighting the occupation by asking: 'when is an Iraqi *not* an Iraqi? When he is actively fighting the American occupation' (Solomon 2004, in De Grand Pré 2007: 689). *New York Press* contributing writer Matt Taibbi compared the press conference to 'a mini-Alamo for American journalism, a final announcement that the press no longer performs anything akin to a real function' (Smolkin 2003).

THE ARAB MEDIA ENVIRONMENT THAT AFFECTED THE FOREIGN AND THE DOMESTIC OPINIONS ON THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

The changes in the media landscape in the Middle East and North Africa make the media almost unrecognizable from what they were only a decade ago. Many media organizations have embraced new technology, challenged sole government ownership of all means of communication, reduced their reliance on western news agencies and diversified their content (Najjar 2008). Among the most important factors that affected the coverage of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was the establishment of Al Jazeera in 1996, and its extensive reach by 2003, when the Iraq war started. The changes introduced by Al Jazeera and other TV stations are as follows:

- 1) They created a vibrant inter-regional pan-Arab news space Arabs never had before the advent of satellites. Khaled Youssef, a young Egyptian, told *Al-Ahram* newspaper reporter that 'Arabs need their own versions of CNN and Fox News. They need pro-Arab coverage highlighting the

fact that what is going on is a brutal and unjustified invasion of an Arab country' (Shahine 2003).

- 2) They forced the US government to take account of Arab and Islamic public opinion, after years of stubborn reliance solely on the opinion of Arab rulers.
- 3) They weaned Arabs from their reliance on western television and CNN for news about themselves, thus, reversing the direction of news transmission that used to go only from West to East and from North to South. The phenomenon may be seen in what Jeremy Tunstall titled two books he penned eight years apart. He called the first edition *Media are American* (1979) and the second *The Media were American: U.S. Media in Decline* (2007).

Nothing has changed the content and tone of news on the Middle East more than the change in the way news is gathered, and the sources from which it is received. Al Jazeera had eight television crews covering the war in Iraq. Its reporters were all over Iraq, instead of being holed up in hotels, or in the halls of CENTCOM. In this war, however, Arab media played a huge role in neutralizing US government's framing of the war and rendered some psychological operations dead on arrival. For example, on 21 and 22 March 2003 when US forces transmitted false information that the entire 51st Division of the Iraqi army, numbering 8000, had surrendered, Al Jazeera interviewed Colonel Khaled al-Hashemi, commander of the 51st Mechanized Division, who said that he would continue 'to defend our sacred places and our honor' (Free Republic Browse 2003). Al Jazeera was watched by about 35 million viewers in 2005. Aljazeera.net, the online version, which was launched in January 2001, received more than 811 million impressions and 161 million visits, placing it amongst the most visited sites worldwide (Ayish 2006: 130). Basing his study on the analysis of 170 Arabic news stories carried by Aljazeera.net during the period from 17 March to 9 April 2003, Ayish illustrated how war developments were framed as an act of drama in which the American Goliath fights with the Arab David. Al Jazeera called the war 'the invasion of Iraq' by 'Anglo-American invaders', it was a war launched by 'aggressors' and the Iraqis were engaged in 'gallant resistance' (Ayish 2006: 126–49). Chambliss told Chris Matthews that the Republican Guard was being attacked 'in a very surgical manner, and at the same time, not destroying civilian sites. We're not destroying a lot of the history of that country, and I think their folks are doing extremely well with a minimum of casualties' (Stauber and Rampton 2007: 596). In contrast, Al Jazeera was showing images of destroyed buildings, dead civilians, and distraught Iraqi mothers and. A study that investigated the wording used to relay the same news illustrates the differences among three networks (Barkho 2010: 78–79).

2 SEPTEMBER 2004

CNN: US strikes insurgency safe houses in Falluja

A US air strike targeted two safe houses used by followers of reputed terror mastermind Abu Musab al-Zarkawi in Falluja, US officials said.

BBC: At least seventeen die in Falluja raid

At least seventeen Iraqis have died in a US air strike on the city of Falluja, hospital officials have said. US officials say the strike was a deliberate 'precision' attack aimed at followers of the wanted militant Abu Musab al-Zarkawi.

Al Jazeera: American raid kills eighteen in Falluja

At least eighteen people, among them three children, were killed in an American air raid targeting two houses in the residential district of al-Jubail in Falluja, west of Baghdad (Barkho 2010: 78–79).

Arab audiences were not the only ones to distrust US government pronouncements; a BBC poll showed that the rest of the world does not believe that the United States was careful to prevent civilian casualties, despite that being a major theme in almost every CENTCOM and OSD briefing (Gardiner 2007: 635, 606, 607). Furthermore, the administration has hired companies to plant news in the Iraqi media (Schmidt 2005), making it hard to determine the real from the spin.

WHO WATCHES AL JAZEERA? AL JAZEERA FOR ALTERNATIVE FRAMING

A study showed a tendency among western Internet users to turn to Al Jazeera's English website in order to complete the picture depicted to them by their own mainstream media. They felt the need to contextualize all media stories and disrupt 'conventional media "framing" through the wide variety of "voices" and opinions available online'. Alternative websites and, to a lesser extent, blogs and unaffiliated websites 'use Al Jazeera because they are searching for credible alternative news sources due to dissatisfaction with the mainstream media' (Berenger 2006: 112–13). Although Al Jazeera was attacked for showing photos of captive and dead American soldiers as well as dead Iraqi civilians, the station's Washington Bureau Chief Hafez Mirazi defended realism in the depiction of war:

If you are in a war, your population shouldn't just eat their dinner and watch sanitized images on TV and video games produced by the technological whizzes in the Pentagon and say, "This is war." No. You really need to show every family what your men and women are going through.

(Kolodzy and Ricks 2003)

The station posed a serious challenge for the management and control of the war message and images by the Bush administration. In Al Jazeera, says Ayish (2006), 'over 25% of published photos were of Iraqi cities immersed in inferno and devastation' especially of the disruption of services like water, medical centres and transportation facilities. The headlines provided after such raids were stark: for example, on 23 March 2003, AlJazeera.net's headline was: '50 Iraqi civilians in Basra in British air raids on residential targets' (Ayish 2006: 137). The more liberal websites, the alternative news media and blogs were willing to use English.aljazeera.net reports and considered it a credible source, rather than a mouthpiece of Osama Bin Laden, just because it broadcast his speeches after 9/11 (Arzan 2006: 111). As a result of being unable to censor Al Jazeera, even after they bombed it, several US government agencies reported on Al Jazeera (de Franco 2012: 156) and pressured the rulers of Qatar to tone down its reporting.

CULTURE-JAMMERS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Alternative media and culture-jammers showed that there was another way of looking at the war and the Middle East. One cartoonist whose cartoons were the most daring for the way they characterized the invasion from the



Figure 1: This cartoon mocks US claims of waging war in the name of peace (Source: Carlos Latuff).



Figure 2: The cartoon Carlos Latuff drew after the 14 December 2008 press conference in which Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw a shoe at President George Bush (Source: Carlos Latuff, courtesy of the cartoonist).

very beginning was Brazilian artist Carlos Latuff, who published his cartoons on the web. Thus, the cartoons provided a counter-narrative to 'precision bombing', 'war without war' and 'war without blood'. War, according to this narrative, is not a video game, and technofetishism is not to be celebrated, but exposed.

Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty listed the shoe episode among the icons of the Iraq War (Synovitz 2013).

WHY DID THE UNITED STATES' MASTER NARRATIVE 'WAR IS PEACE' FAIL?

The master narrative of the United States is that it is a source of good in the world. Even when it invades countries, the narrative insists it is with good intentions. Master narratives are defined as

systems or stories that circulate across historical and cultural boundaries and express a desire to resolve archetypal conflicts through established literary and historical forms. Because they are deeply embedded within a particular culture and because they are repeated in labyrinth of cultural texts and contexts, master narratives are particularly powerful systems shaping opinions perspectives, and ideological leanings.

(Bernardi et al. 2012: 87)

In the Middle East,

master narratives include invasions by the Crusaders or the Tartars; stories of martyrdom, such as the Battle of Karbala; a narrative conveying



Figure 3: This cartoon mocks US claims of waging war in the name of peace (Source: Carlos Latuff, Wikimedia Commons).

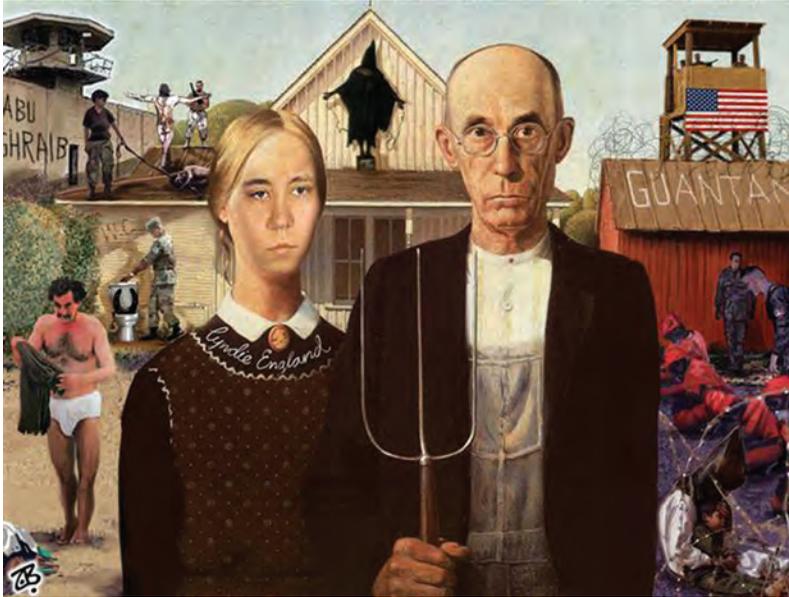


Figure 4: Emad Hajjaj summarizes US human rights abuses in a cartoon that parodies 'American Gothic' By Robert Wood (Source: Courtesy of Emad Hajjaj).

a reversion to primitive pagan barbarism called the jahiliyyah; as well as a narrative of pious opposition to an exploitive tyrant: The Pharaoh.

(Bernardi et al. 2012: 88)

Add to that narrative suspicion of the United Kingdom, which had previously occupied Iraq under false pretenses, and you have a master narrative that is hard to crack. Iraqis knew that the US insinuations that their country perpetuated 9/11 or that they harbored Muslim extremists were not true. The combination of the West's colonial past with the occupation of Iraq made winning 'hearts and minds' impossible. Thus, 'the U.S. forces filled the archetypal villain role previously played by Crusaders, Mongols, and early twentieth-century colonialists' (Bernardi et al. 2012: 82, 84–85). As a result, the invasion as 'liberation' and war as 'peace' failed to work under that narrative umbrella. Culture-jammers like cartoonist Emad Hajjaj, in memorable cartoons, took advantage of the contradictions between what the United States says it stands for and how its troops behave, one of which summed up the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib with a parody of Robert Wood's painting experiences.

CONCLUSION

The review of the media above shows that they have failed to investigate claims about why Iraq needed to be invaded, before the war started, when it really counted. They not only failed to fend against the onslaught of PR and official spin, but actively spread it. The mainstream media failed to consult experts (outside the military) on the effect of the war on the region and convey that information to the American public. And, by the time the media became self-critical about the war and their reporting of it in 2004 and 2005, American soldiers were in the quagmire of an unwinnable war. The only silver lining is

that ten years after the United States and its allies invaded Iraq the majority of Americans answering a Gallup Poll consider the war a mistake. Fifty-three per cent of Americans believe their country 'made a mistake sending troops to fight in Iraq' and 42 per cent say it was not a mistake; down from the high point of 63 per cent in April 2008 (Dugan 2013). Some journalists are looking back and rethinking their positions in 2003. On the tenth anniversary of the war, David Ignatius, who covered Iraq for the *Washington Post*, apologized to his readers 'for being wrong on the overriding question of whether the war made sense'. He characterized invading Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein as 'one of the biggest strategic errors in modern American history'. But even more important for American journalism. Ignatius realized 'the importance of dignity in the Arab world'. Even Iraqis who despised Saddam because he had taken their dignity,

came to loathe America, as well, because for all our talk of democracy, we damaged their sense of honor and independence. As the Arab world proves over and over, from Palestine to Benghazi, people who are penniless in terms of material possessions would rather die than lose their sense of honor to outsiders.

(Ignatius 2013)

And if that is the only lesson learned from the Iraq adventure, journalism will be in good shape in future wars.

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