TELEVISION, PUBLIC OPINION AND THE WAR IN IRAQ: THE CASE OF BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the relationship between television coverage of the Iraq War and changes in British public opinion towards the war. During the war, television coverage helped create a climate in which pro-war positions became more relevant and plausible. This was not the result of crude forms of bias, but the product of news values which privileged certain assumptions and narratives over others. This, in turn, may assist a wider (and questionable) ideological strategy to link the war on terrorism to forms of military action, making both war and military spending more acceptable.

In *Constructing Public Opinion* (Lewis, 2001), I explored the way in which political elites attempted to cut a swathe through a complex and sometimes contradictory set of public attitudes to win—or appear to win—popular support for their policies and programs. From an elite perspective, the goal has often been to make strategic interventions in media discourse to create what Murray Edelman (1964) refers to as 'quiescence'. This involves highlighting moments of popular consent while downplaying those aspects of public opinion that contradict the interests of political elites, thereby achieving enough visible consent to make elite projects politically viable.

If we look at US foreign policy, for example, we can see how elite support for huge levels of military spending is sustained not only by neo-imperialist ideas about 'full spectrum dominance', but an array of powerful bureaucratic, business, and political vested interests (Hellinger & Judd, 1991). And yet US public opinion on military spending and foreign policy is both far more idealistic and distinctively less imperialist in outlook. It is guided neither by neo-conservative strategic ambitions nor by the 'realpolitik' of support for the military industrial complex. On the contrary, surveys in the USA have, for some time, shown that public spending on areas like health and education are consistently more popular than military spending. A survey by the Program on International Policy Attitudes

(PIPA), published in April 2004, found that support for increasing military spending was down to only 16 percent, while 41 percent were in favor of cutbacks. The survey also found most Americans preferred arms control and multilateral agreement—rather than the threat of military force—as a way to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Program on International Policy Attitudes, 2004).

Similarly, Britain is Western Europe's biggest military spender,[1] a position it holds without any clear enthusiasm from the British public, who tend to favor areas like health and education; a *Guardian*/ICM poll in November 2002, found 48 percent in favor of cutting defense spending, with only 38 percent against. Both countries thus maintain high levels of military spending without a clear, popular mandate.

A key rhetorical move, in this respect, has been to stress the link between terrorism and nation-states, thereby providing the logic for a *military* solution to the problem of terrorism and, in turn, the logic for high levels of military spending. As Robert Entman (2004) argues, the Bush administration has done its best to construct the 'war of terror' as the operational foreign policy doctrine to replace the Cold War (although for all its rhetorical force, Entman sees this as a more fragile construction). This logic was enshrined in State Department thinking well before the autumn of 2001, with its branding of countries like Iraq, North Korea, Libya, Cuba and Iran as 'terrorist states'. What has changed, since September 11, 2001, is the ability of this discourse to engage public opinion, making terrorism highly newsworthy and a key area of public concern. If the problem of terrorism can be linked to the need to take *military* action, it provides a rationale for military spending every bit as powerful as, although considerably less coherent than, the Cold War. It is notable, in this respect, that the opinion pollsters MORI, in their regular ranking of issues the British public regard as important, lump 'terrorism' with 'defense'. What seems like a simple matter of convenience in coding categories is, in fact, an implicit acceptance of the logic that terrorism is a military issue rather than, say, a crime or security issue.

The influence of this rhetorical strategy was laid bare in Kull's compelling study of public beliefs and support for the war in Iraq (Kull, 2003). The study established that, for large sections of the public, support in the USA for a war against Iraq was clearly connected to the discourse of anti-terrorism. The assumptions that Saddam Hussein had connections to the September 11 attacks or to al Qaeda were not only widely held, but also directly linked to support for the war in Iraq. As the study points out, there is no evidence to support a link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, or the attack on the Twin Towers; on the contrary, the Iraqi regime was notably antagonistic towards this kind of fundamentalist politics. So why did so many people believe there was?

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[1] This calculation is based on estimates from the Center for Defense Information.

It is at this point that we can see how the Bush administration and its allies have exploited the elliptical nature of the news media's influence on public opinion. Those involved in advertising—our culture's most abundant persuasive discourse—have long understood that you make claims not by argument but by association. You don't say that a product will make you attractive or popular— such a claim may be proved untenable—you simply *associate* the product with attractiveness and popularity. In the same way, those making the case for war with Iraq would juxtapose it—vaguely, intangibly but repeatedly—with the war on terrorism. For a public with a limited knowledge of geo-politics, these associations become the building blocks for making sense of the world (Lewis, 2001, pp. 120–37).

In this article, I draw upon a study of military and journalistic practice, of media content and of public knowledge and opinion to examine how media coverage and political rhetoric may have influenced an uncertain public. This study, partly funded by the BBC, involved interviews with officials from the Ministry of Defence and the Pentagon; journalists, news editors and news chiefs for BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky and Al Jazeera; a content analysis and a qualitative analysis of British coverage of the war; and a survey and focus groups about media coverage of the war (Brookes, Lewis, Mosdell, & Threadgold, 2003). I will argue that public support for military action was partly aided by the nature of the media's war coverage, by the ways in which the media reproduced certain pro-war assumptions, and by the exclusion of more critical forms of coverage.

PUBLIC OPINION IN BRITAIN

Much of Murray Goot's analysis of public opinion in Australia (Goot, 2003) applies to Britain. Both countries had Prime Ministers who were conspicuous in their backing for the US policy. In both countries public opinion—in the forms of polls and huge demonstrations—appeared to be against such a policy before the war began, but seemed to swing behind it once the conflict started. In both cases, surveys seemed to suggest that UN backing was crucial to winning public support—and yet public consent was, apparently, achieved without it.

I will examine possible explanations for this shift to a pro-war position, beginning with a cautionary note. As Goot suggests, there is a danger here in taking the results of surveys at face value. We have known for some time that there are subjects where changes in question wording can produce quite different results (Zaller, 1992), and this may be one of them. So, for example, Baines and Worcester (2003) use MORI surveys to show what looks like a dramatic turnaround. In mid-March only 26 percent supported war with 63 percent opposed. Just two weeks later this turned into 56 percent support and 38 percent opposition. But the question in mid-March asked people if they would support a war *if* there were no proof

from weapons inspectors that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and no UN backing; the later question contained no such conditions.

It could be argued, of course, that since the war was fought without a second UN resolution or proof of WMD, it was simply unnecessary for a question to point this out. If people supported the war, they must, by implication, have changed their minds about the importance of these conditions. And yet the polling on this issue suggests that a significant section of the public were unsure which position to take, and while they may have *expressed* this doubt by making support conditional on specific conditions, this may simply have been a way of registering a degree of uncertainty. This is not to say that there was *no* shift in attitude; but, as Goot points out in the context of other poll results, it may have been the question wording that prompted uncertain respondents to answer one way rather than another.

This could also explain why, in a pre-war poll, MORI was able to show a high level (67 percent) of opposition to Britain's going to war if UN inspectors found no proof of WMD and the Security Council did not vote in favor of military action, and a high level (75 percent) of support for going to war if each of these conditions were met. As Kellner points out, the figures reported by MORI may not have indicated any deeply held commitment to the UN or its weapons inspectors, but rather the existence of a significant group of respondents who could be won over to either side (Kellner, 2003). Indeed, the scale of this uncertainty was such that, by the end of the summer, support for the war had gone down to pre-war levels: in our own survey, support for/opposition to the war was 44/53; in the ICM/Guardian September poll, the corresponding figures were 38/53 (*Guardian*, September 23, 2003).

And yet it seems unlikely that the diminished importance of the UN and evidence of WMD, suggested by MORI's polling before the war and during it, can be entirely explained by question wording. Moreover, the fact that it is possible to produce shifts on such a widely-debated topic by adding conditions to questions suggests that the informational context in which people respond to surveys is important. The British government were acutely aware of the significance of the UN and the threat of WMD in mobilizing public opinion. Once it became clear that Hans Blix's team would not turn up the 'smoking gun' *and* the UN would not sanction war with Iraq, they needed to persuade people that these conditions were less pivotal to the case for war.

Central to this effort was the exploitation of the French threat to veto a pro-war resolution. The US position during negotiations was every bit as intractable as the French (for example, the USA said they would veto a Chilean initiative to extend negotiations by three weeks), and yet much was made of the French position. Although a majority of countries on the UN Security Council had reservations about the U.S. government's stance, it was the French who became a scapegoat for the failure of attempts to reach a second UN resolution. The French

position even became the subject of an ICM survey for the *News of the World* in March (ICM Research, 2003). The success of the strategy to make the French responsible for the failure of diplomacy was indicated by a YouGov survey on March 18, in which 50 percent blamed President Chirac for the failure of the UN Security Council to resolve the crisis—noticeably more than the 35 percent blaming President Bush (Kellner, 2003).

Meanwhile, the British and US governments did their best to persuade people that while proof from Hans Blix's inspection team about Iraqi WMD might be desirable, it was almost certain that they had them anyway. They were helped, in this endeavor, by a degree of bipartisan consensus on this issue, and it was left to a few dissident voices—such as Labour's Robin Cook in his resignation speech— to question this claim.

Finally, the pro-war camp was able to build on a well-established discourse about the depravity of the regime, and to stress a moral obligation to liberate the Iraqi people from such an oppressive dictatorship. While this did not provide a legal basis for intervention, it became increasingly important as a de facto justifi-cation for war. Thus, when asked by one of his own backbenchers in the House of Commons on November 19 'whether the Prime Minister and the President of the United States have come to any agreement as to why this war happened in the first place', Tony Blair replied:

> We went into conflict because we believed—in my view, rightly—that Saddam Hussein was a threat to his region and to the wider world, and we are proud of the fact that people in Iraq today, for the first time in decades, have got the chance of stability, prosperity and democracy. What everyone should realise is that if people like the Hon-ourable Gentleman had had their way, Saddam Hussein, his sons and his henchmen would still be terrorising people in Iraq. I find it quite extraordinary that he thinks that that would be a preferable state of affairs. (*Hansard*, 2003, col. 774).

Thus the notion that Saddam Hussein posed a serious threat is quickly bypassed to portray the conflict as a war of liberation.

THE NATURE OF SUPPORT FOR THE WAR

Drawing upon interviews with journalists and a series of public opinion surveys, Baines and Worcester argue that the shift in favor of the war was a product of the government's 'various rhetorical devices, and a complicit media' (2003, p. 16). In what follows, I will suggest that there is much to support this analysis, although it is important to add that if there was complicity, it was relatively short-lived. The problems of post-war Iraq, together with the failure to find weapons of mass destruction (giving credence to reports suggesting the government exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein) meant that, by the end of the summer, support for the war dropped to pre-war levels.

Our own survey of public attitudes, conducted in late summer 2003,[2] echoed others in reporting a majority opposed to the war before and a few months after, but a majority in favor during the war itself. We cannot, of course, assume that people will accurately recall how their position changed over time. Nevertheless, the pattern of the shift is striking, and it is consistent with polls conducted by MORI and ICM.[3] A large minority (46 percent of respondents) said they had supported the war beforehand (with 51 percent against); 83 percent said they had supported the war (with only 15 percent against) while it was being fought; but, again, no more than 44 percent (with 53 percent against) supported the war at the time the survey was conducted.[4] The shift to a pro-war majority in various polls during the war itself was immensely important. Since it helped to legitimate the war at the most critical time, it is worth examining the conditions under which this shift occurred.

When we asked people *why* they had changed their minds, their responses suggested that, for a significant proportion of the sample, the rise in support for the war recorded by opinion polls once the war began was less a significant change of mood than a pragmatic—and temporary—repositioning. The largest group of 'switchers'—nearly 30 percent of the overall sample—were those who supported the war while it was happening, but did *not* support it either before or afterwards. Of this group, nearly half (49 percent) said they changed their minds because they wanted to support the troops during wartime.

Although this is no great surprise, it sheds light on the nature of the 'shift' in public opinion that took place during the war. It could be argued that a pragmatic decision to 'support our troops' did not, in fact, represent a shift at all. Many people who remained dubious about the decision to go to war nonetheless felt the need to support British troops. Once the war was over their doubts remained, only to be reawakened by (among other things) reports that the government's claims about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein had been exaggerated. In short, while the figures suggest that some were probably persuaded of the case for war, these patriotic pragmatists—who may well have been unconvinced by the rationale for invading Iraq—significantly swelled their numbers.

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[2] The survey was based on telephone interviews, carried out between August 26 and September 8, 2003, with a representative sample of 1,002 British adults.

[3] According to a MORI poll, conducted in late July, 60 percent said they supported the war once British troops were in action but subsequently only 50 percent felt it was right to invade Iraq (Baines & Worcester, 2003).

[4] The very high level of support during the war may have been prompted by the question wording, which, in all cases, referred to support for 'allied forces'. While the 'before' and 'after' questions referred to 'allied forces plans' and 'allied forces decisions', the 'during' question referred simply to 'allied forces'. The wording thus allowed those who did not support 'plans' or 'decisions' to go to war to register support for the troops themselves.

This distinction between supporting the troops and supporting the policy was generally ignored in media coverage. So, for example, on April 15, the *Guardian* reported on its front-page that:

> Support for the war among British voters has surged to a new record level of 63%, according to results of this week's *Guardian*/ICM war tracker poll. The seven-point rise in support for military action since the fall of Baghdad confirms the war has been accompanied by one of the most dramatic shifts in public opinion in recent British political history. (*Guardian*, April 15, p. 1)

It was assumed, in other words, that people simply changed their minds. The idea that the desire to be seen to 'support our troops' may have been compounded by the fear of being seen as part of an isolated, unpatriotic minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) also received little consideration.

This is a classic example of attributing to the public mind a degree of homogeneity that the data do not warrant. That the majority in the 'either/or' world of opinion polls ended up on the pro-war side during the war conceals the fact that, for many, this was not a whole-hearted endorsement of the decision. Similarly, the fact that levels of support/opposition before and after the war were remarkably similar (with just a two-point shift towards the opposition) conceals two countervailing movements. One group—9 percent of the overall sample—supported the war before and during the conflict, but by late summer had come to oppose it. Asked why they changed their minds, these respondents gave a variety of reasons, chiefly the failure to find WMD, the lack of evidence to support the need for war, and a sense that they had been misled. A very different group—6 percent of the overall sample—did not support the war beforehand, but came to do so afterwards. Here the main reason given was the benefits to Iraqis of 'regime change', an echo of the government's line that, whatever the controversy surrounding weapons of mass destruction, Iraqis were now better off without Saddam Hussein.

However, our data also suggest that the shift to a pro-war position in the polls—a shift that the *Guardian* called 'one of the most dramatic shifts in public opinion in recent British political history' (April 15, p.1)—cannot be accounted for purely by the desire to 'support the troops'. While half of the 30 percent who supported the war only while it was happening (and not before or afterwards) said they did so to support the troops, half did not.[5] Part of their reason for shifting, I would argue, was a change in the media climate. While the coverage in Britain was characterized by a comparative openness before and after the war, allowing for a range of issues and viewpoints to be explored, as Baines and

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[5] It is difficult to be precise about their reasons, since respondents were asked simply 'why their attitude to war changed', and many of those who later switched back to an anti-war position gave explanations that explained why they were now anti-war rather than why they *had* supported the war; e.g. 16 percent said they had been 'misled by the media or the government'.

Worcester (2003) suggest, this closed down during the war itself. In what follows, I explore the extent and nature of this closure.

BRITISH TELEVISION'S COVERAGE OF THE WAR

Much of the criticism of British media coverage of the war has focused on the role of reporters 'embedded' with US and British forces (Knightley, 2003). The embed program was a Pentagon initiative to provide media access to the battlefield under the protection and guidance of military units; and the British Ministry of Defence followed suit. While there is nothing new about journalists travelling with military units, the scale and technological sophistication of the embed operation, involving over 600 journalists, was unprecedented. For many, the complicity of the arrangement signalled a loss of journalistic independence and objectivity.

What is indisputable is that the large network of embedded reporters changed the way the war was reported. Our own content analysis found that, on British television, most of the reports from the region came from embeds. While coverage of war has, in the past, been heavily dependent upon military briefings (Taylor, 1992), in 2003, reports from embeds outnumbered reports from official briefings by more than two to one (Lewis & Brookes, 2004). Indeed, the problem facing editors in London was not a lack of pictures from the front lines, but a surfeit of them.

The criticism that embedded reporters were, in effect 'in bed' with the military may be true of some of the US network coverage, but interviews with journalists and a content analysis of the coverage in Britain paints a more complex picture (Brookes et al., 2003). Most British reporters were acutely aware of the need to maintain a sense of distance, and few experienced many overt attempts to censor their reports. Not only did embedded reporters often provide accounts that contradicted official military claims,[6] in important respects their reports did not differ significantly from those filed by other reporters on the ground.

However, while British broadcasters were generally committed to maintaining impartiality in their coverage of the war, in certain key areas they tended to favor assumptions that were central to the pro-war case. Surveys suggest that for many respondents support for the war was contingent on three conditions: support from the UN; proof that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction; and the notion that this was a war of liberation desired by the Iraqi people. In the lead up to war, the importance of a second UN resolution was ameliorated by a campaign to portray the French as blocking attempts to 'resolve' the issue.

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[6] Notable examples of this were embedded reports that refuted claims about the success of attacks on Umm Qasr and Nasiriyah, or that contradicted claims by US forces that warning shots had been fired when seven civilians were shot at a US checkpoint near Najaf.

Once war began, the British news media tended to reproduce—rather than question—claims about weapons of mass destruction. Assessments of the Iraqi possession of such weapons were a repeated source of assertion and speculation during the war—speculation coming from government and military sources, experts and correspondents. In our sample of 1,534 news reports, taken from the main weekday news bulletins during the war (*BBC News at Six*; *ITV Evening News* at 6.30 p.m.; *Channel 4 News* at 7 p.m., and *Sky News at Ten*) only 8 percent referred to WMD (Lewis & Brookes, 2004, p. 132). We categorized these under two broad headings: those that asserted or implied the *possible or likely* presence of chemical/biological weapons, and those references that *cast doubt* on Iraqi WMD capability.[7] Overall, British broadcasters were eight times more likely to make references indicating the presence of chemical and biological weapons than to suggest their absence. Thus, while no such weapons were actually found during the war, 89 percent of the references *assumed* their probable existence, while only 11 percent cast doubt on this idea (Lewis & Brookes, 2004).

How far the government itself believed that Iraq had such weapons remains a matter of controversy, but it was clearly successful in persuading broadcasters in a way that doubters—like Robin Cook—were not. And for the many viewers uncertain about the efficacy of the war, the sense conveyed by this coverage—that such weapons might be used against British forces—may have lessened their doubts.

More significant, perhaps, both during the war and its aftermath, was the discourse of 'liberation'. Ordinary Iraqis were at the centre of debates about the war, with both the pro-war and anti-war camps claiming to speak on their behalf. Yet, for many, they remained something of an enigma. Of our post-war respondents, four out of ten (41 percent) said that they felt there was too little coverage of the Iraqi people's reaction to the war;[8] this compares with no more than 15 percent who felt there was too little coverage of military briefings and only 8 percent who thought there was too little coverage of action from the front lines, this last response reflecting the dominant presence of embedded reporters.

In keeping with this perception, our analysis of the television coverage during the war revealed little analysis of Iraqi attitudes. What we found instead was a constant stream of sidelong glimpses of Iraqi public opinion. One in four reports referred to the Iraqi people. Often these were simply references to casualties (30 percent), but many (45 percent) were references to the attitudes of the Iraqi

[7] References coded as implying the Iraqi possession of WMD included footage of US/UK forces' discovery of facilities suggesting evidence of WMD capability, stories in which US/UK forces or correspondents donned gas masks or chemical protection suits (thus implying the clear and present threat of Iraqi deployment of chemical or biological weapons), and speculation about Iraq's WMD capability. References coded as casting doubt on Iraqi possession tended to be limited to reports that WMD had not (yet) been found.

[8] Some 47 percent said that coverage of the Iraqi people's reaction was 'about right', while only 12 percent felt that there was too much coverage. Of the various aspects of the coverage on which we asked people to comment, it was this issue that generated the biggest margin (29 percentage points) between those wanting more coverage and those wanting less.

people to the US-led operation. Of these, some portrayed the Iraqis welcoming the troops as a liberating force, thereby supporting the government's case; others portrayed the Iraqis as less enthusiastic, even antagonistic—displaying anything from reserve or suspicion to outright hostility.

These findings are worth considering in detail. As Table 1 shows, pro-war accounts of Iraqi opinion predominated: nearly two out of three references portrayed the Iraqis as welcoming the invasion. But what also emerges from this analysis is a division between reporters on the ground—both those who were embedded and those based in Baghdad—and anchors in the studio. Those reporters in a position to gauge Iraqi reaction presented a very mixed picture, with more or less equal numbers of enthusiastic and unenthusiastic Iraqi responses. What is especially notable here is that the embedded reporters (who might have been expected to err in favor of positive Iraqi reactions) and reporters in Baghdad (who we might have assumed would have encountered more hostility) told very similar stories. What made the headlines back in the studios in London, however, was a much more one-sided account, with enthusiastic Iraqi responses outnumbering less enthusiastic accounts by seven to one.

Clearly, this complicates the argument of Baines and Worcester (2003) that the role of embedded reporters was a key component of the media's complicity with the government's line. The pro-war tilt in television reports about the state of the Iraqi people occurred *in spite of* embedded reporting rather than *because of* it. This is not to say that embedded reporters did not play a role in constructing a pro-war narrative, but the nature of this role was more complex than most critics suggest.

The Pentagon's promotion of the embedded reporters program was based on controlling the 'big picture'. As their Public Affairs Guidance document put it:

TABLE 1 **References to the state of the Iraqi people, by type of news report**

	Iraqis welcoming liberation	*Iraqis opposing invasion*
Embedded reporter	29	27
Baghdad reporter	16	19
Qatar reporter	3	0
Unilateral	2	2
Multi-sourced footage	54	25
Studio analysis	2	2
Interview with expert(s)	2	3
Anchor	42	6
Other	1	1
Totals	151	85
Proportion of all reports	(64%)	(36%)

Source: BBC News at Six; ITV Evening News at 6.30 p.m.; Channel 4 News at 7 p.m. and Sky News at Ten, March–April 2003.

'Our people in the field need to tell our story' (Brookes et al., 2003, p. 7). This story was a simple tale of a military campaign, whose main characters were American and British troops. Admiral 'T' McCreary, one of the key strategists behind the embed program, made just this point: 'Once somebody decides to start a war and you start shooting, from the uniform perspective we need the support of the American people for our troops...and what better way for people to understand that than to put the face of the troops as the face of the war... while you may or may not agree with the war, you really support them and them coming back alive' (cited in Brookes et al., 2003, p. 13).

The US government was aware that the news value of the battlefield footage the embeds provided would be compelling. While there were many more complex stories to tell—about the wider international context, the Iraqi people, the economic implications, the reaction of the Arab world, public opinion, and debates about the justifications and rationale for the war and its aftermath—these would be eclipsed by a narrow focus on the war itself. As ITV's James Mates put it, the embeds would become the lens 'through which they could be seen winning the war' (cited in Brookes et al., 2003, p. 32).

Broadcasters found themselves irresistibly drawn into the action-packed drama of a war against a rarely seen enemy: if Iraqi civilians were enigmatic, the Iraqi soldiers were almost invisible—rarely seen or discussed, but generally assumed to be supportive of Saddam Hussein. This left very little time for discussions about the war's purposes or outcomes; only 5 percent of ITV's reports and only 2 percent of the BBC's dealt with such issues. The great majority of reports, 92 percent on the BBC and 93 percent on ITV, were simply about the coverage of war (Albertazzi, 2003). Better still, from the pro-war perspective, the norms of taste and decency made it difficult for broadcasters to show the more graphic images of death and destruction. This gave the narrative an almost fictional quality.[9]

There is an irony, of course, in the verisimilitude of front-line reporting creating a sense of unreality. Nonetheless, it explains the findings of an Independent Television Commission (ITC) survey in which a majority (52 percent) said that this kind of front-line reporting could make war seem too much like fiction, and make it too easy to forget people are dying. This idea was echoed, too, in a series of focus groups in which the participants repeatedly referred to the coverage as being like a 'war film' (Brookes et al., 2003, p. 84).

The pulling down of a statue of Saddam Hussein, by Iraqis joyously greeting US troops as they arrived in Baghdad on April 9, provided an irresistible climax to this narrative. It was, in truth, something of a 'media event'. Most Iraqis had left the centre of Baghdad before US troops arrived, and although the small

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[9] Many journalists and editors described how fears of showing graphic images led to routine self-censorship (Brookes et al., 2003).

crowd of Iraqi men pictured as they clustered around the statue may have been genuine, they were also undoubtedly performing for the US troops and the many journalists—conveniently based in a nearby hotel—gathered to witness the event.

If the ugly side of war was generally shot from a distance, the news value of this incident was emphasized by tighter shots in which the frame appeared crowded with celebrating Iraqis. In short, images were chosen for their drama rather than their accuracy.[10] What made this moment so powerful was that it showed Iraqis greeting US troops 'as liberators' and appeared emblematic of what ITV news described in its main bulletin as 'an end to decades of Iraqi misery'. Images of the toppling of the statue were shown a total of 21 times on the four main evening news programs: five times on BBC 1, six on ITV News, seven on Channel 4, and three times on Sky—though, as a rolling news channel, Sky had already shown the image many times before.

It was this event, more than any other episode during British broadcast coverage of the war, that provoked an outpouring of hyperbole, reporters using words and phrases such as: 'momentous', 'breathtaking', 'utterly overwhelming' (BBC1); 'extraordinary', 'astounding' (ITV News); 'tremendous', 'ecstatic' (Channel 4); 'amazing', 'fantastic' (Sky). It was hard to resist, as a viewer, the impression of a city united in celebration at being liberated:

> Momentous scenes as the Americans take control of central Baghdad. After three weeks of war, U.S. forces are greeted by crowds of cheering Iraqi civilians (BBC1, 10 p.m. News, April 9, 2003).

> Nothing could have prepared me for that moment. It was utterly overwhelming (Rageh Omaar, BBC1 10 p.m. News, April 9, 2003).

> Cry freedom, the people say they've been liberated (Sky 10 p.m. News, April 9, 2003).

> American armored vehicles swept into the heart of Baghdad and were met by crowds of jubilant Iraqis (BBC News 24, April 9, 2003).

> As the Iraqis gathered along the roadside to cheer their liberators into town, our correspondent John Irvine and cameraman Phil Bye were the first journalists to meet them, at the start of what was to be an extraordinary day (ITV News, April 9, 2003).

> As American tanks rolled unopposed into central Baghdad, Iraqi people rolled out to meet them, greeting them as liberators (Ian Glover-James, ITV News, April 9, 2003).

One of the few, more balanced television reports came from Lindsay Hilsum, on Channel 4, who attempted to capture the different nuances of the moment:

> So many complex feelings . . . A lot of people feel relief, they think maybe the war is over, an end to bombing and shelling and no more danger; that's one feeling. Others

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[10] There were no long shots used on any of the main news bulletins (Brookes et al., 2003).

certainly just feel so excited, 30 years of repression gone. . . . They can maybe say what they think for the first time, they can talk openly. . . . So tremendous relief. . . . But then I've also met people who say: 'colonialism, we don't want to be occupied, we're Iraqis'. There's a very strong patriotism and nationalism here and I think some shame that they didn't do it themselves. So I think that people feel a complex mixture of emotions here tonight. (Channel 4 News, April 9, 2003)

However, this 'complex mixture of emotions' was at odds with the simple narrative that dominated the war coverage on British TV—a narrative that came close to being a vindication of the war itself.

When the respondents in our surveys were asked to nominate their most memorable moment of the war, the 'toppling of Saddam' was, in both prompted and unprompted questions, by far the most popular choice. Most respondents (80 percent) claimed that they recalled it 'very well' (compared with only 22 percent who recalled the market place bombing in Baghdad 'very well') and only 3 percent did not recall it at all. This speaks not only to the treatment given to the incident itself, but to the way in which it provided a climactic end to the story that had dominated the news for three weeks.

CONCLUSION

If the victorious images from Paradise Square now seem rather premature, they provided broadcasters with a sense of closure to a story they had followed battle by battle. While this moment marked the beginning of a critical period in Iraq's history, for the embedded reporters and most of those in Baghdad it meant the end of a job well done and time to move on. Iraq remained a news story, but the resources devoted to it—in terms of time and money—quickly dwindled.

The war in Iraq, in some ways, was a perfect news story. Not only was it short enough to allow broadcasters to devote considerable resources to it, but also the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence provided journalists with front row seats. The moral complexities that surrounded debates about the motives and justifications for war could be cast to one side as they focused on a war to topple the most demonised leader of recent times.

Yet how newsworthy was it? US and British involvement in one-sided wars— whether in Kuwait, Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Iraq—has become a feature of the post-Cold War era. The outcome of the Iraqi conflict, as with all the others, was predictable, and the scale of suffering involved was far less than less 'newsworthy' recent conflicts in Africa. Moreover, were the battles for Basra and Baghdad so significant that there was no space left for the wider questions about the war and its ramifications?

Even though the war lasted only three weeks, the ITC reported that 61 percent of viewers felt there was too much coverage (Sancho & Glover, 2003), a feeling also expressed in many of the focus groups. What many people found excessive

was precisely the action footage from the front lines that broadcasters deemed so newsworthy: 35 percent of respondents in our survey felt there was too much coverage of 'action from the front lines' (only 8 percent said there was too little); and 42 percent thought not enough coverage was given to an 'investigation into why the war was fought and whether it was justified' (compared with 19 percent who said too much coverage was given to this sort of investigation).[11] This is not to say that a substantial section of the audience was not drawn to the front-line coverage of the war. But while this group was well catered for, viewers who wanted other stories told were not. Although 55 percent of respondents opposed to the war wanted more coverage of the issues surrounding the war, only 27 percent of respondents who supported the war expressed this view. If these differences are not surprising, *they reveal the degree to which decisions about news value are not impartial.*

And this is the crux of the argument. While many other factors were involved— for example, the desire to support troops during wartime—it seems likely that, in Britain at least, the coverage of the war itself played a part in persuading a majority to support it. Questions about the motives, efficacy, and legality of the war—questions that might have created doubt in people's minds—were suspended. This is not, on the whole, a matter of media 'bias'. British broadcasters were aware that attitudes to the war were divided and made efforts to be impartial. Indeed, they often focused on 'bad news', such as Iraqi forces resisting the advance or a setback for US-led forces, rather than on military successes (Albertazzi, 2003). More generally, there is little evidence that broadcast journalists were seduced by the embed program to become cheerleaders for the USA.

However, what the embed system did do was to get journalists to focus on the progress of the war at the expense of broader contextual issues. The absence, for obvious reasons, of embeds with Iraqi forces combined with traditions of taste and decency that made it difficult to show the ugly side of war, creating a stream of footage that humanized the US-led forces and dehumanised the Iraqis. This narrative created its own momentum. It made 'liberated' Iraqis more newsworthy than those Iraqis who, at best, had mixed feelings about the war.

At the same time, journalists too readily accepted the bipartisan view that Iraq possessed WMD; an acceptance that was facilitated by the emphasis on the war itself and their consequent dependence on military and government sources (Albertazzi, 2003; Brookes et al., 2003). With the outbreak of war, the media environment shifted from a comparatively open and wide-ranging debate, to one firmly placed on a pro-war terrain. For those ambivalent about the war—and many were—this informational context made it easier to support the war and more difficult to summon up arguments against it.

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[11] This is all the more notable since, at the time of the survey, this issue had become a long-running story.

In Britain, at least, this was not a product of any decision by broadcasters to abandon impartiality, but a consequence of routine decisions about news values and practices. These, in turn, were shaped by the media's embrace of the embed program—a strategic public relations intervention, by the Pentagon and the British Ministry of Defence, designed to exploit certain news values (by granting journalists relatively uncensored access to the battlefield) while crowding out others (including broader contextual narratives about the Iraq War).

Unless these values and practices are interrogated and changed, reluctant publics may be persuaded to support war simply by the act of war itself. In the context of a lack of support for many aspects of the use of military power, it is this that most clearly provides political elites with a rationale for sustaining high levels of military expenditure, creating, perhaps, a self-sustaining cycle of military spending and aggression.

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