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COMMENTARY

Historical memory, media studies and journalism ethics

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In October 2006, the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, reported an estimate by an American and Iraqi team of physicians and epidemiologists of the Iraqi death toll since the 2003 military invasion of US-led coalition forces. According to the study, based on mortality rates from prior to the invasion, approximately 655,000 more Iraqis died as a consequence of the war, than would have died if the invasion had not occurred. The primary cause of the deaths has been violence, mainly gunfire and car bombings (Horton, 2006). Beyond the significantly increased mortality rate, the humanitarian issues for the living are also profound, including severe limits in the availability of essential services, such as electricity, fuel, safe drinking water, transportation systems, adequate medical facilities and schools.

This devastating trauma will likely be remembered by Iraqis for many generations to come, and the United States may very well be judged more harshly than will the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein. Since the invasion, citizens of Iraq and neighboring countries have become increasingly radicalized by a war that most of the world's population has considered unnecessary and unjust. As a result of what were represented as efforts to achieve greater security for the United States, US citizens now have increased reason to fear the violent actions of extremists (Mazzetti, 2006). In the best hopes of those Americans who supported the invasion, the US government was not only acting preemptively in the name of self-defense, but it also was on what US leaders cast as a noble and welcome mission to replace tyranny with democracy (Stout, 2006). But if we are to make sense of the fact that Americans indicate repeatedly in polls that the US occupation of Iraq is the number one issue facing the country, and if we consider the dismal approval ratings the President and Vice-President repeatedly receive, we

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can see that none but a loyal core of US citizens now believes or supports the administration's narrative.

Will history be kind to the Bush administration? Will the invasion and US occupation of Iraq be understood as acts of self defense, of benevolence? Will the civil war that resulted be viewed as a minor hiccup on the glorious road to global democracy? Perhaps it is too soon to tell, although the signs are not encouraging, and it is clear that the majority of US politicians now seek to distance themselves from the path Bush chose. But many in Congress did endorse that choice at the time when it mattered most. US Presidential hopeful, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was among the Senators who voted to authorize the decision to go to war. Today, Clinton, like numerous other politicians who wish to distance themselves from the President, replies to questions about her earlier choice by saying, 'If I knew then what I know now we would not have gone to war' (Webb, 2007). What exactly did she *not* know? That the stories about weapons of mass destruction, which were discredited by UN weapons inspectors and other experts at the time, were based on unverified and fraudulent claims? That no evidence existed to support the Vice-President's frequent assertions of a connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States? That the lack of any clear plan for post-invasion Iraq would probably result in a quagmire and risk claiming the lives of thousands of US soldiers? Whether or not they admit it, politicians with ambitions to be re-elected or reach higher office have little choice but to act with one eye on the polls, and that sometimes causes them to choose strange bedfellows. At best, the politicians who now wish to distance themselves from their previous alignment with Bush on Iraq should truthfully admit they were cowed into silence, fearful of losing credibility by having their patriotism called into question if they should voice doubt about the reasoning of an administration that had its sights on Iraq long before 9/11. A less generous assessment would see their choice for war simply as a matter of politically cynical calculation.

Of course, having chosen war, the government needed to first legitimate its decision, because modern leaders rise and fall in the court of public opinion. The Bush administration did a superlative job of steering the population toward widespread assent, while it also silenced critics with the help of the media. Following the suicide bombings on US targets on September 11, 2001, the subsequent war mobilizations – first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq – left no room for public dissent. This was especially problematic in the far more controversial decision to invade Iraq. In the name of patriotism, US media were uncritical in

reporting on the justifications for war that were offered by the Bush administration prior to the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, during the build up to the Iraq war, US media neglected and trivialized the newsworthy subject of opposition at home and around the world. In that period, the dominant US media fully embraced the role of faithful stenographer, but with a bias toward war. According to the media watch organization, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), during a three-week period just after the first day of bombing in Iraq (20 March 2003), of the 1617 on-camera sources interviewed in stories about Iraq, 64 per cent of those who appeared on major news shows on six television networks – ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox and PBS – and 71 per cent of US sources, supported the war. Only 10 per cent of all sources interviewed, and three per cent of US citizens interviewed, opposed the war, a finding that contrasts with polls from that period that revealed 27 per cent of US citizens opposed the war (Rendall and Broughel, 2003).[1]

Much of the government's project to sell the war in Iraq was undertaken in the public eye, not covertly. The administration managed to persuade the majority of journalists, editors, publishers and producers of the most widely consumed US news sources that Saddam Hussein had nuclear, chemical and biological weapons he would soon use against the American population. When Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke before the Security Council of the United Nations on the eve of war, he presented a case that left no doubt in the minds of many prominent journalists that Hussein had the technological capacity and the will to rain weapons of mass destruction on US soil. Powell's multimedia presentation was a shock-and-awe tale, based on revelations from Iraqi 'defectors', of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that could spray lethal chemicals from the air above major population centers, of mobile biological weapons laboratories in the desert of Iraq, and of an operational nuclear weapons program that had the United States in its cross-hairs. Powell also echoed familiar but unsubstantiated allusions to a link between Iraq and al Qaeda. In the wake of the trauma of 9/11, the US population was fertile ground for Powell's narrative.

The story of Powell's role in selling the war is a pathetic one. As one of the most trusted figures in the US government, his credibility was based on a reputation for integrity, which proved at that moment to be a valuable asset to the Bush administration. Powell has been widely recognized as the quintessential 'good soldier', who did what was asked of him by his commander-in-chief. He staked his reputation on what he appears to have convinced himself was reliable evidence. To the Security Council, he stated, 'My colleagues, every statement I make today is

backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence' (Powell, 2003). Not long after, as the story unraveled and numerous fraudulent claims about WMDs were exposed publicly, Powell's reputation suffered significantly. When asked by journalists if he thought he should publicly apologize for his central role in leading the United States to war on the basis of false information, Powell replied:

> It's not [just] me getting had. I'm not the only one who was using that intelligence . . . they all stood up in the Senate. The president stood up on this material. Tony Blair stood up on this material . . . The whole global intelligence community bears responsibility. (Powell quoted in DeYoung, 2006)

Powell's defense was reasonable. There was plenty of blame to go around, and he was but one member of a vast network dedicated to spinning a case for war.

But is it only the intelligence community that bears responsibility? After all, this 'evidence' of Iraq's WMD program and al Qaeda connections was produced for public consumption. The court of public opinion was vital to this effort, and the media were the means by which that audience could be reached. If there is blame to go around for misleading the politicians and the public into supporting the President's call to arms, the record shows that the media must share in it (Calabrese, 2005). This has been acknowledged by major newspapers, to some degree halfheartedly and with a perfunctory tone, but nevertheless there has been an admission that the misplaced priority on scooping competition led to greater emphasis on getting the story first, rather than getting it right (*The Washington Post*, 2003; Kurtz, 2004; Mooney, 2004; *The New York Times*, 2004; Okrent, 2004). Leading journalists, the most prominent among them being Judith Miller of *The New York Times*, relied heavily on anonymous sources, namely, Iraqi 'defectors' (notably, Ahmad Chalabi, who rose meteorically after the invasion to become Iraq's Oil Minister).

These defectors, identified with the 'Iraqi National Congress', an organization established by a public relations firm and funded by the US government, were the central voices in the news 'echo chamber'. It was into the echo chamber that the neoconservatives selectively leaked and declassified information intended to persuade national elites and the public at large that an Iraqi threat was imminent and a war justified, and it was there that shady 'defectors' bounced unverified WMD claims back and forth between the media and the administration (McCollam, 2005).

In this way, journalists could hear a claim from a defector, and then dutifully 'verify' the claim by checking if it was 'true' by asking a member of the administration to whom the defector also would have been speaking. On the Sunday morning television news shows, administration officials could establish the credibility of their claims about the Iraqi acquisition of aluminum tubes that purportedly were to make centrifuges for uranium enrichment, mobile biological weapons labs, and other claims for which no evidence has been shown, while claiming corroboration with ostensibly independent newspaper reports of the same. Did the journalist know that the informant also had access to the administration? How did elite journalists reach that status and position without being able to find out or at least suspect such things?

On the subject of her shoddy reporting about weapons of mass destruction, Judith Miller stated, 'W.M.D. – I got it totally wrong . . . The analysts, the experts and the journalists who covered them – we were all wrong. If your sources are wrong, you are wrong. I did the best job that I could' (Miller quoted in Van Natta et al., 2005). The implication by Miller is that she could not have known that her sources were wrong, and therefore should not be blamed for her extensive and highly influential reporting about WMDs that was based on bad information, provided by individuals who had a clear interest in leading the United States to topple Saddam Hussein. Rather than accept responsibility for showing poor judgment in her choice and use of sources, Miller absolved herself of responsibility by blaming her sources after the fact. Craig Pyes, a colleague who collaborated with Miller in a prize-winning series about Osama bin Laden, wrote about Miller, 'I do not trust her work, her judgment, or her conduct', stating that 'her actions threaten the integrity of the enterprise, and of everyone who works with her'. He further stated that Miller took 'dictation from government sources' (Pyes quoted in McCollam, 2005).

According to Stephen Engelberg, a former *Times* editor who worked with Miller on a story about Saddam Hussein's purported renovation of chemical and nuclear production facilities, because of the dubious nature of Miller's sources, Engelberg and Miller were scrupulous about adding caveats, acknowledging the vested interests of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), from which the information came. The operating principle in going forward with the stories was that the reader should take caution (McCollam, 2004: 36). But then Bush administration officials (who also were in the INC loop) would take such a story, strip it of the caveats and present the claims with certainty on the Sunday morning talk show circuit, noting that *The New York Times* had 'indepen-

dently' revealed the same findings. Soon after, other news shows would run with the White House version, minus the caveats, removing the story even further from the realm of doubt. Viewers would watch and listen, many persuaded that a fair and balanced report such as this left no choice but to unquestioningly support the urgent call to arms.

At this remove, one must question the wisdom and ethical judgment of the *Times* for running the story in the first place. The story of Judith Miller is noteworthy, especially given the central role she played in misleading the American public. Although a clear case has been made that it would be unfair to single her out, since there are numerous other opportunistic and sloppy reporters and editors who have blood on their hands, the remorseless Miller deserves special scrutiny (McCollam, 2004). The misleading coverage by Miller and others helped the administration in its efforts to foment public fear, silence opposition, and coerce weak-willed and ambitious members of Congress to abandon judgment and write a blank check for war.

In February 2007, a conference of academics, journalists and experts was held in Amsterdam on the theme of the 'weaponization of the media'. The purpose of the conference was to explore the role media play as 'political actors' that often hold responsibility for inciting violence, and even for goading a nation to war. Not surprisingly, military forces view media in this way, which explains why the United States bombed al Jazeera offices in Afghanistan and Iraq, why radio was to used incite Hutu listeners to kill Tutsis, and why the editor of a Nazi-era German newspaper was tried, convicted and executed in Nuremberg for 'incitement to murder and extermination' of Jews. These may be extreme cases, but is it safe to say that US media are immune to playing the role of political actor? It would appear not, as American journalists are also citizens with political convictions.

This does not mean we should become cynical about the role journalists can or should play in fostering national dialogues, but it does remind us to consider the foundations of professional ethics for journalists. In the modern world, news media are essential weapons in a political arsenal, and no leader set for war fails to recognize this. Nor should journalists fail to recognize it. Like Colin Powell, Judith Miller and other journalists who knowingly relied on sources with motivations to lie cannot escape blame simply because others were equally responsible for misleading the country into war. Like Powell, Miller used her high status and her influence to make a case for a war that few now consider to have been justified. She and the editors who ran her stories made a formidable weapon of mass destruction.

In August of 2006, a resolution protesting the Bush administration's anti-press policies was passed by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEIMC). Among the issues the text highlights are the shameful behavior of the Bush administration in how it responds to press requests for information, its 'massive reclassification of documents', its 'policy of not allowing photographs of coffins of soldiers killed in Iraq to be released', its 'use of propaganda, including video news releases', and its use of the courts 'to pressure journalists to give up their sources'. The resolution was sent to members of the Bush administration, media educators, and the general news media. In all, the statement is valuable and worthwhile. But by implication, it sets the media up as victims of an administration that has been hostile to open discourse and the truth. The depiction is accurate, but it generates a one-sided viewpoint about the media's uneasy relationship with the government. In the case of the coverage of the run-up to the Iraq war, it would be more accurate to view the media not simply as victim, but both as perpetrator of public deception and accomplice in causing great loss of human life.

In one of the popular textbooks on media ethics, the authors advocate ethical principles 'that call for disregarding material furnished by potential news sources who want to manipulate mass media content for their own purposes' (Gordon and Kittross, 1999: 104). In the case of the journalists, editors and producers who became stenographers to the government and the Iraqi National Congress, their breach of this ethical standard was profound. Given the shameful behavior of the media in the run-up to war, their incentive to forget this breach is strong. Since the media responsible for this inexcusable failure have no incentive to remember, it is up to others to preserve the memory, both to provide accurate accounts of the history of the Iraq war, and as a vital lesson in the professional ethics of journalism. Media researchers in particular have a unique responsibility to document the history of this catastrophic failure, and to provide a public reminder about a relationship between media and government that should not be repeated.

Note

1 For further discussion of media content and polling data from that period, see Calabrese (2005).

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