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Commissars of the Free Press

The media & the Afghan war

Terry Clancy

2002

I'm not going to argue that there is a bias in the media, I'll let a journalist do that for me:

“By the mid- 1980s, the AP [Associated Press — a news agency supplying reports to the international media] used ‘terrorist’ about Arabs but rarely about the IRA in Northern Ireland, where the agreed word was ‘guerrillas’, presumably because AP serves a number of news outlets in the United States with a large Irish-American audience.

The BBC, which increasingly referred to Arab ‘terrorists’, always referred to the IRA as ‘terrorists’ but scarcely ever called ANC bombers in South Africa ‘terrorists’, probably because the BBC, in its wisdom had decided that the ANC’s cause was more ‘justified’ than the Palestinians or the IRA’s.

Tass and Pravda, [Tass being the Russian version of AP] of course, referred to Afghan rebels as ‘terrorists’.

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The Western press would never do this, even though the Afghan guerrillas — ‘freedom fighters’ or ‘insurgents’ were alternative descriptions — murdered the wives and children of Communist party officials, burned down schools and fired rockets onto the civilian population of Kabul.

A startling example of double standards occurred in September 1985, when a British newspaper reported that an airliner carrying civilian passengers had been ‘downed by rebels’. Something wrong here, surely. Terrorists destroy civilian airliners. No one was in any doubt about that in 1988 when a bomb exploded aboard a Pan Am Boeing 747 over Scotland, killing all on board.

“But ‘terrorism’ no longer means terrorism. It is not a definition; it is a political contrivance. ‘Terrorists’ are those who use violence against the side that is using the word.

“To adopt the word means that we have taken a side in the Middle east, not between right and wrong, good and evil, David and Goliath, but with one set of combatants against another. For journalists in the Middle East, the use of the word ‘terrorism’ is akin to carrying a gun.

Unless the word is use against all acts of terrorism — which it is not — then it’s employment turns the reporter into a participant in the war. He becomes a belligerent.”

(From “Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War” by Robert Fisk page 439)

Nor am I going to argue that the media often inhibits an understanding of situations, particularly in regard to foreign policy issues, where almost all of us are dependent on ‘second hand’ information and where most of us receive our ‘second hand’ infor-

mation from the corporate media. Again, I'm going to let some one else do this.

“in surveys carried out by the Center for Studies in Communication of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, those who watched the most television on the Gulf War were the least informed about basic facts of life in the region.

Among the most frequent watchers, 32 percent thought Kuwait was a democracy; only 23 per cent were aware that there were other occupations in the Middle East besides Iraq's, and only 10 per cent had heard of the intifada, the most sustained revolt in modern Middle East history.

When queried as to which three nations vetoed the recent United Nations resolution calling for an international peace conference (the United States, Israel, and Dominica), 14 per cent correctly identified the U.S., but another 12 per cent thought it has to be Iraq. The Center's polls showed that only 13 per cent of these TV viewers were aware of what official U.S. policy was toward Iraq before the August 2 invasion.”

(From 'For Palestine' by Jay Murphy page iii)

What I'm going to do is ask 'Why?'

Why don't we have a media which attempts to be unbiased and objective?

Why don't we have a media which presents all relevant information rather than selecting some information for prominent display and largely rejecting other information?

Why don't we have a wider diversity of opinion in the media?

Firstly, there is a weighty concentration of ownership.

We all know the media barons, the Blacks, Maxwells, Murdochs, Berlusconi, and O'Reillys.

It requires a great amount of start up capital to get up and going in this business and that restricts ownership of major media to a tiny number of the super rich or to giant mega corporations themselves owned by a slightly larger circle of the super rich.

The point is not that the owner directly influences what goes into the newspaper, although that can happen as former Daily Mirror journalist John Pilger shows in his book *Hidden Agendas*.

The point is that there is not a 'level playing field' where anyone can set up a media outlet and compete — you have to be enormously wealthy to do so.

Secondly, the primary market for all media, at least all non-State owned media, is not the general public but advertisers.

Who places advertisements? Why corporations of course and it is to them the media is sold, which is why you can have T.V. stations and newspapers without paying for them, or why T.V. stations and newspapers advertise themselves as reaching a large audience.

To look at what this means consider a recent issue of 'The Economist' (That of September 22nd — 28th).

On page 12 we have a clear rejection of the idea that there is any link between US power in the Middle East and the September 11th attacks — "the idea that America brought the assault on itself is absurd."

On page 5 we have a full page ad. extolling the virtues of investment in Saudi Arabia, paid for by 'The Ministry of Information' (you couldn't make it up!) of Saudi's ruling family aka government.

On page 27 you have a job advertisement on behalf of Saudi Aramco, the Saudi national oil company.

Clearly it is totally incompatible to sell yourself to these people and to run a piece to the effect that the Middle East has been a battlefield for the competing forces of US Imperialism and indigenous nationalism for decades, and that now that battlefield includes New York.

"May God Bless President George W. Bush and other leaders. And God Bless America!"

(Toronto Globe and Mail 6/10/01)

Outside the United States, there have been more dissenting voices and more of a debate in the media.

Still it has been primarily dissenting voices questioning the means not the end of Western policy, questioning the injustice of sanctions on Iraq or the injustice of support for Israeli Defence Forces repression but not relating this to corporate investments in the Middle East oilfields.

Or debate within a very narrow spectrum which accepts the supposed goals of Western military intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia, with the dissenting voices merely asking for more United Nations involvement or to give more opportunity for the Taliban to hand over Bin Laden.

Never are the dots joined and the connection made between corporate investments and markets in the Middle East, military intervention to defend them, support for client states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia to do likewise, the rise of indigenous nationalist movements and September 11th's attacks. There is a war for control of the Middle East, and there has been for decades, but you might never know it.

We now have defence experts (creatures of Ministries of Defence and Defence industries), retired officers and serving officers pontificating upon what is happening in Afghanistan. Surely a more accurate answer to that question could be given by interviewing survivors from the bombing of Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Iraq and Yugoslavia.

We are seeing maps with troop dispositions, bases, and aircraft carriers surely pictures of the effects of previous wars would be just as apt. We have diagrams of warplanes showing their attributes but no pictures of what they do to the bodies of human beings.

So what impact is this having on the American media?

As it stands today hardly a glimmer of dissent is tolerated. According to film director Michael Moore :

“Our media, it’s so pathetic and embarrassing”

“I’ve been called by the CBC, BBC, and ABC in Australia.

I’ve been on the nightly newscast of every Western country practically, and I’ve not had a single call from the American networksBecause I’m going to go on there and say the things they don’t want to hear. I’m going to be off message. I’m not going to sing with the chorus. And the media is part of the chorus now. They’re wearing their ribbons and they’re not being objective journalists and they’re not presenting all sides.”

(Toronto Globe and Mail 6/10/01)

Michael Moore, has had, in a further silencing of dissent, the distribution of his latest book halted by the publishing company (owned by Rupert Murdoch) which was bringing it out.

Furthermore at least two journalists have been fired for criticising President George Bush Jnr. The boss of one of them wrote a front page apology for the fact a member of his staff had criticised Dubya ending it with:

Given that a major aspect of U.S. Imperialism in the region is the relationship with the rulers of Arabia.

To say such is to be anti-American, or a supporter of Islamic fundamentalism, or to justify terrorism. Which means that at least one segment of the Pentagon is anti-American, supporters of Islamic fundamentalism and justifies terrorism.

How come? Because a 1997 U.S. Department of Defence study found that: *“As part of its global power position, the United States is called upon frequently to respond to international causes and deploy forces around the world. America’s position in the world invites attack simply because of its presence. Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States.”* (Quoted in the CATO website www.cato.org)

Now it is not that advertisers order the media not to run a certain story or put pressure on the media, although that can happen.

It is simply that a publication which even in just 25% of its copy ran stories highly critical of corporate power, opinion pieces and editorials questioning the basis of our society, could hardly expect to get advertising revenue from those same corporations.

Thus a publication which did so could not compete in the market place.

Perhaps of more concern in regard to domestic issues is the fact that advertisers are aiming for groups in the ‘high income’ brackets with the greater disposable income to spend on consumer goods. ‘The Irish Times’ for instance sells itself by saying *“8 out of 10 senior business people read”* it.

Thus newspapers, and media in general, which appeal to the interests and concerns of the better off are more likely to get advertising revenue.

Again doing the opposite will effect your ability to compete.

Thirdly the media, like any industry, is dependant on its supply of raw material.

In this case information. Where does it get this information? What are its sources? In the context of a war the primary sources are government/military, and they do their utmost to make sure it stays that way.

Journalist Peter Preston describes the situation during the Falklands War:

“Those of us who yomped through the Ministry of Defence in the Falklands soon got the changed hang of things. Top chaps in dark suits would summon up the full authority of their office and lie like troopers.”

“The Falklands war was more than a distant side show. It hugely impressed the Pentagon. Ensure that reporters are cooped upon on aircraft carriers or minded by Mod male nurses far from the front and, as long as you keep decent clamps on back at the political ranch, there is total information control.”

(The Guardian 8/10/01)

The United States military, as so often before, took the example from their British colleagues and employed it in Grenada, Panama and the Gulf.

Consider the coverage during the Second Gulf War, and the build up to it.

Firstly we had the reports of Iraqi troops massed at the Saudi border poised to invade the personal property of the House of Saud, a gang of oil rich religious fanatic depots. O.K. I'm lying Saudi Arabia was not described like that, but nonetheless Iraqi armour was about to sweep down into Saudi in a Hitlerian blitzkrieg. We were originally told that U.S. troops were going out there to protect Saudi Arabia. Except this story was completely false. As was later admitted by U.S. Generals, and known to be false both by the media (but never reported) and the Pentagon, because satellite photos existed

which saw Iraqi withdrawals back into Iraq's pre-August 2nd 1990 borders.

Secondly we had the 'Iraqi soldiers kill babies by throwing them out of incubators' story. Again false. Not only had the Iraqi Army not done this but the hospital where it was supposed to have happened didn't even have enough incubators for the 300 babies supposedly slain.

Thirdly we had the "smart bombs". Which is probably the single thing which will be most remembered from the Second Gulf War (except for Iraqis who will remember deaths, injuries and fear). Except even if we accept the premise that these "smart bombs" only hit what they were supposed to and that what they were supposed to hit was not power stations, bridges, water works etc., still only 7% of the missiles and bombs used were "smart".

We saw just how "smart" these bombing campaigns are during the air strikes on Yugoslavia. The difference then was that with a body of international journalists on both sides of the frontline it was far harder for the Pentagon and the MoD to impose total control on what was being reported. Nonetheless the factors detailed above still worked to ensure that when "accidents" happened the spin, slant, and interpretation given to events remained one which favoured the war effort.

In other words a report of an event which exposed the reality of war, but coupled with an interpretation which accepted the paradigm of the war party.

For example: 'the bombing is killing innocent people and not doing the job, we must send ground troops'(assuming that a full scale invasion would not do the same and not questioning the goals but just the means).

Or: 'what can NATO do to ensure that there are no civilian deaths?' (supporting the war effort, assuming that such a thing is possible and assuming that the apparatchiks of NATO give a fuck so long as their bloody handwork is not on the Six o'clock news) .