

Media, War, and Propaganda: Strategies of Information Management During the 2003 Iraq War

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It is now widely acknowledged that the Bush administration used faulty and false information to justify the 2003 war on Iraq, and that the mainstream media, by not adequately investigating the case for war, assisted with the project. In this paper, I outline the particular strategies employed by the media–military industrial complex to ensure a dominance of pro-war arguments in the public sphere. I conclude by arguing that the failure of the media in the US to meet the democratic needs of this society places enormous responsibility on intellectuals to produce scholarship critical of the new imperialism.

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Today, few would disagree that the Bush administration resorted to propaganda in order to justify its war on Iraq and that the news media simply presented as fact information that they should have carefully scrutinized. Some media outlets have even admitted to this. An editorial on May 25, 2004 in the *New York Times* states that in a number of instances, their coverage of the Iraq war “was not as rigorous as it should have been” and that “information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged.”¹

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Several scholars such as Orville Schell have argued that the news media not only accepted but actively embraced information based on spurious intelligence. The result was that dissenting voices were “buried on back pages, ignored on op-ed pages, or confined to the margins of the media, and so denied the kinds of ‘respectability’ that a major media outlet can confer.”² This raises disturbing questions for democracy and the role of the media in facilitating the widest possible exchange of ideas.

Highlighting the crisis of democracy in the twenty-first century, Douglas Kellner argues that the media have become the “arms of conservative and corporate interests,” due to the concentration of ownership.³ Thus, instead of acting in the interests of the public, they advance the interests of political and economic elites. There is also an abundance of research that shows that the mainstream media have a long history of supporting the efforts of the government during war.⁴ At least since the Spanish–American war of 1898, which marked the entry of the US onto the global stage of imperial conquest and rivalry, the news media have played an important role in winning public consent for war.⁵ An explosion on the *USS Maine* led many newspapers, particularly those owned by William Randolph Hearst, in coordination with pro-war voices in government, to accuse Spain without a shred of proof and beat the drums of war.⁶ If the *Maine* became the rallying cry for war with Spain, the Johnson administration, in a replay of history, concocted the “Gulf of Tonkin” incident in 1964. They claimed that the *Maddox*, an American destroyer, was fired at by the North Vietnamese in an unprovoked incident. This turned out to be untrue, but it gave Johnson the congressional resolution he needed to prosecute the Vietnam War.⁷ The media were willing partners in this deception.⁸ More recently, during the 1991 Gulf war, the first Bush administration rallied behind the fabricated story of Kuwaiti babies torn from incubators by Iraqi troops as one of the key justifications for war.⁹ Given this history, it is hardly surprising that the Bush administration would resort to similar mechanisms and that the media would be complicit in their efforts. What is significant about the Iraq war is the depth and scope of duplicity.

In this paper, I analyze media coverage of the 2003 war on Iraq, both in the build up to war and during the war, in order to delineate media and government strategies that ensured a preponderance of pro-war arguments. The mechanisms of information control were successful, I argue, due to two co-existing factors: the development and testing of government information control strategies over the last three decades, and the emergence of a for-profit giant conglomerate media system that lends itself to propaganda due to its structural limitations. The convergence of these two trends has seen a further integration of the media into the military industrial complex, building upon existing Cold War relationships. As the “war on terror” continues, we can expect the growth of more sophisticated methods of information control and the further curtailment of diversity and debate, unless significant challenges are posed by an informed public. We have seen steps in this direction in the aftermath of the war with the growth of public skepticism towards the corporate media. I conclude by arguing that dissenting voices in the academy have a responsibility to challenge the

logic of this new age of empire, not only through our research but also through our participation in social movements.

The Evolving Propaganda Machine: Historical and Structural Factors

The current system of war information management derives from strategies devised by political elites and military planners over the last 30 years which built upon those of the Cold War. After the Vietnam War, sections of the political elite came to believe that it was media coverage of the war that led to US defeat. Among other things, they argued that television distorted the war by showing graphic images of the dead, turning Americans against the war. While television did show some images of casualties, it was nowhere near the claimed volume. Between 1965 and 1970, only about 3 percent of all evening news reports from Vietnam showed heavy fighting with dead or wounded.¹⁰ Additionally, TV war stories featuring images of casualties were brief and were a minority of all reports filed.¹¹ Right up to 1968, media coverage of war was consistent with the official line. However, despite the reality, future war planners would conclude that they could never again risk uncensored media coverage of wars.

Through trial and error, a system of media control was devised over the 1980s. The first real attempt was during the US invasion of Grenada in 1983. Media control was so successful that there was a virtual black out of this war because journalists were prevented from going to Grenada. In response to protests, the National Media Pool was created which included a small number of trusted reporters who could be taken to the scene of war at short notice. This was put into practice in the next major US invasion, Panama in 1989. During this war, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney insisted on a Washington-based pool, which meant that the most knowledgeable reporters—those with some experience and knowledge of Panama—would not be in the region. He then decided not to inform the press of the invasion until a few hours before it began. As a result, as with Grenada, journalists could not reach Panama on time. Once they arrived, they were held captive by the military for another five hours. Ultimately, journalists found that they had little information and no pictures other than what the Pentagon had provided them, and this is what they reported.¹² Military planners had finally devised a system of media control: restrict access to the battlefield and thus minimize coverage of casualties, provide the media with military approved images of the war, create a “pool” of trusted journalists who could be relied upon, and drum up patriotism.¹³

By the time of the Gulf War of 1991, the system of media censorship had been all but perfected. As Dick Cheney, one of the contributors to this system, would state after the war: “Frankly, I looked on it [the media] as a problem to be managed. The information function was extraordinarily important. I did not have a lot of confidence that I could leave it to the press.”¹⁴ The pool system allowed the military to control the movement of journalists and to restrict where they went and what they saw. Journalists were taken to selected sites and not allowed to interview soldiers without a military minder present. Additionally, reporters were not allowed to pass

on stories until they were inspected by the military. In the absence of direct access to the war, reporters were treated to press briefings with images of precision bombing and laser-guided missiles hitting their target.

Even the language used to discuss the war assumed Orwellian forms: bad became good and night day. As Kellner argues, “Euphemisms concealed the lethality of the destruction and the effects of the bombing and provided a false picture of surgical, precision bombing.”¹⁵ While the dominant images and language suggested that the war was being fought with precision guided bombs, in reality only 7 percent of the ordnance was the “smart” bombs. Furthermore, 70 percent of the smart bombs missed their targets. In all, both conventional and smart technology weapons killed an estimated 200,000 or more and destroyed the infrastructure including electrical power, water, sanitation, and communication facilities. But the pool system prevented journalists from covering this destruction. When journalists Jon Alpert and Maryann DeLeo managed to obtain video footage of the destruction, NBC and CBS refused to air their videotapes. The media also squelched reports of “friendly fire” casualties.

In the 2003 war on Iraq, many of the same characteristics of war coverage can be observed. Additionally, as I will discuss below, several new facets of censorship were incorporated, making the system more sophisticated. In part, this evolution and perfecting of the media–military industrial complex propaganda system is voluntary and conscious. For instance, Bush advisers Karl Rove and Mark McKinnon met with the heads of Viacom, Disney, MGM and others after 9/11 to discuss how the media could “help” the government’s efforts. Before the start of the Iraq war, CNN set up a system of “script approval” where reporters had to send their stories to unnamed officials in Atlanta before they could be run. This would ensure that if the military made any errors, CNN monitors would act as the second layer of filtering. Rupert Murdoch of News Corporation took an active role in setting the tone of his news media outlets, so that, not coincidentally, all 175 editors of Murdoch’s worldwide newspaper empire took a position in support of the war.¹⁶ Fox, also owned by News Corporation, took this support to the extreme, going so far as to ridicule antiwar protesters.

The convergence of media and government interests in war propaganda derives from shared economic and political interests. In order for US-based media conglomerates such as AOL–Time Warner, Disney, Viacom etc., to continue to be profitable and to extend their reach, they rely on the government to protect their interests domestically and internationally. Domestically, policies like the Telecommunication Act of 1996 have allowed for unprecedented media concentration. Internationally, the US government, through institutions like the World Trade Organization, pries open foreign governments for US media investments. In the case of Iraq, the conquest of that country and the strengthening of US control in the region allows US-based media conglomerates and telecommunications giants to be better positioned to dominate Middle East markets.

In addition to cooperation between media and political elites, another element that has allowed the emergence of the current system of war propaganda arises from the

structural limitations of the corporate media system. The pressure to increase profit, felt quite acutely by giant media conglomerates, has led to methods of operation that have compromised journalist ethics. The “Fox effect” shows how this works. The Fox news channel emerged, over the course of the war on Iraq, as the most watched source of news on cable. Fox’s approach to the war was self-consciously biased in favor of war, and it sought to tap into a conservative niche market. Anchors and reporters openly chided antiwar voices and abandoned any pretence of neutrality and objectivity. Despite the obvious violations of journalistic integrity, Fox received high ratings, and disturbingly other channels took steps to emulate Fox.¹⁷

Additionally, there are more long-term structural weaknesses that allow the media to be manipulated. There has been much scholarship on the nature of the corporate media, and in the interests of space I will highlight only a few factors: excessive reliance on government and corporate sources, professional journalism’s deference to official sources, the lack of funding for investigative journalism, the marginalization of dissenting voices, and mechanisms that promote self-censorship. Over the last two decades, in order to keep costs low, media conglomerates have downsized and laid off journalists. The result is that they have become more reliant on cheap or free sources of information. The two main sources of such information are corporate public relations departments and the government. Vast amounts of information reach the news media through these two sources. The Pentagon alone employs thousands of people, and spends millions of dollars on its public relations every year.¹⁸ When combined with the “beat” system, where reporters are sent to established locations such as the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, and so on to routinely cover events, the extent of media reliance on government information becomes clear. The outcome of this dependency is that government (and corporate) sources acquire enormous power to manipulate the news.¹⁹

Furthermore, the logic of “professional journalism” encourages reporters to accept this status quo. As Robert McChesney argues, the standards of professional journalism work to legitimate and prioritize corporate profit-making journalism over partisan public-service journalism.²⁰ One consequence of this is the tendency to view those in positions of authority, such as government officials or CEOs, as “credible” and reliable sources of information. Brent Cunningham, managing editor of *Columbia Journalism Review*, argues that the pursuit of objectivity has exacerbated the tendency to rely on official sources making journalists passive recipients of the news.²¹ This reliance on official sources, combined with cost-cutting measures that have dried up resources for investigative reporting, has resulted in the practice of running unverified government-issued information as news. Political elites have learnt how to use this to their advantage. During the Iraq war, many “facts” and pieces of evidence were stated as truth, only to be recanted later when their veracity was called into question. In another context, Peter Teeley, a press secretary of George H. W. Bush, explained this strategy: “You can say anything you want during a debate, and 80 million people hear it.” If it happens to be untrue, “so what? Maybe 200 people read [the correction] or 2,000 or 20,000.”²²

While official sources are treated deferentially, those who do fall outside the accepted gamut of legitimate sources are dismissed. This logic serves to limit diversity. For instance, when the Chicago-based pacifist group *Voices in the Wilderness* invited the American news media to cover a visit by American antiwar teachers to an Iraqi school, the media declined. Norman Solomon, who was present when this took place, explained this incident as follows:

I was there when Kysia [a member of *Voices in the Wilderness*] handed the press release to a TV crew. As soon as he left, the crew didn't even bother to read the entire press release before declaring that it was propaganda. They considered *Voices* to be outside the reign of legitimate sources, and therefore it could be safely ignored.²³

This is not to say that there are not journalists who want to report on wars in ways that are more inclusive of diverse opinions. However, they are restricted by in-built systems of discipline and rewards. During the war on Iraq, even celebrity journalists like Peter Arnett would be disciplined for crossing the line. Arnett was fired by NBC and National Geographic for stating on Iraqi TV that US war aims had failed to proceed as planned. The effect of this form of disciplining is one of self-censorship. As Dan Rather stated in a BBC interview in 2002: "What we are talking about here—whether one wants to recognize it or not, or call it by its proper name or not—is a form of self-censorship. I worry that patriotism run amok will trample the very values that the country seeks to defend."²⁴ The atmosphere of charged patriotism after 9/11 not only promoted self-censorship but also squelched debate. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the range of acceptable political discussion was made clear. For instance, network and cable television channels incorporated logos that prominently featured the American flag. They also adopted names for their war coverage that bore a strong resemblance to the Pentagon's language. Fox and MSNBC went with "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the Pentagon's name for the Iraq operation, CBS opted for "America at War," and CNN used "Strike on Iraq." With titles and logos that in no uncertain terms establish "us" and "them" in news coverage, it was almost a foregone conclusion which side would receive favorable coverage and which would not.

In sum, the emergence of the system of information management in effect during the 2003 war on Iraq is the product of post-Vietnam military strategy combined with the willing cooperation of media elites operating within a conglomerated system that lends itself to propaganda. While the media have been a part of the military industrial complex since the Cold war, this integration was strengthened post-Vietnam. In the following sections, I discuss how the war on Iraq was covered. In particular, I show how the propaganda efforts of the pro-war side were able to find an echo, and even amplification, in the mainstream media, while dissenting views were muffled.

War Rhetoric: The Bush Administration's Case for War

Well before 9/11, the neoconservatives associated with the Bush administration had developed ways in which to shape US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.

September 11 presented them with an opportunity to campaign publicly for their vision of world politics. This vision is exemplified in the documents of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), founded in 1997 by many individuals in high positions in the Bush administration. A partial list of PNAC founders includes Vice President Dick Cheney, his chief of staff Lewis Libby, Chief Pentagon adviser Richard Perle, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz.²⁵ In September 2000, a PNAC document argued that the US should use overwhelming military force to take control of the gulf region. The report called for “maintaining global US preeminence . . . and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests.”²⁶ But in order to realize this goal, the report went on to add, it was necessary to have “some catastrophic event—like a new Pearl Harbor.”²⁷ This event presented itself one year later in the form of 9/11, and the neoconservatives would use this opportunity to launch a propaganda campaign to win support for war with Iraq.

The case for war on Iraq, as I show below, consisted of at least two key arguments: that Iraq was in some way connected with the events of 9/11, and that the Iraqis possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), had used them in the past, and were willing to use them against the US. In trying to make this case to the public, the neoconservatives in the Bush administration were assisted by several like-minded individuals and groups/think tanks, which when combined with the complicit corporate media, can be seen to constitute an “axis of deception.”

Iraq and 9/11

While the war on Afghanistan seemed easy to justify from the Bush administration’s point of view, tying Iraq to 9/11 and to al Qaeda proved to be a challenge. Yet the efforts to find this connection, as Richard Clarke the former counterterrorism czar reveals in his book *Against All Enemies*, began almost immediately after 9/11. Clarke mentions an incident where President Bush took a few people aside, including himself, and said to them: “I know you have a lot to do and all . . . but I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he’s linked in any way.”²⁸ To carry out this mission, James Woolsey, former director of the CIA and a founding member of PNAC, was sent to Europe to find the evidence. In Europe, Woolsey “discovered” that Czech intelligence had information that Mohammed Atta, the alleged leader of the September 11 attacks, had met with an Iraqi agent in Prague in April, 2001. The report was dismissed as not credible by US, British, French, and Israeli intelligence agencies.²⁹ However, this did not stop Woolsey from appearing on several talk shows and writing op-ed pieces in major newspapers. Even though these allegations were discredited, the limited range of information meant that the public did not have adequate access to both sides of the story. Polls taken at the end of 2002 and in early 2003 reflect the misconceptions surrounding this issue: almost half of all Americans believed that there was a connection between Iraq and 9/11, and many believed that several of the hijackers were Iraqi, though none were.³⁰

Woolsey was not alone in making the connection between 9/11 and Iraq. His arguments were reinforced by several members of the Bush administration. For instance, Cheney stated on NBC:

Cheney. That's been pretty well confirmed, that he [Atta] did go to Prague and he did meet with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in Czechoslovakia last April, several months before the attack. Now, what the purpose of that was, what transpired between them, we simply don't know at this point. But that's clearly an avenue that we want to pursue.

Tim Russert (Anchor). What we do know is that Iraq is harboring terrorists. . . .

Cheney. Well, the evidence is pretty conclusive that the Iraqis have indeed harbored terrorists.³¹

The pattern used to establish an Iraq–al Qaeda link was to assert the connection, sometimes accompanied with caveats of uncertainty as in the quote above, only to be later recanted placing the blame on faulty intelligence. Cheney would later state that the intelligence regarding the Atta–Prague incident was not conclusive. If so, then one wonders why Cheney would argue that this meeting was “well confirmed” and why he would prematurely make public inconclusive intelligence. Another associated strategy was to hide behind the excuse of “classified” information. For instance, when Paul Wolfowitz was asked during a congressional hearing to confirm the Atta–Prague story, he replied that he could not since “this gets into a lot of classified areas.” He went on to add that “[a]lmost everything that's important is shrouded in uncertainty. Nothing is black or white.”³² Wolfowitz and others could rely on the media to accept this line of argument because of the credibility that official sources are granted by the journalist apparatus.

In addition to the Atta story, the connection between Iraq and al Qaeda was made through the method of establishing guilt-by-suggestion. By mentioning Iraq and al Qaeda in the same breath, and by constantly repeating this connection, the link was established. Thus, Bush would state that “the [Iraqi] regime has longstanding and continuing ties to terrorist organizations. And there are al Qaeda terrorists inside Iraq.”³³ The implication is that Iraq must support al Qaeda. While Iraq may have had ties to organizations that the US considers to be “terrorists,” and while there may have been al Qaeda stationed in Iraq, by juxtaposing these two sentences it sent the message that Iraq supported al Qaeda and encouraged them to set up camp in Iraq. Hence, the suggestion of a connection rather than the explicit linking of the two served to establish guilt without the accuser having the burden of proof or accountability. When asked to provide evidence of such links, administration figures like Donald Rumsfeld would evade the question. At a news conference, Rumsfeld said, “I suppose that, at some moment, it may make sense to discuss that [evidence of al Qaeda in Iraq] publicly.” He went on to add, “It doesn't today. But what I have said is a fact—that there are al Qaeda in a number of locations in Iraq.”³⁴

Another rhetorical strategy was to establish guilt-through-speculation. Bush administration officials argued that an Iraq–al Qaeda collaboration could pose a serious threat to the US. Thus, Cheney would state:

Cheney. But that's one of the reasons—it takes us back into the axis of evil speech the president made at the State of the Union, our concerns about Iraq, our concerns about the possible marriage, if you will, between the terrorist organization on the one hand and a state that has or is developing weapons of mass destruction on the other. And *if* you ever get them married up—that is *if* somebody who has nukes decides to share one with a terrorist organization, with the expectation they'll use it against us, obviously we've got another problem.³⁵

The entire argument is based around constructing hypothetical scenarios. When there was no concrete evidence to suggest that terrorist organizations were acting in concert with “rogue” nations, the argument was based on constructing imaginary connections. Bush would reinforce this logic when he argued that the “danger is, is [*sic*] that they work in concert . . . the danger is, is [*sic*] that al Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam's madness and his hatred and his capacity to extend weapons of mass destruction around the world.”³⁶ In short, al Qaeda *might* work with Iraq which *could* then pose a grave danger in some foreseeable future.

It is interesting that on the same day that Bush could only speculate about connections between al Qaeda and Iraq, the Defense Secretary had evidence of this connection. Rumsfeld stated on CNN that “[w]e have what we consider to be credible evidence that al Qaeda leaders have sought contacts in Iraq who could help them acquire weapons of mass destruction capabilities. We do have, I believe, *it's one report*, indicating that Iraq provided unspecified training relating to chemical and/or biological matters for al Qaeda members.”³⁷ This “one report” could prove to be false, but it leaves the door open for Rumsfeld to claim that he had faulty intelligence.

As the war drew closer, Bush and Cheney would drop the aforementioned strategies and go on to directly accuse Iraq of having ties to al Qaeda.³⁸ In a radio address on February 8, 2003, Bush would state “Saddam Hussein has longstanding, direct and continuing ties to terrorist networks. Senior members of the Iraqi intelligence and al Qaeda have met at least eight times since the early 1990s. Iraq has sent bomb-making and document forgery experts to work with al Qaeda. Iraq has also provided al Qaeda with chemical and biological weapons training.”³⁹ Cheney would also make similar statements.

Overall, the connection between Iraq and 9/11 was made through three strategies. The first was to present facts attached with a disclaimer of uncertainty, so that when the evidence was proved false, the credibility of the source could still be maintained by blaming faulty intelligence or claiming that the information was classified. This strategy continues to be used as a way to explain the absence of WMDs. The second strategy was to establish guilt through suggestion. This involved mentioning al Qaeda and Iraq in the same sentence as a way to imply, rather than assert as fact, a connection between the two. And the third strategy was to establish guilt through speculation, which consisted of projecting imaginary scenarios of what a possible alliance between al Qaeda and Iraq could mean. In addition to tying Iraq to 9/11, the pro-war advocates argued that Iraq was an immediate threat to the US. In an effort to promote a campaign of fear, they argued that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was willing to use them.

Iraq and WMDs

The argument about WMDs began in earnest in September, 2002 when British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Bush, in a joint press conference, declared that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had issued a new report stating that Iraq had revived its nuclear weapons project. “I would remind you,” Bush insisted, “that when the inspectors first went into Iraq and were denied—finally denied access [in 1998], a report came out of the Atomic—the IAEA that they were six months away from developing a weapon.” He added, “I don’t know what more evidence we need.”⁴⁰ Three weeks after this press conference, Mark Gwozdecky, the chief spokesperson of the IAEA, stated that no such report exists.⁴¹

Later that month, Blair argued that not only did Iraq possess WMDs, but it was capable of deploying them in forty-five minutes. On September 24, Blair released a 50-page “dossier” on Iraq’s weapons program. This was reinforced by at least two other pieces of “evidence” furnished by the neoconservative camp. The first was that Iraq had purchased aluminum tubes in order to build nuclear weapons in a matter of six months. And the second was that Iraq had tried to buy uranium from the African country, Niger. The proof of these allegations was based on a series of letters that the administration claimed was the “smoking gun.” It was in this context that Bush was able to win a congressional resolution on October 11, 2002 giving him a blank check for war on Iraq. Shortly after this resolution, the truth began to surface.

On December 6, *60 Minutes* broadcast an interview with former UN weapons inspector David Albright, who stated that the aluminum tubes were most likely meant for conventional weapons.⁴² One month later, Mohammed El Baradei, head of the IAEA, confirmed this report and declared that the tubes had no relation to a nuclear program. In February 2003, the British *Channel 4 News* revealed that large chunks of the Blair dossier were plagiarized, simply cut and pasted, from a University of California graduate student’s thesis.⁴³ In early March, nuclear weapons experts revealed that the letters demonstrating that Iraq had bought uranium from Niger were hoaxes. These forged letters were even disowned by the CIA; the agency also stated that they had communicated this information to the administration as far back as 2001.⁴⁴ When Joseph Wilson, a US diplomat, publicly criticized the Bush administration claims about Iraq seeking uranium from Niger, the White House, apparently, leaked the name of his CIA undercover operative spouse as punishment. Despite evidence to the contrary, the Bush administration insisted that the Niger forgeries were proof that Iraq has WMDs. And on March 7, 2003, Colin Powell went before the UN Security Council and repeated the discredited aluminum tubes story. Hans Blix, executive director of UNMOVIC who supervised inspections in Iraq, also speaking before the Council that day contradicted several pieces of intelligence about Iraq’s weapons. For instance, he pointed out that there was no evidence to indicate that Iraq had mobile chemical weapons production units. However, he also expressed uncertainty about Iraq’s weapons, stating that more inspections were necessary.⁴⁵ But this assessment would not halt the US drive to war. Blix would later speculate in his book, *Disarming Iraq*, that the decision by the US to overthrow Hussein was made

much in advance and would have proceeded regardless of UN inspections, which several figures in the Bush administration did not hold in high regard.⁴⁶

Overall, the approach was that faulty and unverified information was repeated often enough until, in true Orwellian fashion, falsehoods came to be accepted as truth. In order to keep these lies alive in the public imagination, the administration relied on the support of several well-funded think-tanks with easy access to the media. In addition to PNAC, several associations such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Middle East Forum, the Hudson Institute, the Hoover Institute, and the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, were involved in the propaganda efforts.⁴⁷ These organizations went through Benador Associates, a media relations company, to ensure that their arguments found a space in the media. Benador was successful in booking several Middle East and terrorism “experts” from these associations on television programs and placing op-ed pieces in prominent newspapers. A Lexis-Nexis search with the terms “Iraq” in the headline and just one of the groups mentioned above, the “American Enterprise Institute” in the full text, came up with 620 hits in major newspapers and 655 hits on television during the years 2002–2003. Thus, overwhelmingly, as we shall see in the following section, pro-war voices dominated the framing of this issue.

Media and War Propaganda

With few exceptions, the bulk of media coverage on the front pages of major newspapers and headline news on television simply parroted the administration’s line before and during the war. This spirit is best captured in Dan Rather’s statement: “George Bush is the president, he makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, whenever he wants me to line up, just tell me where.”⁴⁸ Even though there was enough evidence to suggest that the case for war was fraught with contradictions, the media chose to present certain “facts” and ignore others. While there are differences in how various sections of the media covered the war, and I take great care in this paper to point to instances where the mainstream media uncovered information critical of the war, the overall tone, as I show below, was weighted decisively in favor of war.

The key strategy was omission. For instance, in the weeks leading up to the crucial Security Council vote on the war, US officials listened in on phone conversations and read the emails of UN Security Council representatives from Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Bulgaria, Guinea and Pakistan who were stationed in New York. A media system that behaves as the “watchdog” of the government would have reported this incident as a major story. However, a media system that is complicit with the larger program of the military industrial complex acts to silence and marginalize contradictory information. After the British newspaper, the *Observer*, broke the story in early March, 2003, a study of US media treatment of this story shows that the *LA Times* and the *Washington Post* did their best to play down the significance of the matter while other media, including the networks, did not even cover the story.⁴⁹

In October, 2002, when Czech president Vaclav Havel stated that there was no evidence that Atta had met with an Iraqi official or that he was in the country during the alleged meeting, mainstream media again downplayed this information. It is significant that while several media outlets carried stories on Atta's alleged meeting with Iraqi officials, only three newspapers and three television news sources had stories that focused on the denial of such a meeting.⁵⁰ In short, while the original accusations were featured prominently, the retractions or refutations were barely addressed. As the *New York Times* would later admit, articles "based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all." The *Times* was not alone in this practice, but it was one of the few media sources that would take responsibility for it.

Coverage of the claims that Iraq had WMDs was similar to coverage of the alleged links between al Qaeda and Iraq. Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, such as the interviews with former weapons inspector Scott Ritter who had stated repeatedly that Iraq was 90–95 percent disarmed, the media chose to bury questions about WMDs deep inside a story or to ignore it all together. Perhaps the most egregious example of this attitude was the approach taken towards the *Newsweek* exclusive with an Iraqi defector run on March 3, 2003.⁵¹ The article stated that Hussein Kamel, the highest-ranking Iraqi official ever to defect from Saddam Hussein's inner circle, had told CIA and British intelligence officers in 1995 that after the Gulf War, Iraq had destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons. However, as a study notes, Bush, Powell, and other administration officials had repeatedly cited "Kamel's defection . . . as evidence that (1) Iraq has not disarmed; (2) inspections cannot disarm it; and (3) defectors such as Kamel are the most reliable source of information on Iraq's weapons."⁵² It is significant that testimony that could throw into doubt the key argument made by the Bush administration was largely ignored by the rest of the media and buried.⁵³ Some media outlets would even take a hostile tone towards those who disagreed with the US position on WMDs. Even Hans Blix was attacked by the *New York Times* in an article that questioned his integrity, claiming that he was "more interested in pleasing all sides than stating the facts."⁵⁴

The media also ignored the historical connections between the US and Iraq. It is well known that Saddam Hussein was an ally of the US, and that the US supplied Iraq with chemical and biological weapons during the 1980s, but with few exceptions, the media developed collective historical amnesia on this question. One of the exceptions was a *Washington Post* story that stated clearly that US involvement with Iraq "included large-scale intelligence sharing, supply of cluster bombs through a Chilean front company, and facilitating Iraq's acquisition of chemical and biological precursors."⁵⁵ The article went on to add that the "administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items that had both military and civilian applications, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses, such as anthrax and bubonic plague," and that this practice continued even after Iraq used chemical and biological weapons against the Kurds. At the very least, the article threw into question the sincerity of the Bush

administration's denunciation of Hussein's use of chemical weapons against "his own people," i.e., the Kurdish population. But this history was largely downplayed.⁵⁶

In addition to downplaying or omitting facts that would refute the administration's case for war, the media also went out of their way to create a climate supportive of the war. They did so in two ways—first, by stacking the deck with pro-war guests and "experts" and, second, by firing or intimidating reporters and talk-show hosts who upset this scenario. Additionally, several media outlets refused to accept anti-war ads. A study of PBS and the three networks' evening news shows conducted over a two-week period in February, 2003, found that 76 percent of the guests were either current or former government or military officials, of which all but one person advocated a pro-war stance. On the other hand, less than 1 percent of the guests were associated with the antiwar movement, even though large demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands had already taken place in the US.⁵⁷

Additionally, Phil Donahue's show was cancelled by MSNBC because, according to a leaked internal report, the show presented "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war."⁵⁸ The report went on to add that Donahue "seems to delight in presenting guests who are antiwar, anti-Bush and skeptical of the administration's motives." While the official excuses for dropping the show had to do with ratings and profits, in reality Donahue's show averaged 439,000 the month before it was cancelled, which made it the top-rated show on MSNBC, outperforming *Hardball with Chris Matthews*.⁵⁹

The message to journalists was clear: either censor yourself or face disciplining. This message came not only from the elites who run the mass media, but also from the White House. As journalists Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman note, White House press passes are hard to come by if you are known to be a reporter who asks tough questions.⁶⁰ A vivid display of the results of these tactics was to be found at Bush's prime time news conference on March 6, 2003. The press conference was so tightly controlled that even compliant White House journalists were irate. Bush called only on reporters he wanted from a pre-determined list, while following a tight script, emphasizing 9/11 and repeating the same points again and again. Bush had gone too far in exposing the degree of media subservience, and some journalists were annoyed.⁶¹ But not much would change during the actual war on Iraq.

Reporting the War on Iraq

Donald Rumsfeld described the coverage of the war in classic Orwellian terms: "I don't think . . . there has ever been the degree of free press coverage as you have seen in this instance."⁶² The illusion of freedom comes from the fact that unlike the 1991 Gulf War, when journalists were not allowed to witness the war first hand, this time "embedded" journalists were allowed onto the frontlines. However, in order to be an embed, reporters had to sign a contract with the military agreeing to a 50-point program that stated what they could and could not report. A close reading of this program shows that it had in-built mechanisms of scrutiny, which would reveal themselves as the war progressed. In all, there were about 900 reporters, mainly US

and British, embedded with the troops. Those who were not embedded were termed “unilaterals” and did not have access to transportation and other facilities. Perhaps most important, embeds were protected by the military while unilaterals were on their own. Arguably, this distinction between embeds and unilaterals was less about protection and more about issuing a threat—a threat that the military would soon act upon.

While reporting from the scene of battle is not new, what was new about this war was the live footage from the actual battles. Far from making the war more realistic, it positioned viewers, quite literally, to witness the skirmishes from the point of view of the military. If you shoot the action from the side of the US and British forces, it becomes very clear who the “good guys” and “bad guys” are and whom to support. Far from objective reporting, the embedded reporters were telling the story both physically and ideologically from the vantage point of the US and British troops. Ideologically, the journalists seemed to identify with the soldiers. This would seem natural; after all, they ate with them, they slept together, and they even wore the same clothes. As Pamela Hess, a UPI reporter, would state, “Reporters love troops. Put us with these 18-year-old kids . . . we just turn to jelly.”⁶³ When setting this system up, it must have been clear to the war planners that this situation would create identification with the soldiers and lead to voluntary self-censorship by the journalists.

However, this system could also backfire. For instance, already at the start of the war, a significant minority of soldiers had expressed disagreement with the war. Had the war dragged on, leading to more US casualties and fatalities, this sentiment is likely to have become more generalized as it did in Vietnam after 1968 when large numbers of soldiers turned against the war. Since the official end of war on May 1, the occupation of Iraq has had an impact on the consciousness of soldiers. Many have articulated the view that they are not there to liberate the people of Iraq, but instead to occupy that country. As one angry sergeant put it, “If Donald Rumsfeld was here, I’d ask him for his resignation.”⁶⁴ A growing number of military personnel and their families have started to speak out against the occupation leading to the formation of coalitions like “Bring the Troops Home Now” and “Military Families Speak Out” which consist of thousands of military families. Had this happened during the war, embedded journalists would have been positioned to report on this discontent. But as it worked out, the official war was short, and journalists left before these sentiments could manifest themselves. Thus, the footage of the actual battlefield served to promote identification with the soldiers, thereby bolstering the “support the troops” argument.

To add to this, reporters saw only what the troops did and lacked the mobility to travel elsewhere or to witness the havoc created in the aftermath of an attack. The result was images of sophisticated machinery, bombs, and wreckage, but little of the human consequences. We did not see the horrific pictures of Iraqi casualties, the dead, and the destruction of their homes and cities or those of dead or injured US soldiers either. As discussed earlier, this is consistent with the model of information management agreed upon by the military and media elite. Just like the Gulf war, even

though the footage was available to network executives, they declined to air it. And like the Gulf war, the military and the White House ensured clean war coverage.

What was different this time was that embedded journalists were allowed to show real images of the action and the superior fire power and artillery of the US and British troops, unlike the military simulations of the 1991 war or the fireworks-like display in the night sky. This shift was motivated in large part by advances in the Pentagon's psychological warfare program and the move to enlist the media in the US "shock and awe" operation. As Michael Ryan, a former editor for *Time*, observed, the "American media, essentially, have become an extension of the military psychological operations, with Rumsfeld hoping they can help to scare the daylights out of Iraq."⁶⁵ In April 2003, using technology capable of overriding domestic media broadcasts, the US rebroadcast news programs featuring Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings to the Iraqi population.⁶⁶

A large part of the psychological operations was the spread of misinformation. The constant demand for new information on the 24-hour news channels, and the credibility associated with official sources, meant that often military claims would be relayed without taking the time to check the facts. An update from a military official would receive wide publicity, only to be retracted or modified later. The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, and the BBC tracked these claims and counter-claims.⁶⁷ The extent of the deception is stunning. As one senior BBC news source commented, "We're absolutely sick and tired of putting things out and finding out they're not true. The misinformation in this war is far and away worse than any conflict I've covered, including the first Gulf War and Kosovo."⁶⁸

On the first day of war, military spokespersons claimed that Iraq had fired scuds into Kuwait. This story received much play in the media. Three days later, US General Stanley McChrystal stated that no scuds had been fired. On March 21, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce and Donald Rumsfeld reported that Umm Qasr had fallen to "coalition" forces. This was not true. In fact, Umm Qasr was officially reported "taken" *nine times* before it was actually taken.⁶⁹ On March 27, Tony Blair in a joint press conference with Bush declared that two British soldiers had been executed by the Iraqis and that this was proof of Saddam Hussein's "depravity." The next day, the prime minister's spokesperson stated that there was no "absolute evidence" that the soldiers were executed.⁷⁰ On March 29, an explosion in a market in Baghdad killed at least 50 civilians. The official spokespersons for the US and UK, who both seemed to share a similar media strategy, claimed that they had nothing to do with the incident. The media ran this story without question. A few days later, Robert Fisk, of the British *Independent* newspaper, found shrapnel that identified the cause of the explosion as a US missile. Over the course of the war, there were a series of claims that troops had found evidence of weapons of chemical and biological weapons, only to declare shortly after that there were no such weapons. Even the story of rescued POW Jessica Lynch on April 1, 2004, it was later revealed, was based on faulty information.⁷¹

Some have argued that these claims and counter-claims were genuine mistakes made in the heat of war. This would be disingenuous. The history of using the

mainstream media in psychological operations is both long and well documented. As Lieutenant Commander Arthur A. Humphries, an advocate of press control, argued over two decades ago, "The news media can be a useful tool, or even a weapon, in prosecuting a war psychologically, so that the operators don't have to use their more severe weapons."⁷² The spread of misinformation is part of a calculated plan whose rationale is to plant a story for a specific goal, regardless of the truth of the story.

Cynically, some in the military tried to blame the misinformation on reporters. Richard Gaisford, an embedded BBC reporter, replied to this charge as follows, "We have to check each story we have with [the military]. And the captain, who's our media liaison officer, will check with the colonel, and they will check with the Brigade headquarters as well."⁷³ Unwittingly, Gaisford revealed the extent to which the embedded system was under military control. What this quote also reveals is the willingness of media organizations to be part of such a system of censorship.

In addition to the direct censorship on the battlefield, there was another coordinating organization that played a key role in orchestrating the war propaganda. The White House set up an institution known as the Office of Global Communication which acted as a public relations agency for the Bush administration. Its tasks included issuing daily talking points to US spokespersons around the world. Its role was to coordinate the messages from the Pentagon, the State Department, and the military officials in the Middle East, so that the comments from these sources were approved in advance by the White House and were consistent with the official line. The Office also trained and provided former military personnel to be interviewed by the media. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Bob Kemper notes that so "controlled is the administration's message that officials from Bush on down often use identical anecdotes to make their points."⁷⁴ Even the choice of words was thought out. For instance, the office sent directives to the military spokespersons not to refer to Iraqi troops loyal to Saddam Hussein as the "Fedayeen," since this term held a positive association. Instead, they were asked to refer to these troops as "terrorists," "death squads," or "thugs."⁷⁵

Even the best designed public relations campaign, however, can fail if other sources of information that contradict the official line are allowed to flourish. Thus, when the war on Iraq proved not to be a cakewalk in its first several days, journalists who pointed that out had to be disciplined. Peter Arnett, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, was fired from MSNBC for admitting on Iraqi television that things were not going as planned for the US. The Iraqi television station in Baghdad, which had contradicted many of the claims made by US and British officials, was bombed. Rather than express horror at this bombing, many reporters at Fox, CNN, MSNBC, and other media outlets supported the bombing. Fox news's John Gibson wondered: "Should we take Iraqi TV off the air? Should we put one down the stove pipe there?" On CNBC, Forrest Sawyer offered tactical alternatives to bombing: "There are operatives in there. You could go in with sabotage, take out the building, you could take out the tower."⁷⁶ What these quotes illustrate is that nothing close to balance was being maintained on the channels.

Journalists also became targets in this war. The biggest assault on reporters who did not toe the US line began on April 8 when a US missile hit the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera, which had devoted considerable coverage to the deaths of Iraqi civilians. The attack killed Tareq Ayub, a 34-year old Jordanian journalist. The same day, the US fired at the Palestine Hotel where most foreign journalists not embedded with the military were staying, killing two more journalists. Sections of the media, such as the *New York Times* were forced to admit that these events raise “concerns” and “bring accusations” that the military was deliberately targeting journalists.⁷⁷ Arguably, this was part of the plan. Weeks before this incident, veteran BBC reporter Kate Adie was told by a senior Pentagon official that if unilateral broadcast satellite links were detected, they would be targeted, even if the journalists were still at the intercepted location.⁷⁸ More recently, the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror*, citing a leaked memo of a conversation between Blair and Bush in April, 2004, claimed that Blair convinced Bush not to bomb Al-Jazeera’s headquarters.⁷⁹

It appears that the overall media strategy of the war makers had several fronts: the use of embedded journalists; the spread of misinformation; threats, bombings, or even death for journalists and media outlets hostile to the US, and a central propaganda-coordinating mechanism, i.e., the Office of Global Communication. This level of planning and strategizing is not new; rather, as discussed earlier, it is the culmination of a decades-long process to strengthen the media–government nexus.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the propagandistic coverage of the war on Iraq reveals the extent to which the media are complicit with the aims of the military industrial complex. Yet, this relationship is sometimes strained in the interests of maintaining credibility. In democratic societies, the media have to maintain a semblance of independence so as not to appear to be obviously subservient to elite interests. In the months following the war when the reality blatantly contradicted war propaganda, such as when WMDs were not discovered, the media were forced to acknowledge this discrepancy. A slew of such events/facts then kept up the pressure on the media—from the growth of the liberation movement in Iraq to the revelations of the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal. To add to this, as more “respectable” official sources, such as Democratic politicians like Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich, and later Republicans such as John McCain and Chuck Hagel, as well as former officials like Richard Clarke and Joseph Wilson, came forward to voice their criticisms, the space for questioning expanded.

This was not uniformly true of all media. Thus, while Fox continued to insinuate, a full year after the official end of warfare, that WMDs might still be found in Iraq, *The New York Times* ran the 9/11 commission report of 2004, which established that there was no connection between Iraq and al Qaeda, as front-page news. Finally, the media also had to respond to the anti-war movement whose arguments were vindicated in the aftermath of the war. The combination of three factors—an avalanche of empirical evidence that threw war claims into question, the pressure of domestic and

international movements, and the emergence of skeptical official sources—forced large sections of media to take a more adversarial role in order to maintain credibility.

However, despite their best efforts, the public only seems to have grown more skeptical of the media. In the lead up to the war, even though close to 60 percent held mistaken views about the war, the remaining resisted the propaganda.⁸⁰ A Zogby poll taken a month before the outbreak of war found that just over half of the population supported war, while a substantial 41 percent opposed it.⁸¹ The numbers against the war and occupation would increase as incidents like Abu Ghraib, as well as the various falsehoods, began to be revealed. It would appear that along with the rejection of war propaganda, there has been a growing distrust of the mainstream media. Since the start of the Iraq war, significant numbers of Americans began to rely on British media for information about the conflict.⁸² The audience for the BBC World News bulletins aired on PBS increased by almost 30 percent during the first weeks of the war, and the BBC's website saw a dramatic increase in the number of Americans visiting the site. About 40 percent of *The Guardian* newspaper's online readers are located in the United States. Christian Christensen concludes that this preference for British media is due to a growing gap between the public's expectation of fair and accurate information and the American media's failure to deliver. He adds that what seems to have disappointed Americans most of all is that the media have covered scandalous events in a "relatively timid and uncritical" way.

This search for alternative sources of information is visible in another mediated sphere: web blogs. Over the first half of 2004, left-wing blogs experienced a significant increase in traffic.⁸³ Matthew Klam explains that partisan blogs have seen this growth due to the public's increased sense of crisis and the inability to tolerate the "once-soothing voice of the nonideological press" (p. 45). However, as I have shown in this paper, the media are far from non-ideological. Additionally, it is important to note that it is not simply partisan blogs that are being sought after but *left-wing* blogs, i.e., those critical of the status quo. This trend is also visible in documentary films. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* drew millions and set a box office record for documentaries. The documentary *Outfoxed*, a critique of the Fox channel and an expose of its rightwing, pro-Republican bias, was originally intended to be sold as DVDs. However, after more than 50,000 copies were sold within the first ten days of its release, it began to be distributed in theatres.

What these examples demonstrate is an increased politicization of the American citizenry and an enormous potential to rebuild the anti-war movement. At the same time, there has also been a hardening of the pro-war side, leading many to characterize the 2004 election year as one marked by polarization. However, while the pro-war and conservative segment of the population has been given political expression by the Republican Party, the absence of a viable political party to the left of the Democratic Party meant that the anti-war potential remained largely unorganized. There were few demonstrations that expressed the disgust that the majority of Americans felt towards the Abu Ghraib incidents. Instead, progressives threw their support behind the Democratic presidential candidate, arguing for the logic of "Anybody but Bush," even though John Kerry promised to continue the

occupation of Iraq. At the end of the day, despite the differences between the two major parties, they were both agreed on the right of the US to intervene militarily around the globe and to craft the new imperial project of the twenty-first century.⁸⁴

In this context of growing public skepticism, the failure of the media to meet the democratic needs of this society, and the absence of significant anti-war and anti-imperialist voices in the public sphere, intellectuals bear an enormous responsibility. Dissenting voices in the academy, with access to institutional resources, have a role to play in producing scholarship critical of the new imperialism. However, to be practically effective, this research needs to be placed at the service of progressive movements and to be tied to the project of rebuilding an anti-imperialist movement.

Notes

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- [51] John Barry, "Exclusive: The Defector's Secrets," *Newsweek* 3 March 2003, <http://stacks.msnbc.com/news/876128.asp> (accessed 15 May 2003).
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