

MASS MEDIA AND THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC OPINION IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR: VIOLENCE AND LEGITIMACY IN IRAQ

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Key Words

War on Terrorism, Iraq, Mass Media, Public Opinion and Legitimacy.

Introduction

The media are the deliverers of a message, and through this message the audience comprehends and forms opinions on events. This makes the mass media both an opportunity and a threat for the sides engaged in a conflict. An opportunity if the power of the mass media can be harnessed to one's advantage and the message relayed. A threat if this 'power' is harnessed by an opposing party who use it to generate negative sentiment and publicity for your cause. This makes journalists a target in modern conflicts, in 2005 some 150 media workers were killed worldwide. 89 of them while they were on duty, singled out because of their work.¹ Iraq is one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice the journalistic profession. Journalists are squeezed between the countless actors involved – the Iraqi government, insurgents, militias and the coalition forces.

This paper looks at a number of issues surrounding the current American involvement in Iraq. Reports and articles that appear in the mass media form the base of this work, it is supplemented by reports from NGOs and government sources and from questions posed to experts/actors. The thorny issue of mass media, and the relationship maintained between them and the various actors involved in Iraq is examined. Certain key issues are examined in some detail, such as: the creation of a 'them' and 'us', the contemporary notion of 'Just War' in the Western sense, the increasing level of violence in Iraq, the issue of civil war and the implications of this, and the problem of lack of accountability and credibility.

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¹ Cozens, C., "Year of Targeting and Tragedy" *Claims 150 Journalists*, The Guardian, www.guardian.co.uk, 25 January, 2006

Mass media form an essential element for transmitting the Bush administration's message to the American public and a wider global audience. The intended message is designed to ensure or to gain support for the American involvement in Iraq. As a result some images are preferred and others are suppressed in order to successfully transmit a positive and upbeat tone.

Media, Events and the Message

Because of the high stakes involved, as was outlined above, the mass media not only become an actor, but a target as well. It becomes a contest between the actors involved in the conflict for; he who controls the media controls the message. Pressure on different actors manifests itself in different ways. A recent article in the British newspaper *Guardian* addressed the effect that 24 hour a day, seven days per week news has had on the British government. In 1997 when Labour came to power some 300 public relations officers were employed, currently there are 3200 press officers and a further 77 politically appointed special advisers working for Prime Minister Tony Blair.² This gives some inkling of the importance placed upon contemporary political communications, where at times the perception of reality may be as important as the reality on the ground.

Coming back to the issue of controlling the message through controlling the mass media (or at least trying to control it), one of the means of attaining this goal is through the ownership of media outlets. In September 2006 information ministers and officials from the 57 countries that make up the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was convened in Saudi Arabia. They believed that after the 9/11 attacks that Islam faced worldwide vilification. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu the OIC chief called for Muslim tycoons to invest in mass media and stated that:

Muslim investors must invest in the large media institutions of the world, which generally make considerable profits, so that they have the ability to affect their policies via their administrative boards... This would benefit in terms of correcting the image of Islam worldwide.³

² Hencke, D., *Ministers say 24/7 news Demands 3200 Press Officers*, *Guardian*, <http://media.guardian.co.uk>, 31 August, 2006

³ *Muslims Urged to buy Influence in World Media*, Reuters, <http://today.reuters.co.uk> 13 September, 2006. For further reading on some of the processes involved in communicating the conflict globally and the implications of this, please see Part 1: Communicating Conflict in a Global World in Thussu, D. K. & Freedman, D. (editors), *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*, London, Sage, 2003

These thoughts and fears were echoed and amplified by the Egyptian information minister, Anas el-Feki. “The fierce attack on Islam in the five years since the September 11 attacks has forced us into a defensive position on our faith and understanding of our tolerant religion... Now more than ever we need a new Islamic media message that reaches all parts of the world”.⁴ The problem of a negative image associated with Islam in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the continuing war on terrorism has become such that the leaders in the Islamic world are now seeking to redress the perceived imbalance, which is circulated in the Western and international media. The intention is to challenge this negative image through influence that is exerted through financial control or stakes in the same mass media. It is a question of changing the culture of the media from the inside, and then to attempt to harness the influence potential in swaying public attitudes toward Islam.

Mass Media and Terrorism

French academic Gabriel Tarde expressed his thoughts on how the media derive their power of influence. He stated that “One pen suffices to set off one million tongues..”. and that mass media possess the ability to transport “... thought across distance”.⁵

News is an important source, from which society can derive their meaning of events in the wider community (regional, state or world community). A lot of the news content is distant from most individuals’ personal experience. News making and production is a complex process, but which is managed in a very methodical manner. Certain routines and steps must be carried out in order to achieve the desired end result.

A news story consists of four main parts;

- Framing – establishing the topic.
- Focussing – the event’s significance is explained.
- Realising – story confirmation and the process of authentication.
- Closing – alternative views are discounted. This process occurs throughout the story.⁶

⁴ *Muslims Urged to buy Influence in World Media*, Reuters, <http://today.reuters.co.uk>, 13 September, 2006

⁵ Ewen, S., *PR! A Social History of Spin*, New York, Basic Books, 1996, p. 69.

⁶ Bignell, J., *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. 119 – 121.

One of the most important tools of legitimisation in news is the use of photographs. By using a photo in a news story, a claim is made regarding the story. Photographs carry a “claim to denote reality”.⁷ It may be possible to try and defend a story’s authenticity by claiming, “they have a photo, so it must be true”. The appearance of truth and reality reside with the concept of photographic (“irrefutable”) “evidence”.

The interpretation of photographs is an important aspect to appreciating the power of the application and use of the photo in news items. A key to this power lies in the concept that images are influenced by a linguistic code. Pictures are an effective way of influencing and triggering memory due to the instantaneous nature of recalled memory. A picture evokes a linguistic association. The written word requires decoding by an educated reader.⁸

[E]very photographic image depends on the system of language despite the fact that they are made up of iconic and not linguistic signs.⁹

The importance of news is not restricted to solely informing or manipulating the public about certain issues. News can be aimed at other target groups, sometimes to establish a type of informal dialogue between two or more parties.

[N]ews enables policy makers to send messages to one another: to make their programmes known without discussing them directly. The news serves as a testing ground for the reactions of others in power.¹⁰

Mass media are a conduit through which society obtains their images that they will derive their sense of reality. In this sense media have three important properties, the importance of which is even further elevated in times of difficulty and/or stress; a *mirror*, a *witness* and a *transmitter*.

- Mirror – reality is amplified through the images that the media transmit. This gives a certain definition of reality.
- Witness – the survival of democracy is ensured as the media see and hear events and act in the capacity as a watchdog. They can also add credibility or otherwise, to an event.

⁷ Bignell, J., op. cit., p. 103.

⁸ Ewen, S., op. cit., p. 152.

⁹ Bignell, J., op. cit., p. 102.

¹⁰ Turpin, J., *Reinventing the Soviet Self: Media and Social Change in the Former Soviet Union*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1995, p. 8.

- Transmitter – media act as an intermediary for all groups that are able to express themselves and transmit their image to the public (the so-called “CNN Effect”).¹¹

BBC news producer, Kenneth Payne wrote of the role and significance of mass media during the modern era of warfare. The importance of the mass media has heightened, especially in light of the changing nature of warfare where success is not necessarily measured in military, but political terms.

The media, in the modern era, are indisputably an instrument of war. This is because winning modern wars is as much dependent on carrying domestic and international public opinion as it is on defeating the enemy on the battlefield. And it remains true regardless of the aspirations of many journalists to give an impartial and balanced assessment of conflict.

The experience of the US military in the post-Cold War world demonstrates that victory on the battlefield is seldom as simple as defeating the enemy by force of arms. From Somalia and Haiti through Kosovo and Afghanistan, success has been defined in political, rather than military, terms.

Today’s military commanders stand to gain more than ever before from controlling the media and shaping their output. The laws and conventions of war, however, do not adequately reflect the critical role that the media play in shaping the political outcome of conflicts. International humanitarian law requires that media members are afforded the rights of civilians; the question is whether this is sustainable when the exigencies of war fighting suggest that controlling the media is essential.¹²

The waging of armed combat, and together with this an information war, is inextricably entangled in modern society. News has become a 24 hour a day, seven day a week business, political and military leaders realise the significance and importance of this non-stop information stream reaching the public. This dictates to an extent the way that those military and political leaders (on both sides) would demonstrate how warfare is prosecuted. Implicit

¹¹ Raboy, M. & Dagenais, B., eds., *Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order*, London, Sage, 1992, p. 123.

¹² Payne, K., *The Media as an Instrument of War*, Parameters, Spring 2005, pp. 81-93. Downloaded from <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/05spring/payne.htm>, 1 September, 2005. For more on the role of the reporter in conflicts please see pages 187-8 in Seaton, J., *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News About Violence*, London, Allen Lane (Penguin), 2005

in the manner in which modern warfare “should” be waged and is covered in the mass media is the sanctity of human life (including “enemy” civilians, who can be portrayed as being unwilling participants or bystanders in the conflict and at odds with their country’s leadership).

Media coverage of the modern military conflict between the West and another state or entity, centres on sending the image of a “clean” war being fought with the use of modern technology that minimises civilian casualties (referred to as collateral damage). Very little is shown of the effects of modern weaponry upon human flesh, rather inanimate objects are shown: a “smart” bomb striking what is identified as being a military installation for example. Thus, the “ugliness” of war is removed (and the elements that may weaken public support for a war), partly through the process of minimising “familiarity” with the enemy, which may lead to empathy or sympathy for them. In the end it seems like a war waged between machines rather than by men.

Wars and other forms of conflict impose an extra-ordinary form of stress upon society, even those that are considered to be democratic. A lot is at stake for both politicians (reputation, legacy and their office for instance) and the public (who may lose certain freedoms and be asked or exposed to risking their lives). There is often a tendency to rally around the leader and to create a united front to face a named threat. The nature of the current war on terrorism means that at times there is no clear war front and at times no clearly defined enemy. Mass media can easily get drawn into the frame of mind of supporting the government rather than acting as a watchdog.

The finding that misinformation and impressionistic clues were closely tied to American support for the war in Iraq suggests broad governmental power to shape public opinion, given news routines, and the expressed desirability of self-censorship among a significant segment of the press.¹³

The mirror role of mass media in the wake of the September 11, 2001 tragedy merely serves to compound the problem. There is a tremendous amount of pressure on the media to give a certain image of reality that is likely to bring about consensus on an issue, which can be further clouded by introducing notions such as patriotism into the equation; i.e. when a journalist

¹³ Norris, P., Kern, M. & Just, M., editors, *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, The Government, and the Public*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 297.

undertakes an action that is not appreciated by the authorities he or she is labelled as being “unpatriotic”. This is a powerful tool to ensure a measure of self-censorship during a period of societal tension. “In a society that is consensual around acts of terrorism, the domestic news frames of terrorism can go unchallenged”.¹⁴ Such conditions allow very little, if any room, for informed and democratic debate of the course of events.

Media personnel have been caught in the middle of the various factions that are vying for power in Iraq. Various means are used by these sides in an effort to discourage media intrusion, get a particular point of view aired or to make some kind of political statement. The media rights group *Reporters Without Borders* issued a report in 2006 that outlined the casualties suffered by journalists in three years of war. In the period 20 March 2003 to 20 March 2006 a total of 86 journalists and media assistants have been killed and 38 have been kidnapped. Of those journalists and media assistants killed, 77 per cent are of Iraqi nationality. To put this into perspective, this number of journalists killed is greater than during the war in former Yugoslavia during 1991-95 (49 journalists killed), in the 20 years of the Vietnam War 1955-75 (63 journalists killed) or during the civil war in Algeria 1993-96 (77 journalists killed).¹⁵

Reporters Without Borders has been very critical of the U.S army and the manner in which they treat journalists. In 2005 they “arbitrarily and illegally” arrested journalists. Four media workers were interned at Camp Bucca, where they were denied access to lawyers, family and employers. There has been no evidence presented by the US authorities that they were involved in any illegal activities. US soldiers shot dead three media workers, but the military investigations either found no fault on the part of the US military or the investigations were not complete at that stage. Other journalists were wounded by US soldiers.¹⁶ In 2004 journalists suffered significant pressure and abuse.

- 19 journalists were killed
- 12 media assistants were killed
- 7 journalists were wounded

¹⁴ Norris, P., Kern, M. & Just, M., editors, *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, The Government, and the Public*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 298.

¹⁵ *Slaughter in Iraq: 20 March 2003 – 20 March 2006*, Reporters Without Borders, www.rsf.org, March 2006

¹⁶ *Iraq – Annual Report 2006*, Reporters Without Borders, www.rsf.org, 3 May, 2006

- 5 imprisoned
- 79 arrested
- Dozens threatened
- 3 media outlets were physically attacked.¹⁷

Iraqi journalists working for state run media have been targeted by various insurgent groups. These journalists are considered to be traitors as they are working for a government which is aligned with the United States. Since 2004 at least 18 state media employees have been killed.¹⁸ The increased danger for journalists in Iraq has seen an increase in the number of Iraqi journalists working for Western news organisations. This is an even more dangerous situation as a reporter is viewed as being “a spy, an infidel, a profiteer exploiting the suffering of Iraqis”.¹⁹ The *Committee to Protect Journalists* compiled statistics with regard to the death of journalists in Iraq in May 2006.

- 78 percent of journalists and support staff killed in Iraq are Iraqis
- 60 percent of journalists and support staff killed in Iraq were murdered
- 54 percent of journalists and support staff who died were working for international news organisations
- 68 percent of journalists and support staff deaths were the result of the insurgent’s activities
- 34 journalists and 15 media workers were killed in the Bagdad province, the most dangerous of the provinces.²⁰

One case which did gain some interest involved an alleged conversation between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush during an April 2004 meeting, which took place in Washington. The British tabloid the *Daily Mirror* reported that President Bush raised the idea of bombing al-Jazeera’s offices, which was rejected by Blair. A range of reactions by officials on the nature of the threat were somewhat mixed, from it was a joke to he

¹⁷ *Iraq – 2005 Annual Report*, Reporters Without Borders, www.rsf.org, 3 May, 2005

¹⁸ *Iraq: Design editor of State Run Paper Murdered*, News Alert 2006, Committee to Protect Journalists, www.cpj.org, 11 September, 2006

¹⁹ Sebtí, B., *Heading into Danger*, *Dangerous Assignments: Covering the Global Press Freedom Struggle*, Committee to Protect Journalists, www.cpj.org, 4 May, 2006

²⁰ Sebtí, B., *Heading into Danger*, *Dangerous Assignments: Covering the Global Press Freedom Struggle*, Committee to Protect Journalists, www.cpj.org, 4 May, 2006

was “deadly serious”. Certainly Rumsfeld has commented on al-Jazeera in the past, accusing it of “consistently lying” and “working in concert with the terrorists”. In April 2003 a US missile struck the al-Jazeera offices in Bagdad, and in November 2001 bombed their bureau in Kabul, Afghanistan, raising fears of a targeting of al-Jazeera facilities. There has been no subsequent clarification of the conversation by either Bush or Blair.²¹ Al-Jazeera took the case to court in order to secure the release of the alleged memo under the freedom of information act. When asked about any progress of the case, Hashem Said from al-Jazeera replied that the British government was prosecuting some government officials who leaked the memo and that they were still trying to secure the release of the information, however without any tangible results to date.²²

A mechanism used by the Iraqi and American authorities to control, or at least intimidate news media, is the claim that what they are reporting is prejudicial to security and national stability. A number of such cases have appeared. The Dubai based satellite TV station al-Arabiya had been shut down for one month (the second time, first time being in November 2003). The Iraqi Prime Ministers Office issued a statement on the closure, stating news reports “capitalise on the footage of victims of terrorist attacks... respect the dignity of human beings and not fall into the trap set by the terrorist groups who want to petrify the Iraqi people”. Al-Jazeera had its offices closed by the Iraqi government in August 2004 on the grounds that its reports incited violence.²³ The vague excuses of national security or maintaining national stability are used as a means of muzzling the press. These notions have a reasonably broad interpretation and are therefore somewhat more problematic to counter.

The American mass media have been subject to a number of criticisms from the Bush administration. Rumsfeld stated that the American mass media had a tendency to focus on the negative aspects of the conflict at the expense of the positive points. To illustrate his point he used the intense media publicity created by the Abu Ghraib scandals and the scant attention recent of Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith being awarded the Medal of Honour. He acknowledged that the US military had “bad actors – the ones who dominate the news today – who don’t live up to the standards of the oath and of our

²¹ *Bush, Blair Should set Record Straight on Leaked Al-Jazeera Threat*, 2005 News Alert, Committee to Protect Journalists, www.cpj.org, 23 November, 2005

²² E-mail correspondence between the author and Hashem Said from al-Jazeera, International Media and Relations department, reply received on 7 September, 2006.

²³ 1) *Al-Arabiya Says Police Arrive at Bagdad Offices to Close Station*, International Herald Tribune, www.iht.com, 7 September, 2006

2) Schemm, P., *Arabiya ban Spotlights Iraq’s Tense Media Relations*, AFP, <http://news.yahoo.com>, 8 September, 2006

country”. It was added that these people were a small minority of all of those personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rumsfeld urged that: “Those who know the truth need to speak out against these kinds of myths and lies and distortions being told about our troops and about our country”.²⁴ Rumsfeld is suggesting a rigorous campaign against information that contradicts the official version of events and desired picture of “reality”.

There have been a number of methods used by the authorities in trying to influence the coverage of news and events. One of the means used by the Bush regime is to pay either journalists or PR companies to disseminate a desired message. An incident of paying journalists surfaced in the United States in September 2006 when the Bush administration’s Office of Cuba Broadcasting paid ten journalists to provide anti-Castro commentary on Radio and TV Martí, which is broadcast to Cuba.²⁵ The US has also been paying subsidies to Iraqi journalists and paying to have “news” items included in media publications as a means of securing the desired tone in the news.

The importance of news framing and content, and the possible effects that it has on public attitudes and opinions, was highlighted by a contract that was opened tender by U.S. military leaders in Bagdad. This project involves a two year long contract worth US\$20 million which involves extensive monitoring of Middle Eastern and US media in an attempt to promote more positive news coverage of Iraq. The stated aim of the project is to “develop communication strategies and tactics, identify opportunities, and to execute events ... to effectively communicate Iraqi government and coalition’s goals, and build support among our strategic audiences in achieving these goals”. The project is scheduled to begin on 28 October, 2006.²⁶ This effort, to monitor and to influence media coverage of the Iraq conflict demonstrates a significant weakness on the part of the Iraqi and U.S. authorities in not only getting their message across, but also trying to muster domestic support for their actions.

During the initial phase of the ground attack on Iraq in 2003 reporters were embedded with military units. This was said to be for their physical safety on the battlefield. Others see it as a means of controlling where a journalist goes, who he or she talks to, the means of communication with the

²⁴ Rumsfeld: *World Faces New “Fascism”*, CBS News, Salt Lake City, www.cbs.com, 29 August, 2006.

²⁵ Goodnough, A., *U.S. Paid 10 Journalists for Anti-Castro Reports*, The New York Times, www.nytimes.com, 8 September, 2006

²⁶ Pincus, W., *Positive Press on Iraq is Aim of US Contract*, Washington Post, www.washingtonpost.com, 31 August, 2006

outside world, not to mention relying on the troops for transport, food and protection. But what kind of effect does “embedding” a journalist have on the manner in which they report? A study by Penn Sate University showed some interesting results. The study covered news articles appearing in the period 19 March 2003 through to 1 May 2003, analyzing 742 print articles from 67 news sources by 156 journalists. Researcher Andrew Linder noted that: “the majority of war coverage in the study heavily emphasised the soldiers’ experiences of the war while downplaying the effects of the invasion on the Iraqi people”.²⁷ The study seems to demonstrate that the environment in which the journalists were placed, attached to a military unit, influences the choice and/or the opportunity of those who they interview. In this case, the outcome is favourable for the military as it downplays the devastating effects of modern warfare and portrays coalition troops in a more personal light.

Conclusion

Mass media are caught in the middle by the various actors involved in the violence in Iraq. This is due in no small part to the changed notion of measuring victory in modern warfare, which is in more political terms rather than the ability to defeat an enemy’s army on the field of battle. A change that is not lost by the actors involved in modern conflict. Attempts are made to persuade media to behave and report in a certain manner, which is favourable to the authorities. These efforts vary and range from: giving incentives, such as subsidies or other forms of payment, to appeals for journalists to behave in a “patriotic” way or branding them as traitors or abetting the enemy if they don’t, to administrative measures as fines or confiscation of equipment or arrest, through to the targeting and killing of journalists.

The importance of political communication is realised by the parties concerned, the massive increase in PR personnel working for the British government is testimony to the importance attached to it. Additionally, glimpses of thought about using the media as a tool to influence a target audience, rather than using the mass media as a means of informing the public, and to let the viewer make their own judgement. One of the mechanisms of control that is sought is that of ownership of media outlets, such methods of control are harder to detect as control eventually becomes internalised, i.e. the introduction of self-censorship.

²⁷ *Embedded Reporting Influences War Coverage, Study Shows*, Penn State News, www.psu.edu/ur/2006/embedreporting.html, 11 August, 2006

As the conflict in Iraq is escalating, coinciding with upcoming elections in the United States, the stakes are becoming much higher. This drives the desire to control the message of the media that much more as political stakes – credibility and power – is at risk. The control of images is one of the goals, for instance, the filming of US soldiers killed in Iraq returning to the US in flag draped coffins is strictly off limits. Images such as these have the power to heavily influence the US public, in a very profound and emotional manner, making an already unpopular war even more unpopular.

As has been mentioned on a number of occasions throughout the text, the Bush administration has sought to maintain a “positive” and “upbeat” account of events in Iraq. They have been seen on a number of occasions to try and persuade the mass media to “stop focusing on the negative and focus more on the positive”. It is evident in their attempts, that the media are being sought to play the role as a mirror of events in Iraq, which is to give an account from a certain perspective. Officials – both American and Iraqi – seem to have little desire to see the media play the role as watchdog in the conflict.

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