jc2m
[journal for crime, conflict and the media]

Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media 1 (1) 23-36
ISSN 1741 1580

The Media War on Terrorism[1]

Philip Hammond
London South Bank University

As the history of war correspondence shows, journalists generally play a highly supportive role in wartime, often acting as little more than a conduit for official propaganda. During the 1999 Kosovo conflict, for example, the media offered enthusiastic support, with few questions asked – until months after the war – about the reasons for and results of NATO's 'humanitarian' bombing campaign (Hammond, 2000). As Phillip Knightley noted at the time, in the only UK newspaper to oppose the bombing, 'the media tend to believe everything the military tells them' (*Independent on Sunday*, 27 June 1999). In the war on terrorism, however, there have been some surprises, including robust condemnations of American imperialism in the mainstream UK media. Channel Four put 'America On Trial' in a special programme (22 February 2003), for instance, while the *Daily Mirror*, one of Britain's best-selling tabloids, published prominent articles by radical journalist John Pilger and featured anti-war posters and petitions. This article investigates this shift, discussing what it involves, and indicating the limits of media criticism.

Media Cynicism

The war on terrorism is a war of images. Just as the September 11 attacks were calculated not simply to wreak terrible destruction but to create a global media spectacle by targeting symbols of American prestige and power, so too the response of the US and UK governments has been highly image-conscious. Particularly in those aspects of the war on terrorism which have involved actual war fighting, producing the right image appears to be at least as important as any tangible results achieved on the ground. This emphasis on image is a response to the lack of any political vision which can inspire loyalty and enthusiasm. Yet it ultimately serves only to exacerbate the problem, encouraging distrust of coalition claims and cynicism about the purpose and objectives of the war.

During the invasion of Iraq 'embedded' reporters produced much dramatic real-time footage of the rapid coalition advance, but the military did not always command the loyalty of the journalists travelling with them. One embedded photographer working for the *New York Times Magazine*, for instance, gave an interview to *Le Monde* (12

[1] This article is based on a paper presented at the 'Communicating the War on Terror' conference, Department of Defence Studies, Kings College, University of London, 5-6 June 2003.

April 2003) in which he recounted numerous incidents of US Marines shooting civilians (Guerin, 2003). NBC correspondent Ashleigh Banfield noted that her own network had produced a 'glorious and wonderful picture that had a lot of people watching and a lot of advertisers excited….But it wasn't journalism' (Banfield, 2003). Of course, once conflicts are over reporters often reveal facts they were unable or unwilling to report at the time, and there are usually a few dissenting voices contesting the official line. Today, however, there seems to be a growing cynicism about attempts to spin the war on terrorism. When Air Marshal Brian Burridge, the commander of British forces in Iraq, complained about the media – 'You stand for nothing, you support nothing, you criticise, you drip. It's a spectator sport to criticise anybody or anything' – he accurately described at least some of the coverage of the Iraq intervention (*Telegraph*, 7 April 2003). In most cases it was not a question of outright opposition, nor even of sceptical and critical analysis, but a more insidious cynicism, characterised by a jaded suspicion of spin doctors and resentment at being used.

Rather than simply report events, journalists have often explicitly discussed them in terms of news management and image projection, such as when *Newsnight*'s Jeremy Paxman contrasted pictures of angry Iraqis protesting against the shooting of demonstrators with the day's 'intended message' delivered by Donald Rumsfeld (29 April 2003). Similarly, when reporting a missile strike on a Baghdad marketplace which killed 55 civilians, David Sells remarked that the coalition was 'once again confounding its own virtuous propaganda' (*Newsnight*, 28 March). In the same programme, Richard Watson noted that a ship delivering aid had been met by a 'reception party of journalists' who had been 'bussed in…by the military's press handlers', and observed that 'like many of the events of recent days laid on by they coalition, there was a very clear message they wanted to get across'. On a day when the most significant weapons find was a factory making bullets, David Shukman remarked pointedly that 'the Americans very deliberately drove captured Iraqi missiles past the media hotel in Baghdad' (BBC1, 17 April). In the *Guardian* Mark Borkowski asked 'Is it all a photo-op?', comparing the propaganda campaign to a 'corporate-style PR, advertising and marketing strategy' (27 March), and the paper ran a series of articles by Michael Wolff of *New York Magazine* describing the surreal atmosphere at the million-dollar Cent-Com compound in Doha, which was equipped with a media centre designed by a Hollywood art director. Wolff ridiculed the pretence that reporters were being given the 'big picture' at Doha, suggesting that:

> 'Eventually you realise that you know significantly less than when you arrived, and that you are losing more sense of the larger picture by the hour. At some point you will know nothing.' (31 March)

He described the briefings as a 'theatre of the absurd' in which journalists interviewed other journalists, and watched television news reports to find out what was going on (14 April).

The apogee was President George W. Bush's 1 May speech announcing 'the end of major combat operations', for which he co-piloted a fighter and strode around the

deck of an aircraft carrier wearing a military flight suit. The performance, which reportedly cost around $1million and delayed the return of the ship, was trailed for 24 hours in advance, and seemed to invite a cynical response. BBC reporters described it as 'carefully choreographed', 'stage-managed', 'made for American TV' and 'pure Hollywood', Bridget Kendall suggesting that the war had merely provided a 'useful prop' for Bush's re-election campaign (BBC Radio 4, 3 May; BBC1, 2 May 2003). Such coverage was not welcomed. At the start of the Iraq campaign, when the BBC went live to the Oval Office a few minutes early and showed Bush rehearsing his lines and having his hair done, the White House was reportedly furious, threatening a 'strong retaliatory response' (*Washington Post*, 20 March 2003). We have been invited to undertake rigorous analysis of Osama bin Laden's or Saddam Hussein's video appearances, but when it comes to coalition leaders we are not supposed to shatter the illusion. Yet political and military leaders have only themselves to blame for the media's cynicism, since it is they who have treated the war on terrorism as a war of images.

War As Image Production

Saddam's information minister, Mohammad Said al-Sahaf, became a figure of fun, inspiring both a website devoted to an ironic appreciation of his sayings, and a talking action figure. Al-Sahaf nevertheless had a point when he accused the coalition of producing misleading images:

> "This is an illusion...they are trying to sell to the others an illusion."
>
> "They are trying to fool you. They are showing any old pictures of buildings."
>
> "Some of their acts that took place at dawn yesterday and today are similar to what happened in *Wag the Dog*."
>
> "…they are pretending things which have never taken place…"[2]

Al-Sahaf's comments exposed the growing gap between his own rhetoric of victory and the certainty of his defeat. Yet in asserting the primacy of image over reality he was only trying, with more limited resources, to do precisely what the coalition did. It was telling, for example, that in his 1 May 'mission accomplished' speech Bush stopped short of declaring the conflict over. Instead, he emphasised the image, rather than the fact, of victory, claiming that: 'In the images of falling statues, we have witnessed the arrival of a new era'; and that: 'In the images of celebrating Iraqis, we have also seen the ageless appeal of human freedom'. The fact that, within a few months, more US soldiers had been killed since the end of 'major combat operations'

[2] See http://www.welovetheiraqiinformationminister.com/. The al-Sahaf action figure is available from http://www.herobuilders.com/

than had died during the invasion, suggests that Bush's priorities were similar to al-Sahaf's: achieving the impression of victory and liberation rather than the substance.[3]

Air Marshal Burridge accused the British media of turning the Iraq war into 'reality TV' and 'infotainment' (*Telegraph*, 7 April 2003). The charge seems a fair one for much reporting of the war on terrorism. Sky News reporter James Forlong resigned from his job and later committed suicide after it was revealed that he had faked a report from a submarine apparently firing a cruise missile in the Persian Gulf. In fact the submarine was in dock, the crew were rehearsing a drill, and the picture of the missile launch was library footage (*Guardian*, 17 July 2003). Yet although Forlong's falsification was treated as exceptionally unethical it was not so unusual. Vaughn Smith, a freelance photographer and cameraman who covered the Afghan war for the BBC, complained about the artificial nature of much of the coverage (*Guardian*, 26 April 2002). While journalists were confined to an area of the Panshir valley, ostensibly awaiting helicopter transport, in order to fill the hours of airtime they got the Northern Alliance to become actors, firing off rounds for the cameras in return for hard currency. In many instances, journalists were acting too: doing reports which were based, not on any actual newsgathering, but on press releases and agency stories which had been read to them down the satellite phone from studios in London or Washington prior to their live pieces to camera.

Notwithstanding Burridge's criticisms of the media, however, the military are usually more than willing to help reporters to spin a good yarn. One of the first actions of troops arriving in the port of Umm Qasr at the start of the Iraq conflict was to provide innumerable photo-opportunities with lovable dolphins, which seemed to have been deployed on both mine-clearance and heart-warming duties. The military were also happy to mobilise in support of media campaigns to help individual Iraqi children, such as Ali Abbas who had his arms blown off by the coalition missile which killed his family. Burridge complained that journalists wanted a 'Hollywood blockbuster', but as the *Telegraph*'s interviewer, Rachel Sylvester, pointed out: 'it was soldiers who named the battle for Basra Operation James Bond (complete with targets Pussy and Galore)'. The military have proved adept at producing their own infotainment in both Iraq and Afghanistan: the US Marines hired a film production company to help their efforts to make films of both conflicts. Though shot using high-definition digital video cameras, the style is reportedly a pastiche of 1940s Movietone newsreels (Glasner, 2003). The Royal Marine whose widely-reported 'miraculous escape' from death turned out to have been bogus – the bullet holes in his helmet were actually made by his fellow soldiers trying to detonate a mine, and he was not wearing the helmet at the time – was only getting into the spirit of the media war.[4]

[3] The *Washington Post* reported that of the 253 US troops killed by enemy fire in Iraq by the beginning of November 2003, 139 had died since 1 May http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A54882-2003Nov2.html . November 2003 then turned out to be the worst month so far, with a further 79 American deaths (Channel Four News, 1 December 2003).

[4] BBC Online, 'Exposed: Marine's "Miracle Escape" Rumbled', 15 April 2003 http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/2948747.stm

More significantly, the military sometimes seem to carry out operations specifically in order to film themselves. The US special forces who went into Kandahar in October 2001, for example, were essentially actors, staging a stunt and videotaping their exploits for the world's media. The operation was of dubious military value since, as Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* (5 November 2001), army pathfinders had already gone in beforehand to make sure the area was secure. Similarly, when US forces rescued Private Jessica Lynch from al-Nasiriyah they again took their video cameras, producing something so closely resembling fictional drama that Lynch's story immediately attracted interest from film studios. Two weeks after the rescue, Richard Lloyd-Parry revealed in the *Times* (16 April 2003) that it had not been 'the heroic Hollywood story told by the US military, but a staged operation that terrified patients and victimised the doctors who had struggled to save her life'. Like the Kandahar raid, it was of questionable military value. Local Baath Party officials and Iraqi troops had left the city the previous day, so the only available 'targets' were doctors and patients – including one who was paralysed and on an intravenous drip – who were handcuffed and interrogated by the soldiers. The reports that Lynch had been shot, stabbed and tortured were untrue. Indeed, the only reason she needed to be 'rescued' was that nervous troops had previously fired on an ambulance attempting to deliver her to an American checkpoint. As John Kampfner reported for *Correspondent* (BBC2, 18 May 2003), the Pentagon produced the Lynch story in the style of a TV series about US troops in Afghanistan, *Profiles from the Front Line*, which was dreamed up by Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer. It was therefore fitting that, when screening the videotape of the rescue for the press, US spokesman General Vincent Brooks began to echo the script of Bruckheimer's film *Black Hawk Down* (tagline: 'leave no man behind'), declaring that: 'Some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know that they'll never leave a fallen comrade.'

Individual reporters on the ground had a limited view of events – one complained that, despite seeing the action close up, 'I felt I missed the war because I hadn't seen it on TV' (*Guardian*, 30 June 2003). But perhaps this was the point: the system of 'embedded' reporting was designed to produce news coverage which was similar to the military's own productions. The Pentagon's Public Affairs guidance for the Iraq conflict said that the use of helmet-mounted cameras on combat sorties was 'approved and encouraged to the greatest extent possible'.[5] As Alan Knight suggests, this meant that 'the perspectives of reporters who still might see the stories as their own could become irrelevant, as the audience entered the immediate reality of the soldier'. The result was that coverage often bore 'a striking resemblance to live telecast of a major sporting event, with close ups of our team in action, running scores, retired players giving informed sideline commentaries and even tank cam' (Knight, 2003). The effect was not accidental. The BBC's Tim Franks recalled how he was told by one British commander that the military wanted a 'particular message delivered to particular audiences', and that the media were 'a tool, a weapon, a battle-winning

[5] The Public Affairs guidance is available at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~govdocs/docs/iraq/d20030228pag.pdf

asset'. Another officer told him: 'We are in the business of news management' (Franks, 2003).

If the military think in terms of 'news management', how much more so do their political masters. New Labour is synonymous with spin, taking the governmental use of public relations techniques to new heights (Fairclough, 2000). Similarly, Bush's presidency has been assiduously stage-managed, with a team of former media professionals employed by the White House to design backdrops and sets for speeches, plan camera angles and provide lighting (*New York Times*, 16 May 2003). Not surprisingly, given the character of the governments waging it, the conduct of the war on terrorism has been acutely image-conscious, fought with one eye on how it will look on TV. The doctrine of 'shock and awe', for example, is primarily conceived as an attempt to affect an enemy's 'will, understanding, and perception' (Ullman and Wade, 1996), yet it seemed that the spectacular *son et lumière* broadcast live from Baghdad was designed at least as much for domestic consumption. As Canadian psychologist Tana Dineen argued, the application of 'shock and awe' in Iraq was 'essentially a propaganda campaign' which 'had less to do with astonishing the enemy than it did with swaying the hearts and minds of the public back home' (Dineen, 2003).

There has been a corresponding nervousness about the 'wrong' image leaking out. Following the first al-Qaeda video release in October 2001, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice asked American television networks not to show bin Laden's messages live and unedited, and Secretary of State Colin Powell asked the Emir of Qatar to 'restrain' the Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera, which had aired the tape. During the bombing of Afghanistan the US and UK set up 'Coalition Information Centres' in Washington, London and Islamabad which, according to the *Washington Post* (1 November 2001), were tasked with refuting reports of civilian casualties, using press conferences, speeches and Internet reports timed to meet morning and evening news deadlines in different time zones. The US bought up all commercial satellite imagery of the region, bombed Afghan radio stations, and strictly controlled the movements of Western reporters in order to prevent information coming out of the country (Mahajan, 2002:87-89). The US also bombed al-Jazeera's offices in Kabul, and hackers tried to disable its English-language website. In Iraq, journalists again became targets: the coalition again bombed al-Jazeera, killing one of its journalists; opened fire on the Palestine Hotel which housed the international media, killing two Western journalists; and attacked the Baghdad offices of Abu Dhabi TV. Knightley (2003) argues that these attacks have been part of a deliberate attempt to deter reporting from the enemy side. Yet in an era of global information flows it is not easy to restrict unwanted images, and even these extreme measures did not prevent al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV from screening pictures of civilian casualties and captured US servicemen, nor from airing footage which exposed the falsehood of coalition claims about an 'uprising' in Basra (*Al-Jazeera Exclusive*, BBC2, 1 June 2003).

Perhaps the most telling example of perception management was the way that coalition forces in Iraq spent considerable time literally attacking enemy images. Troops encountered more difficulty than they had anticipated in securing control of towns, claiming to have 'taken' Umm Qasr no fewer than nine times before actually

gaining control, for example. Far easier, however, was to create the impression of control by rolling tanks and armoured vehicles over shrines to Saddam, painting over his murals, and ripping up his pictures. As Jonathan Glancey noted in the *Guardian* (10 April 2003), this was 'not…a knee-jerk reaction by angry soldiers….The photographs are too many, press coverage too knowing for that.' It may have proved difficult actually to kill Saddam, but it was possible to simulate it by defacing his image and pulling down his statues. US forces in Tikrit also hatched a cunning plan to root out 'Saddam loyalists' by putting up posters showing Saddam's face digitally superimposed on the bodies of Western stars such as Veronica Lake, Lauren Bacall and Elvis. A US officer explained that while most locals would laugh, 'the bad guys [would] be upset', thereby making them easier to identify (*Guardian*, 18 August 2003). This absurd scheme may have been impractical, but it revealed much about the coalition's preoccupation with images.

The culmination, of course, was the toppling a statue of Saddam in Baghdad on 9 April 2003. Most Western journalists obligingly hailed this obvious media stunt as a 'historic' moment'. BBC reporters enthused that it was a 'momentous event', 'a vindication of the strategy' of the coalition, proving that 'This war has been a major success'. The BBC's political editor, Andrew Marr, said Blair had been 'proved conclusively right' and that he was 'a larger man and a stronger prime minister as a result'.[6] Yet even this image was not wholly immune from media cynicism. As Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber (2003:3) note, amid the media jubilation in the US, the *Boston Globe* observed that the image had a 'self-conscious and forced quality'. In Britain, the *Independent* (11 April) put ironic quotes around 'spontaneously' in describing how the statue fell, raising the possibility that the event may have been 'stage-managed'. The *Sunday Telegraph*'s reviewer described it as a moment of 'low farce' as well as 'high drama' (13 April). The head of BBC television news, writing in the *Sunday Business* (13 April), seemed unsure if it had been 'a moment of history' or 'a piece of drama', remarking that it was 'odd' that the marines had pulled down the statue 'right outside the city's media hotel'. In the *Telegraph* (11 April), satirist Armando Iannucci wrote that 'with Saddam's whereabouts still unknown, President Bush has now re-stated his war aim, which is "to capture the statue of Saddam Hussein, dead or alive"', adding that 'in northern Afghanistan, the CIA says it is closing in on the statue of Osama bin Laden.' Somehow, the very importance attached to image-making calls forth a cynical response.

Why Image Isn't Everything

Today's media culture is one in which there is an acute awareness of image manipulation. School students practice deconstructing television programmes for their Media Studies GCSEs, advertisers frequently appeal to us on the basis of our awareness of advertising techniques, and popular films such as *The Truman Show*,

[6] 'Vindication: A Statue Falls', *MediaLens*, 11 April 2003
http://www.medialens.org/alerts/2003/030411_Vindication.html

The Matrix and *Wag the Dog* play on the idea of the media producing illusions of reality. The war on terrorism is not immune from this culture. Digitalisation, the Internet, and the growth of global media audiences all play a role in promoting a greater self-consciousness about image construction. They do so, moreover, in a context of popular political disengagement. This is the problem which the image-making is designed to address, but which it cannot overcome.

Photographs have always been posed, cropped, staged and altered, but digitalisation not only makes manipulation much easier, it severs the indexical bond between the photographic image and external reality. The *Evening Standard* was accused of having digitally altered the picture of joyous Iraqis which featured on its 9 April 2003 front page, in order to create a bigger crowd than there actually was – an allegation denied by the newspaper.[7] A photo in the *Los Angeles Times* was a combination of two images, merged to produce a more appealing composition of a soldier calming civilians near Basra.[8] The photographer, Brian Walski, was instantly sacked. In a sense, however, it is the possibility of manipulation which is important, rather than any particular deception. Most newspapers now feel obliged to have policies on the use of digital images, and the very fact that the press have to promise not to use digitally altered pictures indicates that they know their readers have far less confidence in the photograph as a reliable record of reality.

Another story of image manipulation, of the more conventional sort, circulated on the Web, where wide-angle shots of the fall of Saddam's statue were contrasted with the more tightly-framed versions which more usually featured in mainstream news, making it clear that the number of Iraqis participating in the event was much smaller than had appeared.[9] The Web also undermines trust in mainstream news sources. It is now easy to compare different versions of the same news story, to look at contrasting national perspectives on an event, to seek out alternative sources of information and commentary, or to compare official statements and press releases with what appears in our newspaper. Even if most people still rely on TV for their news, the proliferation of sources of information and commentary means that we are less likely simply to accept the truthfulness of any single account. The culture of 'blogging' – challenging, satirising, criticising mainstream news – exemplifies this distrust, and it was no surprise that many rumours were disseminated via the Internet immediately after 9/11. Some of the various conspiracy theories concerned not only the event itself but also the media coverage, such as the tale circulated by a Brazilian university student about CNN using old footage from 1991 to suggest that Palestinians were celebrating the World Trade Center attacks. CNN rebutted the story,[10] but whether such rumours are

[7] The allegedly manipulated image is available at http://www.thememoryhole.org/media/evening-standard-crowd.htm

[8] The pictures, and the newspaper's note about the incident, are reproduced at http://www.sree.net/teaching/lateditors.html

[9] 'A Tale of Two Photos', *Information Clearing House*, 15 April 2003 http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2838.htm

[10] 'CNN statement about false claim it used old video', *CNN Online*, 20 September 2001 http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/cnn.statement/

false or true is perhaps less significant than the fact that they quickly gain currency. There is almost an expectation that we will be manipulated and lied to.

The Web, along with satellite and cable television channels, creates a global audience for news, and this too exacerbates problems of trust. American news audiences reportedly turned to British sites in much greater numbers since 9/11 (Ali, 2001), and disapora communities in Britain and elsewhere have access to Arab satellite channels. A study of audience reactions to news of 9/11 uncovered a 'deep lack of trust in British and American TV news' among UK Muslims, and argued that 'The existence of non-Western transnational satellite TV news stations, providing alternative accounts of events, directly feeds scepticism and cynicism about "western news"' (Michalski et al., 2002: 6). In a global media environment, identifying closely with one's government or with the Western coalition may play well with some sections of the audience, but risks alienating others. BBC Director General Greg Dyke recognised this problem when he attacked the 'gung-ho patriotism' of Fox News and other US networks in a 24 April 2003 speech. Claiming that 'we are here for everyone in the UK', Dyke argued that the BBC 'cannot afford to mix patriotism and journalism', since this would undermine its credibility.[11] Again, the number of people who actually view Arab satellite channels is less important than the fact that it is possible to do so. In order to retain credibility with audiences who potentially have access to such alternative sources, editorial decisions about what to report have to take into account the diversity of available views.

Political leaders face similar problems. ABC News quoted Bush Administration officials as saying the Iraq war had not really been about weapons of mass destruction but had been designed to 'make a statement' and 'send a message'. The message was: 'Don't mess with the United States'.[12] The war may well have been fought to send a message, but the message was not as unambiguous as this retrospective explanation suggests. Lacking a clear framework of meaning, political leaders have seemed uncertain about what image they want to project. Traditional ideological standbys – celebrating a martial, national or Western identity – have often caused embarrassment instead of cohering support. There were constant worries, for example, about appearing too militaristic, as epitomised by the debate about whether to hold a victory parade, a 'cavalcade' or a church service after the Iraq campaign. In the event, a 'multi-faith service of remembrance' was held at St. Paul's Cathedral, which was designed to be 'sensitive to other traditions, other experiences and other faiths', including Islam. The service commemorated Iraqi military and civilian dead as well as British service personnel. As the Dean of St. Paul's explained: 'I don't believe in today's world we can have a national service behaving like little Brits' (*Independent*, 11 October 2003). Similar considerations applied beforehand, one journalist revealed:

[11] 'Dyke Slates "gung ho" war reports', *BBC Online*, 24 April 2003 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/tv_and_radio/2973163.stm

[12] 'Reason for War?', *ABCNews.com*, 25 April 2003, http://abcnews.go.com/sections/nightline/US/globalshow_030425.html

> "We were not allowed to take any pictures or describe British soldiers carrying guns. I was told that there was…a decision made by Downing Street that the military minders of the journalists down there were to go to any lengths…to not portray…the British fighting man and women as fighters." (*Correspondent*, BBC2, 18 May 2003)[13]

An inability to celebrate victory or to portray soldiers as soldiers is symptomatic of a severe lack of confidence among the elite.

Noting how doubts about the Iraq campaign were openly expressed even among the US military and the CIA, Mick Hume argues that the American establishment have been unable to overcome the defeats suffered in the 'Culture Wars' – the corrosive post-Vietnam questioning of traditional values and institutions. An 'underlying defensiveness' is apparent in the show of respect for Islam, with Bush visiting a mosque in the wake of 9/11 and Blair claiming to be reading the Koran (Hume, 2002). The Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was forced to apologise for saying that Western civilisation was superior to Islam. After his remarks provoked a 'storm of condemnation from the European Union and the US', Berlusconi said it was a 'great' religion for which he had 'deep respect'.[14] Even the name of the attack on Afghanistan had to be changed when it was found that calling it 'Operation Infinite Justice' could be offensive to Muslims. Astonishingly, after a row about airmen scrawling offensive messages, such as 'High jack this, fags', on bombs dropped in the Afghan war, the US Navy instructed commanders to 'keep the messages positive'. In the same spirit, US troops sent to Iraq had to go through a 'cultural boot camp' to educate them about Arab culture (O'Neill, 2003). Evidently the intention was that Iraq should be invaded in a culturally sensitive fashion. This was why news audience witnessed the strange spectacle of the stars and stripes being proudly hoisted one minute only to see it hauled down in embarrassment the next. This happened at Umm Qasr at the start of the Iraq war, and again when the flag that had flown over the Pentagon on 9/11 was draped over the face of Saddam's falling statue on 9 April. It must have taken some planning to get the flag in the right place at the right time, but the image reportedly caused 'a moment of concern' in Washington (BBC News 24, 9 April 2003).

Such incoherence has meant that the propaganda war has been conducted with startling ineptitude. Trumpeting dossiers of 'evidence' which turn out to be bogus hardly helps to inspire public confidence, and announcing the formation of an 'Office of Strategic Influence' – a Pentagon group tasked with planting propaganda and disinformation in the media – was a strategic blunder which could not be put right by subsequently declaring a change of heart (Rampton and Stauber, 2003:66). Even though the plan was scrapped, telling people you will plant false stories is surely the shortest route to ensuring they do not believe anything you say. The call for UN weapons inspectors to verify any post-war finds of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

[13] A transcript of the programme is available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/spl/hi/programmes/correspondent/transcripts/18.5.03.txt

[14] 'Berlusconi hails "great" Islam', *BBC Online*, 2 October, 2001 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1575619.stm

reflected the wide assumption that coalition governments are likely to lie and to plant evidence. As David Shukman asked of the hunt for weapons materiel, 'If they [the US and UK] find it, who'll believe them?' (BBC1, 17 April 2003). After 9/11 the US consulted marketing and PR companies and put a former advertising executive, Charlotte Beers, in charge of 're-branding' US foreign policy. Rampton and Stauber (2003:34) suggest that Beers's efforts were 'an abject failure' because of the inability to address the underlying causes of resentment of the US in the Muslim world. A more fundamental problem, however, was the uncertain nature of the 'brand' itself. Beers's 'Shared Values' advertising campaign was bound to fail precisely because of the lack of agreed values in Western societies.

The war on terrorism was initially supposed to be a largely covert effort rather than a TV war conducted in a blaze of publicity; an untold story of anonymous heroes rather than a series of human-interest mini-dramas. The suspicion begins to dawn that the war is actually *about* creating the right image. Unable to inspire and engage the public in the domestic political sphere, leaders have seized on the war on terrorism as an opportunity to create the impression of purpose and mission. Precisely because of this lack of substance, the emphasis on image has proved self-defeating, inducing an already unenthusiastic public to become even more cynical. When Transport Department adviser Jo Moore described 9/11 as 'a good day to bury bad news', she only confirmed what everyone already knew: that politicians are obsessed with news management (Franklin, 2003). It was no wonder that when the UK government stationed tanks at Heathrow airport in February 2003, claiming this was in response to a terrorist threat, many people assumed it was just a publicity stunt (*Telegraph*, 16 February 2003).

The Limits Of Debate

In response to such public cynicism political leaders have sought alternative ways to project an image of coherence and mission in their pursuit of the war on terrorism. A key theme from the outset has been the allegedly 'moral' dimension of interventions. Apparently embarrassed by their own national symbols, politicians have emphasised incongruous 'humanitarian' and 'human rights' claims instead. Recalling the rhetoric he used during the Kosovo war, Blair maintained in an October 2001 speech that the bombing of Afghanistan was 'not a conventional conflict' and 'not a battle for territory', but 'a battle to allow the Afghans themselves to retake control of their country'. Similarly, at a March 2002 press conference Powell claimed the bombing was 'a triumph for human rights', citing the removal of the Taliban and the appointment of two women to the country's interim government as evidence.[15] By

[15] 'Afghanistan hailed "a triumph for human rights in 2001"', US Department of State, 5 March 2002 http://usinfo.state.gov/cgi-bin/washfile/display.pl?p=/products/washfile/topic/rights&f=02030406.ndh&t=/products/washfile/newsitem.shtml

the time the invasion of Iraq started leaders seemed to have virtually forgotten about the search for weapons of mass destruction, let alone the fight against international terrorism, instead pompously promising to 'liberate' the Iraqi people. Indeed, the invasion was named 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. Bush told the US military that 'the peace of a troubled world and the hope of an oppressed people now depend on you'; while Blair told the Iraqis: 'we will liberate you. The day of your freedom draws near' (*Times*, 21, 28 March 2003).

The attempt to turn the war on terrorism into some kind of humanitarian mission has often produced absurd results. While Bush appealed to American children to donate a dollar to the Red Cross his airforce repeatedly and deliberately bombed the organisation's facilities in Kabul and Kandahar (Mahajan, 2002:38). US planes dropped aid as well as cluster bombs, both in bright yellow packaging, in an effort to rescue some Afghans from starvation while killing others. Much of the food – pop-tarts and tomato ketchup, for example – was hopelessly impractical, but being seen to distribute it was what counted. In an article titled 'Give 'em Hell…and Food', the *Sun* portrayed the deployment of US and British special forces to help the Northern Alliance take the city of Mazar-i-Sharif as having the goal of setting up a 'sanctuary' for refugees. It quoted a military source describing this as 'good perception management' and explaining that the anticipated 'bitter and bloody' battle would 'demonstrate that we are not only bombing but using military action to bring emergency help for millions who need it' (5 November 2001). The pattern was repeated in Iraq: the BBC reported that British forces hoped to win the 'battle for Basra' quickly in order to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid. This, we were told, would 'prove that they come in peace' (26 March 2003). On the same day, a coalition missile killed at least 15 civilians in a Baghdad marketplace, while elsewhere the first aid convoy arrived in the country. After the war, practical measures to solve chronic problems with water, food, medicine and electricity supplies appeared to take second place to the production of scenes of simulated humanitarianism for the cameras.

Yet this is where the limits of media criticism are reached. Although there is criticism of how far proclaimed humanitarian or human rights aims have been achieved, there are few questions asked about the desirability of Western intervention on these grounds. BBC correspondent Fergal Keane predicted that the Iraq war would be 'justified in the lofty rhetoric of human rights', warning his audience: 'Get ready for a new generation of heart-wrenching images. Now Iraq's torture victims are poster of the month…' (*Independent*, 1 February 2003). Yet the minute he arrived in Baghdad Keane started reporting on human rights abuses that the population had suffered under Saddam, providing exactly the sort of justificatory propaganda he had envisaged (BBC1, 17 April 2003). Despite all the cynical and self-conscious coverage, the post-Cold War consensus that the West has a moral duty to intervene for humanitarian reasons still holds. Hence many critics of the build-up to war simultaneously advocated far-reaching Western interference in Iraq. Timothy Garton Ash, for example, was sceptical about the war, concerned that 'the association with Bush's America is tarnishing [the] liberal internationalist project'. He argued instead for 'intrusive and rigorous' weapons inspections backed by 'the threat of force', because:

> '…we need a world in which sovereignty is limited by some basic international norms, in which a Saddam, a Milosevic, a Pinochet or an Idi Amin know: thus far I may go, but no further, or my country will be bombed and I'll end up in court at the Hague.' (*Guardian*, 19 September 2002)

Similarly, the *Independent* advocated 'intrusive inspections backed by the threat of limited force' as an alternative to war (7 February 2003); and the *Guardian*'s Jonathan Freedland argued that 'the peace camp has to set out its own, alternative method of ridding Iraq of its oppressor', such as 'muscular rights inspectors' backed by 'a military presence' (19 February). More broadly, the acceptance of 'ethical' interventionism was reflected in the position, adopted by many leading critics of war, that invading Iraq would be wrong unless sanctioned by a further UN resolution, in which case it would be right.

For those on the receiving end, 'liberation' mean invasion and military occupation by foreign powers; 'democracy' means subordinating national sovereignty to the dictates of the 'international community'. This is true whether interventions are conducted by the UN or by 'coalitions of the willing'. The image of the Western powers liberating benighted peoples is surely the most misleading of all.

References

Ali, R. (2001) 'In frantic hunt for news, readers peruse foreign papers', *Globalvision News Network*, 11 October http://www.gvnews.net/html/Corp/press4.html

Banfield, A. (2003) 'MSNBC's Banfield slams war coverage', *AlterNet*, 29 April http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=15778

Dineen, T. (2003) 'Hearts, minds and missiles', *Spiked*, 17 April http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DD5B.htm

Fairclough, N. (2000) *New Labour, new language?* London, Routledge.

Franklin, B. (2003) '"A good day to bury bad news?": Journalists, sources and the packaging of politics', in Cottle, S. (ed.) *News, public relations and power*. London, Sage, pp. 45-61.

Franks, T. (2003) 'Not war reporting – just reporting', *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp.15-19 http://www.bjr.org.uk/data/2003/no2_franks.htm

Glasner, J. (2003) 'Military cameramen head to gulf', *Wired News*, 13 March http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,58021,00.html

Guerrin, M. (2003) 'Embedded photographer: "I saw marines kill civilians"', trans. Norman Madarasz, *Counterpunch*, 16 April http://www.counterpunch.org/guerrin04162003.html

Hammond, P. (2000) 'reporting "humanitarian" warfare: propaganda, moralism and NATO's Kosovo war', *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, July, pp.365-386.

Hume, M. (2002) 'One war that Bush has already lost', *Spiked*, 15 October http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DAB6.htm

Knight, A. (2003) 'The battlefield of lies: the Iraq war and the press', *Public Record*, 15 April http://www.abc.net.au/public/s832958.htm
Knightley, P. (2003) 'History or bunkum?', *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp.7-14 http://www.bjr.org.uk/data/2003/no2_knightley.htm
Mahajan, R. (2002) *The new crusade: america's war on terrorism*, New York, Monthly Review Press.
Michalski, M., Preston, A., Paterson, R., Gillespie, M. and Cheesman, T. (2002) *After September 11: tv news and transnational audiences* (research report, undated, but c. 2002)
http://www.afterseptember11.tv/download/11%20September%20Research.pdf
O'Neill, B. (2003) 'Gulf war meets culture War', *Spiked*, 27 February
http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DC92.htm
Rampton, S. and Stauber, J. (2003) *Weapons of mass deception: the uses of propaganda in Bush's war on Iraq*, London, Robinson.
Ullman, H. K. and Wade, J.P. (1996) *Shock and awe: achieving rapid dominance*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press.
http://www.dodccrp.org/shockIndex.html