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The invasion of Iraq — and how the media war was won and lost

Half truths and media spin: whom do you believe?

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RECENTLY a revealing book was published in the United States and, as far as I know, it was never reviewed, or barely mentioned, in the New Zealand media. But its message was a salutary lesson for us here, half a globe away from the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols have argued for an honest debate over a total rethink of policy for media if it is to continue to have an effective role in democracy, if it is to remain a genuine Fourth Estate. Their book, entitled, *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media*, presents a persuasive case for building a mass movement that seeks to replace *their* [corporate] *media* with a media that serves ordinary citizens — *our media*.¹ According to McChesney and Nichols, the constitutional founders guaranteed freedom of the press because they knew democracy needed “rich and diverse sources of information and ideas”.² Essentially, the authors were arguing that the multinational media corporations were too powerful and should not be allowed to dictate to governments the limits placed on competition in the broadcast and print media sectors.

People know the media are betraying their public trust. Whether it's what's on TV — the exploitation, the commercialism — or the news and public service programming that isn't on the TV, people know that what they're getting is not what they want or need.³

Elsewhere in the book, Noam Chomsky reminds us about how Tom Paine two centuries ago issued a call to “recover rights” that had been lost to ‘conquest and tyranny’, thereby opening “a new era to the human race”. Chomsky renewed the challenge to carry forward the endless struggle for freedom and justice.⁴ Unfortunately few seem to have heeded that challenge, least of all some 500 journalists who chose to be “embedded’ with the military, or as most cynics describe it, in bed with the military during last month's invasion of Iraq.

Some 2000 journalists covered the war in an unprecedented voyeuristic view of a one-sided destruction of a nation in what was an illegal war. Some estimates put the number of Australian journalists on the ground covering the war as high as 100, but certainly they were there in “larger numbers than in Korea, Vietnam, the Indonesian confrontation and the First Gulf War”, all of which had significant Australian military involvement.⁵ (If you think this is a high number, the *New York Times* alone had 30 journalists in the

¹ McChesney, Robert W., and John Nichols. (2002). *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

² Nader, Ralph. (2002). In an honest Debate. In McChesney, Robert W., and John Nichols (pp. 12-14). *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Chomsky, Noam. (2002). Renewing Tom Paine's Challenge. In McChesney, Robert W., and John Nichols. (pp. 15-23). *Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

⁵ Tidey, John. (2003, April). Australian newspapers send their best people, *PANPA Bulletin*, p. 5.

field.)⁶ In contrast, merely three journalists from New Zealand were covering the war, all television reporters and all on the periphery, both geographically (well clear of the battle zones) and in terms of coverage insights. Why did they bother?

The target for this war was a Third World nation that had been inhumanely impoverished and effectively disarmed by 12 years of sanctions. Under a tyrant, yes, but Iraq had no chance against the might of the Anglo-American forces. The propaganda myth of the “elite Republican Guard” forces evaporated soon enough. This was a country with 1980s Soviet-era vintage equipment and virtually defenceless against modern precision digital era armaments.

‘More’ news, but less insightful

The massive “more” of news coverage hardly equalled quality information, which was lost in the “fog of war”⁷, and raised alarming questions about media credibility in a campaign of propaganda, lies, half-truth and spin. Of course, this is nothing new; truth has always been the first casualty of war, and author Philip Knightley⁸ had already warned us about this some months before the invasion began. But according to John Pilger:

There is something deeply corrupt consuming this craft of mine. It is not a recent phenomenon; look back on the ‘coverage’ of the First World War by journalists who were subsequently knighted for their services for the concealment of the truth of that great slaughter.

What makes the difference today is the technology that produces an avalanche of repetitive information, which in the United States has been the source of arguably the most vociferous brainwashing in that country’s history.

A war that was hardly a war, that was so one-sided it ought to be despatched with shame in the military annals, was reported like a Formula One race, as we watched the home teams speed to the chequered flag in Baghdad’s Fardus Square, where a statue of the dictator created and sustained by “us” was pulled down in a ceremony that was as close to fakery as you could get.⁹

And Pilger is by no means alone in these views. Robert Fisk, the celebrated *Independent* specialist on Middle East affairs, wrote a series of trenchant and contextual articles, many of them scathing about aspects of media coverage — including one particularly memorable one questioning whether US troops murdered three journalists during the fall of Baghdad.¹⁰ But unfortunately not many of his best pieces were used in the *New Zealand Herald* in spite of the paper being owned by Tony O’Reilly’s *Independent* group. According to David Miller, a member of the Glasgow University Media group and

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Sirri, Odai. (2003, April 16). Did the media get blinded by the “fog of war”? *al-Jazeera*.

⁸ Knightley, Philip (2002). *The First Casualty* (2nd Ed).

⁹ Pilger, John. (2003, April 25). Something deeply corrupt is consuming journalism. *Hidden Agendas* www.john.pilger.com

¹⁰ Fisk, Robert. (2003, April 26). Did the US murder these journalists? *The Independent* www.news.independent.co.uk

joint author of *Market Killing*, the invasion of Iraq was ‘the most information controlled conflict of modern times’¹¹:

Coverage in the mainstream media is being manipulated as never before. The US is going to unprecedented lengths to ensure that its spin is dominating media agendas across the West. And it is expending massive resources in minimising critical coverage around the world.

[The] US and UK governments have shown themselves adept at learning media-management lessons from successive conflicts. In both Suez (1956) and most importantly Vietnam, the UK and US governments came to believe that propaganda was the key to winning wars. In the Suez debacle General Sir Charles Keighley concluded in an internal British government report in 1957 that the “over-riding lesson” was that “world opinion is now the absolute principle of war”.¹²

The lessons of the Vietnam conflict were put into practice in the Falklands War in 1982. The 29 journalists covering that war were tightly controlled in an earlier – more tightly controlled - version of “embedding” with the naval forces and there were no independent reporters. A dual system of censorship operated in the war on Iraq. Curiously, while the Arabic media were routinely portrayed as biased or censored, the bias and manipulation of the Anglo-American media was rarely acknowledged in Western countries — certainly not in NZ television and print reports.

The bias and editorialising of much of the NZ media coverage, relying heavily as it did on news sources, satellite feeds and wire agencies from Anglo-American protagonists, was quite significant. More than 1000 peace protesters marched on Television New Zealand and *The New Zealand Herald* offices in Auckland on 12 April 2003 to express their displeasure. While *One News* acknowledged the demonstration in a brief news report that night, the *Herald* ignored the protesters. In a letter delivered to chief executive Ian Fraser of TVNZ, a state-owned company operating two free-to-air channels, the protesters claimed its news service had become a “mouthpiece and visual portal for an unrelenting stream of bald US/UK propaganda and blatant lies”.

TVNZ has simply set aside the fact that the US invasion is illegal, immoral and unsanctioned and has portrayed it over the past three weeks as a ‘war of liberation’, undertaken on behalf of the Iraqi people with barely a nod towards the great mass of humanity - and a clear majority of New Zealanders - who oppose this organised aggression against the people of Iraq.¹³

The rare exceptions included the *Listener*, particularly with editorials by editor Finlay Macdonald and analysis of the war by Gordon Campbell, and Scoop www.scoop.co.nz, which pursued a fiercely independent line and posted images of the Anglo-American POWs in defiance of an American directive to media. US authorities happily violated the

¹¹ Miller, David. (2003, April 16). War journalism is guided by military precision. al-Jazeera.net english.aljazeera.net

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ [NZ] Iraq war demonstrators protest over ‘media bias’. (2003, April 12). *Pacific Media Watch*.

Geneva Convention when taking Afghani captives to shackles to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where they are far removed from constitutional protections, and were happy for TV networks to show pictures of surrendering Iraqi soldiers.

Why is it that when journalists who generally respect the ethical norms of balance, fairness and impartiality during “normal times” are happy to jump on the bandwagon of jingoism and suspend their critical faculties during war? And New Zealand, unlike Australia, was not even at war. Rarely did we get reports of the “other side” of the story – reports from Arabic satellite channels such as al-Jazeera, the independent academic analysis, or even insightful reporting on the Iraqi community in New Zealand.

Direct attacks on journalists

Measuring the war reportage of the New Zealand — and much of the Western media — against their role in democratic society to provide the public with an informed basis on which to exercise their democratic rights to lobby, then the media “failed spectacularly to do its job”, according to independent Scoop website editor Alastair Thompson. Not only did the media have to deal with censorship, says Thompson, but it also had to combat what he calls “information warfare”.¹⁴

This information war was conducted on numerous fronts. Among the techniques used have been direct attacks on journalists, deliberate misinformation – i.e. lies, obstruction, legal threats and intimidation, linguistic sophistry, staged media events, planted information, forgery, and even Cointel-pro type slander attacks on commentators and opposition figures.¹⁵

Video clip one: Rageh Omaar reports on the shelling of journalists in the Palestine Hotel, Baghdad, BBC World, 8 April 2002

At the time of the shelling of the Palestine Hotel – and let’s be frank, it was well-known that this hotel was where most foreign journalists were based – General Buford Blount of the Third Infantry Division claimed that sniper fire had been directed at the tank. He added that the fire ended “after the tank had fired” at the hotel. Not only did journalists at the hotel confirm there was no sniper fire, veteran Middle East specialist Robert Fisk actually witnessed the shelling. He recalled in an article questioning whether the US troops murdered two journalists in the shelling:

There was no sniper fire – nor any rocket-propelled grenade fire, as the American officer claimed – at the time. French television footage of the tank, running for minutes before the attack, shows the same thing. The soundtrack – until the blinding, repulsive golden flash from the tank barrel – is silent.¹⁶

¹⁴ Thompson, Alastair. (2003, April 29). The role of the media in the Second Gulf War. An address by the Scoop editor at St Andrews-on-the-Terrace, Wellington. Published on Scoop:

www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/HL0304/S00223.htm

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Fisk, Robert . (2003, April 26). Did the US murder these journalists? *The Independent*.

This attack on journalists at the Reuters office followed less than three hours after an American aircraft fired a single missile at the Qatar-based al-Jazeera office and killed reporter Tareq Ayoub. The missile was apparently fired at the exact coordinates supplied by al-Jazeera's managing director, Mohamed Jassem al-Ali, to US Defence Department warning that civilian journalists were working in the building. The US military also attacked the al-Jazeera office in Kabul in the invasion of Afghanistan after September 11. The Paris-based media freedom group Reporters Sans Frontières condemned the Baghdad killings. The New York advocacy group Committee to Protect Journalists issued a media advisory headed: "Is killing part of the Pentagon press policy?" It stated:

On April 8 ... US military forces launched what appeared to be deliberate attacks on independent journalists covering the war, killing three and injuring four others. In one incident, a US tank fired an explosive shell at the Palestine Hotel, where most non-embedded international reporters in Baghdad are based. Two journalists, Taras Protsyuk of the British news agency Reuters and Jose Couso of the Spanish network Telecinco, were killed; three other journalists were injured. The tank, which was parked nearby, appeared to carefully select its target, according to journalists in the hotel, raising and aiming its gun turret some two minutes before firing a single shell.

Robert Fisk says the Americans were "outraged at al-Jazeera's coverage of the civilian victims of US bombing raids". They were equally unhappy with some of the reportage from journalists at the Palestine Hotel, free from the self-censorship straitjacket of being "embedded" with the military. Fisk added:

A Ukrainian, a Spaniard, an Arab. They all died within hours of each other. I suspect they were killed because the US – someone in the Pentagon – decided to try to "close down" the press. Of course, American journalists are not investigating this. They should – because they will be next.

The toppled statue episode – a stage-managed farce?

Gagging the critics — an age-old tactic. But let us return to John Pilger's earlier reference to the statue propaganda, the truth about this fraudulent incident needs to be exposed. The US was desperate to have a symbolic "liberation" style image to project the people of Iraq, especially as these images had eluded them in Basra as defenders of the regime fought on desperately against great odds. Thus the iconic images of Saddam's statue being toppled in Fardus Square. on April 9 and being "beaten" with sandals by a "jubilant crowd greeting liberation" in reality were nothing like what was framed on TV and in the newspapers. I watched BBC World in the lead-up to the toppling.

OHX1 "Packaged global image": A hated tyrant falls, NZH/Reuters 11 April 2003

OHX2 Reality: The near-empty Fardus Square, 10 April 2003, dc.Indymedia

The square was largely empty except for three strategically positioned US Abrams tanks and an armoured personnel carrier plus a small paltry crowd of 100 or so, many of them apparently journalists. A BBC World news presenter kept asking, "Where is everybody?" There were apparently more journalists there than Iraqis and they appeared to be waiting

for an event that some had possibly been tipped off about in advance. The statue was unlikely to have been pulled down without US help, which the American soldiers were quick to exploit — even momentarily wrapping the *Stars and Stripes* around Saddam's head. An IndyMedia website presented photos and evidence that some of the crowd were from US-backed Ahmed Chalabi's Free Iraqi Forces militia.¹⁷

It is incidents such as this that have tarnished the credibility of US news sources. What has happened to the Fourth Estate ethic? Certainly, it seemed to have lost its edge compared with the new Arabic media such as al-Jazeera, el-Manar TV and Abu Dhabi TV. "For many years Western media had represented the best option for Arab viewers," wrote Kaled Ezeelarab. "It had gained a reputation of being motivated solely by professional incentives, first and foremost seeking the truth."¹⁸ But now the sophistication and professionalism of the Arab stations have challenged Western dominance.

For Stephan Richter of *The Globalist*, part of the problem is the "follow the herd" or the pack mentality. Many journalists are afraid to step outside consensus reporting: "As long as they don't stick their necks out, these people believe, nobody can berate them for getting out of line."¹⁹ A similar problem is that the same pack dynamic also works in reverse – making the whole US media business, especially in print and cable news reporting, highly pro-cyclical. To follow the war and the reconstruction with any real understanding, we need to refer to both the Arab (such as al-Jazeera in English, english.aljazeera.net) and Western news sources – and read between the lines. But most importantly, we need to browse independent and insightful websites.

Glossed over civilian casualties

Adam Porter highlights how the embedded style of media reality show glossed over the civilian casualties and played up the image of a "clean" war.²⁰ He cited the uncritical and defensive news presentation by BBC networks after the US Third Regiment killed seven women and children on the night of March 31 as they approached a checkpoint on a bridge near the southern Iraqi city of Karbala. Initial reports claimed that a warning shot had been fired and the women had kept coming towards the checkpoint.

They "just kept coming, just kept coming". (*BBC 10 O'Clock News/Sky TV News/BBC News 24*).

What could anyone do? They "failed to stop?" (*BBC Radio 5 Live*).

Everyone "feels sorry" for the Third Infantry soldiers being put in that position. (*Major David Holly, BBC radio 5 Live*).

¹⁷ Unsigned. (2003, April 10). Staged "liberation" media event? *DC Indy Media* dc.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=63743&group=webcast

¹⁸ Ezzelarab, Kaled. (2003, April 22). Western media no longer the best. *Islam Online* www.gvnews.net/html/DailyNews/alert4146.html

¹⁹ Richter, Stephan. (2003, April 14). The US media and global respect. *GlobalVision/The Globalist*. www.gvnews.net/html/DailyNews/alert4062.html

²⁰ Porter, Adam (2003, April 16). Glossing civilian casualties. *Al Jazeera.net* english.aljazeera.net

The “soldiers were right to shoot” and should be “given (the backing” of Washington. And the tactics were a direct result of the Iraqi military. (*BBC Radio 5 Live*).

The “soldiers were right to defend themselves”. (*BBC Radio 4*).

Was the “just kept coming” phrase from Central Command? Until the following morning, the massacre was presented as a “tragedy” with the Iraqi women having contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to their deaths. However, the *Washington Post* reported the officer in command who ordered the winning shot — but that never came. Commenting on similar incidents, John Pilger wrote:

Imagine the terror of a mother, cowering with her children on the road as the “softly spoken 21-year-olds” decide whether to kill them, or kill the old man failing to stop his car? The children are clearly “scouts”; the old man is, well, who knows and who cares?²¹

The killing-the-chick-who-got-in-the-way mentality was another manifestation of the “collateral damage” to use an obscene military term.²² Another obscene term is “degrading the enemy”, which means bomb hell out of “them” while you have total air supremacy and kill as many of “them” as possible. The following clip is an example of the many times when US troops “degraded” their own forces or allies.

Video clip Two: US aircraft bomb own forces in Northern Iraq, TVNZ compilation, 6 April 200.

OHT: New Zealand Herald front page case study

The ongoing information war

Although “major combat operations” have officially ceased²³, the information war goes on. No one will really know what happened in this war until the Western media does its job and asks the right questions. Now that the New Zealand media has “turned off” Iraq after the end of the reality show, it will be even more difficult to get answers. Some of these questions are:

- Why hasn’t the media investigated the alleged role of US troops in the apparent policy of encouraging or even organising looting in the days after the fall of Baghdad? While a company of soldiers guarded the Oil Ministry alone, the National Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Archives and various ministries and hospitals were looted and, in some cases, torched. And to make it worse, there is evidence that suggests much of the looting was organised and the rise of the “Arab street” was projected as a cover-up for this.

²¹ Pilger, John (2003), *op. cit.*

²² Collateral damage: Al Sahaf unleashed. (2003, April 16). *al-Jazeera*

²³ All over bar the shouting. (2003, May 3). *Weekend Herald*, citing Reuters, AP.

According to an Arabic-speaking PhD scholar from Sweden who was a human shield during the war, he personally watched US soldiers shoot security guards on an administrative building in Haifa Ave on April 8. He recalled:

I was just 300 metres away when the guards were murdered. Then they shot the building entrance to pieces, and their Arabic translators in the tanks told people to run for grabs inside the building. Rumours spread rapidly and the house was cleaned out. Moments later tanks broke down the doors to the Justice Department, residing in the neighbouring building, and looting was carried on there.

Interviewer: Do you mean to say that it was the US troops that initiated the looting?

Absolutely. The lack of scenes of joy had the US forces in need of images of Iraqis who [had] in different ways demonstrated their disgust with Saddam's regime.²⁴

- Who ordered these “scorched earth” tactics and why?
- What happened to the “20,000 strong, well-equipped elite” Special Republican Guards who were supposed to defend Baghdad? Where did they vanish to?
- What happened to the long-promised fedayeen urban guerrilla war, a la the Battle of Mogadishu? Basra was far smaller and relatively lightly defended, and it took three weeks to subdue the city.
- Why were none of the bridges leading into Baghdad destroyed – an effective military tactic for defending a city?
- Why did the entire Iraqi cabinet manage to escape apparently overnight on April 8? This was the night of the alleged bombing in the Mansur district when 14 civilians were killed. A BBC team later reported that the actual meeting place allegedly used by Saddam was unscathed?
- What happened to the infrastructure of the regime – the bulk of the estimated 500,000 elite?
- What has happened to Saddam Hussein, given that he was a target of the invasion?

²⁴ Rothenborg, Ole. (2003, April 11). US forces encourage looting. *Dagens Nyeter*, translated article posted on Information Clearing House:
www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2914.htm

Many rumours have been fuelled by a Lebanese newspaper report²⁵ outlining how the CIA allegedly infiltrated the human shields in Baghdad to pinpoint targets, the Republican Guard commanders were bribed with safe passage in return for their surrender, independent media were to be intimidated and “corralled” – hence the attack on the Reuters and al-Jazeera offices – and Saddam and his entourage were spirited to Mecca. Or is Saddam still in Iraq and planning for guerrilla war?²⁶

- And where is the “smoking gun” – the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD)? Did the weapons exist when the war began? Probably not. But undoubtedly they will be “found”, just as a number of journalists have found nice, clean and conveniently incriminating “smear” files on people such as the Scottish MP supporter of Iraq, George Galloway, among the ashes of ruined ministries. A media manipulator’s dream.
- Why have the New Zealand media been so quick to publish the smear allegations against Galloway and not publish his response, such as published in *The Independent*?²⁷

Finally, when are the media going to provide some serious answers, or even pose the questions? And where is the likelihood of the democracy that this war’s supposed objective. The Anglo-American forces easily won the war – as if that was ever in doubt – but it is hard to see them winning the peace. Sooner or later the guerilla war will begin with Iraq perhaps becoming another Palestine or Lebanon, or alternatively an Islamist state like Iran. But to keep informed, don’t count too much on the corporate media.

²⁵ Thompson, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Escobar, Pepe (2003, April 25). The Roving Eye: The Baghdad deal. *Asia Times Online* www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/ED25Ak04.html

²⁷ Galloway, George (2003, April 24). I’m a victim of the war against the Iraqi people. *The Independent*. argument.independent.co.uk/commentators/story.jsp?story=399799