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Demanding More from Media Coverage of War

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Dr. Piers Robinson



prosecuting the war in South East Asia and, second, on the need to extract the US from a conflict that had become too costly to be worthwhile. But that was then, and this is now. Ten years into the new millennium, following a decade that has become dominated by two major and controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is time for some critical reflection on how the media of liberal democracies continue to cover war.

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There is undoubtedly a powerful drive to believe that things have got better and that higher standards of independence and neutrality are achieved today. Surely the blanket media coverage of the Iraq conflict in 2003 with all the controversy over missing weapons of mass destruction after the invasion, the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the steady trickle of news highlighting the human cost of the war, proves that journalists are capable of criticising their own governments in war-time? There is a degree of evidence to support this. Some recent studies have pointed toward important variations in levels of objectivity across different media outlets, whilst others have highlighted the dynamic relationship between journalists and officials as both respond to different events, some of which provide space for critical journalism (Aday et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2010; Tumber and Palmer, 2004). For example, widespread coverage of Iraq civilian casualties such as the child Ali Abbas, who was severely maimed in a coalition strike, provided ample opportunity for some British newspapers to condemn the war (Robinson et al., 2010, pp. 140-150). At the same time, Britain's anti-war newspapers and widespread public opposition to war facilitated the emergence of Britain's largest ever war-time and peace-time demonstrations. Broadly speaking, the highly competitive British national press with a large number of newspapers appealing to the national market, coupled with a journalistic culture characterised by high levels of professional autonomy (Robinson et al., 2010, pp. 125-130), are understood to have been key factors in enabling these levels of media independence.

The history of war reporting highlights the disjuncture between popular conceptions of journalists as independent, truth-seeking and authority-aggravating individuals and the empirical reality of an all too common willingness of journalists to subscribe to state-driven censorship and propaganda. Even with respect to wars where our collective memory suggests heroic stories of journalists daring to challenge military and government officials, careful scholarly analysis reveals a far more compliant and subservient media. So, whilst popular myth has it that the Vietnam War was fought and lost on the TV screens, in living rooms across the US, Professor Daniel Hallin's (1986) rigorous analysis of US media coverage reveals that journalists, nearly always, took their cues from US officials. Substantial media adversarialism only arose late in the conflict when officials were publicly arguing over the direction of the war. At no point did US journalists get ahead of Washington thinking, first on the importance of

Supporting the empirical evidence, there are also conceptual groundings to the idea that media independence might have increased. First and foremost, there is a flourishing literature regarding the impact of the so-called new media environment or new media ecology (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). Here, Internet-enabled digital communication, and the capacity of individuals to become citizen journalists as a consequence of digital recording devices (cameras on mobile phones etc), as well as the proliferation of on-line and off-line news media outlets and the so-called global media such as CNN, Al Jazeera and BBC World, are all understood to have pluralised the information environment. Governments can no longer be assured of a privileged position in terms of controlling the flow on information, and according to some seasoned commentators, such as the BBC World main presenter Nik Gowing, there now exists a crisis of control for political elites (Gowing, 2009). The recent controversy over WikiLeaks and US intelligence reports on the war in Afghanistan, and the synergy created between this 'on-line' investigative journalism organization and mainstream print media (The New York Times, Der Spiegel and The Guardian), is but one recent example of the potential pluralising dynamics of today's information environment. The images from Abu Ghraib in 2004, and their rapid and uncontrollable circulation across the World Wide Web, is another case in which the dynamics of the new media environment seem to have fundamentally challenged political institutions. In addition to technological determinants other scholars have suggested that journalists themselves, and the culture of contemporary journalism, have become increasingly inclined to look beyond national boundaries, attempting to see both sides of the story and becoming increasingly empathetic toward the victims of war, many of whom are killed and injured by the actions of 'our' soldiers. As Tumber and Webster (2006, p. 67) describe: 'The prioritisation of the moral and ethical duties of the journalist towards the public and the world in general is part of the professional values framework within which contemporary journalism operates'.

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Certainly, and taken as a whole, the war in Iraq and the proliferation of bad news stories associated with this conflict paint a picture of media-state relations that appears very different from the compliant and deferential media performance during earlier wars. Perhaps we have indeed witnessed the arrival of a new era of journalistic independence and autonomy, as some suggest? However, two matters caution against making such claims. First, for all the media-driven criticism and debate over Iraq, there are important continuities in coverage. First, it should not be forgotten that most mainstream media failed, catastrophically, to seriously question official claims about Iraq WMD capability during the run up to the



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war. Second, despite the emergent criticism and debate, journalists have remained doggedly committed to viewing events from their national perspective. For example, even during the heated and controversial invasion of Iraq, the British anti-war newspapers moderated criticism of the war with patriotic, and at times jingoistic, support for British soldiers (Robinson et al., 2010, pp. 120-122). Also, a recent comparative study of how a number of countries media covered the Iraq war show a persistent trend of coverage that reflects the national perspective (Kolmer and Semetko, 2009). Again, the study by Baum and Groeling (2009), which highlights the importance of US media criticism of the Iraq war, describes this criticism very much as an outflow of elite Washington political debate over the winnability of the war and the cost in American lives: unless members of the political establishment are willing to publicly criticise a war, media will remain largely mute. So, whatever the claimed realities of the new globalised, cosmopolitan media environment, journalists and editors still, by and large, remain doggedly committed to seeing wars from the perspective of 'their side'.

But there is a second, perhaps more troubling reason to moderate hopes of an improved war-time media performance. As the first decade of the new millennium has unfolded, it is increasingly plausible that the public controversy and examples of adversarial media witnessed surrounding the 2003 Iraq invasion might have given way to a return to the earlier pattern of deference to government war aims. This cannot be determined for sure at this point, because the kind of detailed and scholarly research that has already been conducted on media performance between 2000 and 2005 is not yet available for the period 2006 - present. But there are reasons to suggest media have become far less independent, in particular in relation to the war in Afghanistan. First, the on-going war in Afghanistan does not appear to be attracting the same levels of public and media debate that the initial Iraq invasion did in 2003. There is far less anti-war activism amongst the public and much media-political debate has

revolved round troop levels, the winnability of the war, and the time-table for eventual withdrawal. What has been largely absent from such coverage has been any sustained commitment to present either Afghan perspectives, the political context of the war or debate its rationale and legitimacy: Most mainstream media in the West appear to accept the legitimating of this conflict as part of the 'war on terror' whilst the objective vis-à-vis the Afghan people has become one of 'winning hearts and minds'. The geo-political complexities of the war, the ambiguous and complex positions of the people within Afghanistan, and the multiple motivations for Western involvement² remain obstructed by relatively simplistic narratives about fighting terrorism and saving the Afghan people from the Taliban. The echoes here of the Vietnam war, at least in terms of media representation, are striking: in that war the US media paid little attention to the Vietnamese people whilst the political complexities were submerged under Cold War anti-communist rhetoric; 'winning hearts and minds' was a slogan of that war, just as it has become a familiar refrain for the political and military leaders of the Afghan war.

led to the resignation of several key figures in the BBC. This was despite the fact that an intelligence dossier had been produced by the government which painted a misleading picture of the threat posed by Iraq. It is also notable that the editor of the anti-war tabloid The Daily Mirror was forced to resign when it was revealed that his paper had published, without knowing, falsified images of British troops mistreating Iraqi detainees. Although the story was correct, i.e. that British troops stood accused of abuse, the mistake made over the images used for the stories was enough to force the editor's resignation. In short, these events might have created a risk-averse environment in which media are less likely to challenge governments over war policies (Crouch, 2010).

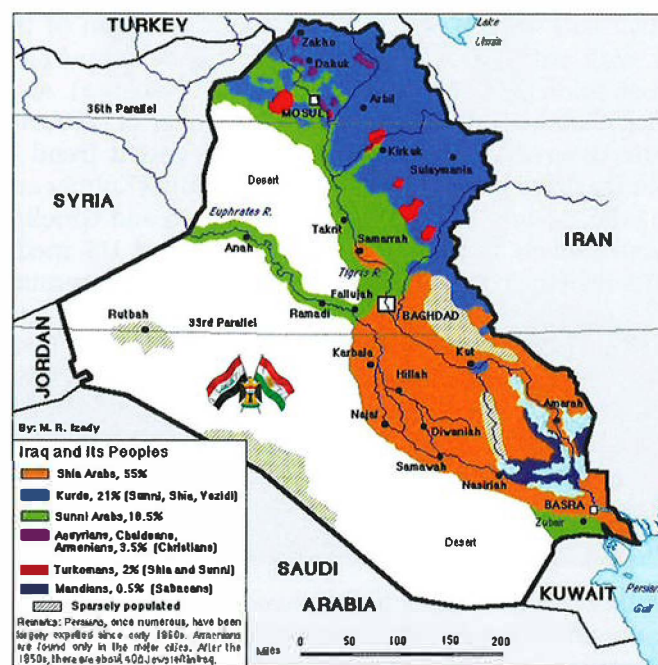
"It is not self-evident that the new media environment leads to more independent journalism in the long run."

Third, although the new media environment might provide opportunities for adversarial journalism, it is not self-evident that it automatically leads to more independent journalism in the long run. Whilst the early 2000s witnessed the consolidation of the Internet as a news source and the proliferation of global news, it is also the case that traditional mainstream media were central to the major examples of critical and independent journalism: the Abu Ghraib scandal was communicated in the US largely via the Washington Post whilst it was the Daily Mirror and Independent in the UK that became the core newspapers representing opposition to the invasion of Iraq. If anything, then, the Internet and other contemporary communication mediums worked in conjunction with traditional broadcast media. Today, the penetration of the new media environment offers an ever greater challenge to traditional mainstream broadcast media with some suggesting their days are numbered. What emerges instead, perhaps, is a media sphere characterised by narrow-cast news (e.g. dedicated foreign affairs coverage for those who want it), an unrivalled and information-rich Internet for those who want to take the time to search it, and an ever more disengaged public who, through choice, make little attempt to actively seek out news on international affairs and conflicts. Of course, it is too early to say whether this scenario will emerge: but the stark difference between the media and public response to the Iraq invasion, and the comparably muted response to current events in Afghanistan, certainly cautions against any assumptions about the inherently pluralizing consequences of new media technologies.

As we move into the second decade of the new millennium, and after a seemingly tumultuous decade in which we have witnessed the West's involvement in two major wars and high levels of public and media controversy, what conclusions can we draw then about the state of war reporting? Certainly, the events surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq, including impressive examples of

media-fuelled challenges to an unpopular war, show what can be achieved when journalists show a commitment to 'seeing the other-side' and particular conditions prevail (Robinson et al., 2010). From a historical perspective, perhaps events surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq might come to be seen as high point of media independence during war, where at least some media actively challenged their governments. But as much as this might be the case, Afghanistan shows that there is no room for complacency and it would appear that the progressive penetration of a diversified and pluralised new media environment has done little to prevent a tunnel-visioning of our view of that

conflict. Achieving higher standards of war-time journalism will require journalists' and editors' to strengthen their commitments to reporting beyond the national 'official' viewpoint and empathising with those who are on the receiving end of 'our' firepower, whilst ensuring that there is a broadcast news media system in place that enables sustained and in-depth journalism to both flourish, and to be communicated to the public at large. Allowing the emergence of a digitalised, personalised and fragmented public sphere will likely ensure that our understanding of wars such as Afghanistan varies little from the official view. ■



Second, at least in the British context, it is easy to believe that the levels of media independence and adversarialism witnessed surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq has given way to a far more cautious and restrained media, not least because of the price that some UK media outlets and newspapers have paid (Crouch, 2010). For example, in 2003, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) famously aired claims from a British weapons scientist (Dr David Kelly) that the government had distorted intelligence about WMD in order to exaggerate the threat from Iraq. The resulting fallout, which included the suicide of Dr Kelly, led to a government-appointed inquiry which cleared the government of wrong-doing, blamed the BBC entirely, and



1. The author is director of the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) research project 'Media Wars: Media Management and News Media During the 2003 Invasion of Iraq', RES-000-23-0551 <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/ViewAwardPage.aspx?AwardId=3321>. The culmination of this project is published in the forthcoming book Pockets of Resistance: British news media, theory and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

2. For regular informed commentary on the complexities of the war in Afghanistan, and others, see <http://www.opendemocracy.net/>, in particular the columns by Professor Paul Rogers.

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