
THE MEDIA & IRAQ: WAR COVERAGE ANALYSIS

BY MARIELLEN DIEMAND

"To speak the truth, there must be two people. One to speak it and one to hear it."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Thoreau reminds us that in order for there to be truth in our lives there must be someone to speak it first. We as a society assume those truths will be freely distributed by those who run our country and those who keep us informed – those we are supposed to be able to depend on and trust. In a time of war, free speech comes under fire by our government in the forms of censorship, false reporting and untruths and unbalanced news. The truth needed for a vibrant democracy has dissipated, leaving behind an antiseptic and sanitized version of the war in Iraq, brought to us by media corporations – often referred to as “mouthpieces for the US government”.

“Mostly, it works that way in practice because countless journalists – whether they’re flag-wavers at *Fox News* or liberal sophisticates at *NPR News* – keep letting authorities define the bounds of appropriate empathy and moral concern,” said **Norman Solomon**, a nationally syndicated columnist on media and politics, on April 17, 2003 in *Media Beat*.

During the course of the war with Iraq, there were many questions about the role of the American media. Some would argue that their role was to inform, but after a slew of false reports, a contract signed by embedded reporters with the Pentagon on “playing by the rules” and a pro-war sentiment ringing throughout cable news networks, it would seem as though objective reporting was the last consideration in the “rush to be first” to inform the public.

“If the first two weeks of the coverage was any indication, this war will be a case study in the failure of success by U.S. journalism,” said **Robert Jensen**, writer for *The Progressive*, at the height of the conflict.¹

“...There was no meaningful debate on the main news shows of *CBS*, *ABC*, *NBC* or *PBS*...The media didn’t even provide the straight facts well,” said Jensen.²

Now that the war has come to an end and the U.S. occupation has begun, twenty-four hour a day coverage of the war has been replaced by sporadic clips of troops guarding the cities of Iraq and of those troops fortunate enough to be returning home. The embedded reporters have returned back to their networks and more emphasis is being placed on national going-ons, the SARS virus and North Korea. So where do we go from here? Do we simply forget about the “reporting” that occurred in Iraq – the one-sided, patriotic sentiment that was evident in newscasts and the many false reports on chemical weapons and the fall of Iraqi cities?

It is important for the nation, now more than ever, to reflect on the information that was served to them about the war – the analysis by ex-military generals serving as “reliable” sources and the misrepresentation of Iraqi casualties and Iraqi voices. It is important to discuss where our press’ and government’s priorities were throughout this war and hope that we can stir enough dialogue so as to change press policies, inviting the chance for open debate – that which is crucial to democracy. We have entered an ideal time for this reflection and change to occur – a time when our eyes are no longer sore from watching relentless bombing, but are now open to see the real devastation of war and the consequences of misinformation and infotainment.

¹ www.progressive.org/may03/jen0503.html

² *ibid*

ROLE OF THE PRESS

*"In wartime the press is always part of the problem. When the nation goes to war, the press goes with it...the blather on CNN or Fox or MSNBC is part of a long and sad tradition."*³

CHRIS HEDGES | reporter for *The New York Times*

In December 2001, a few months after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Solomon noted, "the overwhelming bulk of news stations are already serving as amplification systems for Washington's warriors in times of crisis."⁴

Critics agree the role of the press in the war against Iraq has been to deter dissenting opinions and to be "cheerleaders" for the ongoing battle. Any attempt at objectivity was abandoned once the bombs started dropping and was replaced with one-sided and overly patriotic sentiments, which closely resemble the administration's stance on the war.

"Transfixed with tactical maneuvers and overall strategies inside Iraq, media outlets rarely mention that this entire war by the U.S. government and its British accomplice is a flagrant violation of international law," says Solomon.⁵

In an attempt to decode the reasoning for unbalanced news coverage of the war and the lack of alternative voices, Solomon believes that the White House has been sending a message to working journalists since September 11th: Exercise too much independence and you'll risk accusations of giving aid and comfort to the terrorist enemy.⁶

Brian Lambert, media columnist for the *Pioneer Press* agrees with the notion that reporters have become more concerned with being perceived as un-patriotic than with reporting the realities of war and supplying the American public with an arsenal of varying opinions.

"American networks have behaved as though they truly do fear their patriotism will be questioned (and their ratings suffer) if they report the war with anything less than a stalwart, triumphalist tone," said Lambert.⁷

In other attempts by media critics to define the role of the press during military conflict, many believe that there is loyalty by the press to the administration and vice versa because the two are one in the same: the wealthy and the elite.

"Bush and his administration know that they can count on the 'patriotism' of the press...because the press in the U.S. censors itself," says **Anthony Arrove**, writer for *Z-Magazine* and editor of *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*. Arrove feels that the press' obligation to the administration in the end is dependent on the financial ties each has to the other.⁸

"The media lines up with the government on fundamental matters...because the media themselves are huge corporations that share the same economic and political interests with the tiny elite that runs the U.S. government," says Arrove.⁹

Consequently, the journalists embedded in Iraq have suffered severe limitations on what they can and cannot report. As a guest of U.S. military, embedded journalists must abide by the rules or risk being sent home. These journalists, garbed in fatigues, covered in sweat and dirt report to us from behind tanks using a military vocabulary to describe their unit's mission as if they were the newest recruits.

"Correspondents in the field have bonded with troops to the point that their language and enunciated outlooks are often indistinguishable," says Solomon on the embedded journalists.¹⁰

3 www.thenation.com

4 www.accuracy.org/zmag1101.htm

5 www.alternet.org

6 www.accuracy.org/zmag1101.htm

7 www.alternet.org

8 www.zmag.org

9 *ibid*

10 www.alternet.org

Chris Hedges, reporter for *The Nation*, feels that the embedded journalist's role has been solely to disseminate the "myth...the narrative we are fed about the war by the state...the myth used to justify the war and boost the morale of the soldiers and civilians." As a result, "these journalists become participants in the war effort," says Hedges.¹¹

"UNFAIR AND UNBALANCED NEWS"

"This has been one long Orwellian week...it's amazing on how the news is being managed by the Pentagon...everybody's radar has to be up super high right now and your b.s. detector has to be at full blast..."

MICHAEL MOORE | *Democracy Now!*, March 28, 2003

As network logos swirl around the screen, draped in an American flag, we are reminded that the news we received during the height of the conflict and continue to receive now is frighteningly one-sided: pro-war, anti-Iraqi and anti-alternative voices. We are constantly receiving commentary from ex-military generals and politicians who think in terms of war, not in terms of resolution. Rarely are we given information about the other side, be it the Iraqi civilians or the anti-war movement. Their voices are and have been under-represented leaving many to succumb to the one-sided coverage of the war, forming opinions based on what they are being told and shown.

"The small amount of space that did exist in the mass media for substantive dissent has been largely closed...at least for now," said Solomon on April 2, 2003 on *Democracy Now!*. Solomon notes that he had been on *CNN* five or six times before the war began, but that he hasn't received any invitations to return since then. It is evident that his space and commentary have been given to other 'reliable sources' for commentary and 'analysis':

Steve Rendell, from *Fair and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)* agrees that dissenting voices have not been heard and have been buried beneath a proliferation of pro-war attitudes and opinions.

In an interview on April 4, 2003, with **Aaron Brown**, lead anchor for *CNN's Newsnight* on *Democracy Now!*, Rendell noted that, "...On the four flagship shows on each of the four networks, that less than 1 percent of the guests they had speaking on stories about Iraq over a two week period in February...less than 1 percent anti-war voices were heard there."

"...Whenever the question is war, what we see is the networks and the cable news channels running out and hiring ex-generals, former Pentagon officials, national security types-people who think in terms of military solutions...Why aren't people hired who could serve as a counter weight to those military voices?" asked Rendell.

When asked why there was such unequal coverage of opinions, Brown responded, "I just don't think it coalesced in a way that made it easy to cover, and I think we were slow to get there."

Equally disturbing in the media war coverage was the reporting of Iraqi civilian casualties, and the framing that occurred to discern between U.S. and Iraqi actions. In an interview on April 2, 2003, with **Amy Goodman** from *Democracy Now!*, Norman Solomon commented on the reporting of Iraqi casualties.

Amy Goodman pointed out that, "In the news Iraqi civilian casualties get almost no attention, whereas U.S. casualties are carefully documented."

"This is about who counts, and who counts...According to the *New York Times*: 'The U.S. Has No Count of Iraqi Dead in Fighting,'" said Solomon in response.

As the Iraqi forces attempted to fight back against the U.S. military, it is strange how their defense was framed as terrorism, their deaths as "collateral damage" and progress.

"The visible anger of Iraqi people has roots in events that usually get described in antiseptic and euphemistic terms by U.S. media outlets," said Solomon.¹²

¹¹ www.thenation.com

¹² www.alternet.org

“With a straight face, and a scant willingness to raise fundamental questions, American networks uncritically relay nonstop barrage of statements from U.S. officials that portray deadly Iraqi actions as heinous and deadly American actions as positive. They have “death squads,” and we have noble troops. Their bombs are odious; ours are remedies for tyranny.”¹³

THE AFTERMATH & THE COVERAGE TO FOLLOW

“We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we...remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes which were, for the moment unpopular.”

EDWARD R. MURROW | reporter for CBS (1935-1961)

As the intense fighting slowly comes to an end, we are left to reflect on the policies of the Pentagon and the administration, as well as the news coverage we received as a real-time war played out in our living rooms. There are some critics who believe and have some hope, such as **Michael Moore**, that those journalists who are embedded will at some point stop being a “shill for the government,” while there are others who see the role of the mass media as being an ever-present, negative reality in our life and will remain so in the future.

“This will be with us for years and decades...we do not get a sense of that from the coverage...they look to next week, next month and soldiers coming home,” says **Greg Mitchell**, editor of *Editor and Publisher Magazine*.¹⁴

In agreement with Mitchell's statement, **Daniel Schechter**, web log writer for *Mediachannel.org* said, “The non-stop news cycle turns breaking events into history with an unprecedented rapidity. Soon we will be flooded with books, videocassettes and documentaries about Operation Iraqi Freedom through a media recycling operation already in high gear.”¹⁵

It seems there is a clear solution to the problems of news bias and the restrictions placed on the press, ironically imposed by the same government who abides by the Amendments in the Constitution themselves – “...healthy journalism culture would offer broad debate, independent, accurate information, and journalists asking very tough questions – especially tough questions of people in power,” said Steve Rendell of *FAIR on Democracy Now!* (April 4, 2003).

The First Amendment seems to be losing its meaning daily and that restoration of its founding qualities are essential for a democratic society in which all voices are heard and all opinions are formed on an individual basis without interference from a mass media whose tie – economic and political – is to the government.

In the words of Norman Solomon: *“In the functional category of ‘use it or lose it,’ The First Amendment remains a partially realized promise. To the extent that it can be fulfilled, democracy becomes an actual rather than a theoretical. But that requires a multiplicity of voices. And when war demands our silence, the imperative of dissent becomes paramount.”*¹⁶

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *NOW! With Bill Moyer*, April 4, 2003

¹⁵ www.mediachannel.org

¹⁶ *Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You*