

## The perfect storm? The American media and Iraq

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If the first Iraq war of 1991 was dubbed Desert Storm [1], the second might be called Perfect Storm. The run-up to the 2003 war witnessed an extraordinary convergence of factors that produced near-perfect journalistic participation in government propaganda operations.

What comes now, in the aftermath of a messy military occupation clouded by reports of deceptions or exaggerations willingly passed on by an uncritical media [2], may well be another matter. I would not be surprised to see the press “beast” turn angrily against its former feeders. This turn, if it comes, could not however take place without the first chapter – the ‘success’ of the war itself and its presentation.

This chapter began on 11 September 2001, and ends with George W. Bush’s dramatised tail-hook landing of 1 May 2003 on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* – the *Top Gun* moment in which Bush declared that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended”. “The battle of Iraq”, he added, “is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001, and still goes on.”

On a scale from one to ten – if ‘one’ is rigorously sceptical and ‘ten’ supine – Perfect Storm scored ten out of ten, far exceeding the already impressive levels of press complicity achieved in the first Iraq war. In 1991, it is fair to say that some degree of mediated policy deliberation occurred. At least this was the conclusion of a group of us who studied the media coverage of that war and wrote *Taken by Storm* (Chicago [3], 1994 ) based on that research. The coverage was flawed because the press remained dependent on strategic communication emanating from the administration and from Congress. But some tough questioning did happen.

This time, the level of mediated public deliberation was so diminished as to make the preponderance of journalism little more than an instrumental extension – a sort of propaganda helper – of the strategic communication goals of the administration. With few notable exceptions, the press took a pass on its fourth estate prerogatives. Posing the hard questions, testing the administrations logic and execution at every point, remaining sceptical – all this was drowned in a sea of waving flags and gung-ho celebrations of military technology.

This result was ‘overdetermined’ by at least ten factors that converged in Perfect Storm fashion. These ten factors pushed the press pack to write stories that seldom contested administration framing even though huge gaps in the credibility of that framing were available to knowledgeable reporters at the time. [Evidence to support this claim can be found in Bob Entman’s forthcoming book, *Projections of Power* (Chicago [4], 2004)].

Here then, are the top ten factors that created this perfect propaganda storm.

### 1.9/11 happened

The national public was softened by those horrific events to accept almost anything that might produce 'closure', leading to an amazing assault on civil liberties on the domestic front, along with the rise of unabashed empire discourse from those (Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld) who had – as my colleague David Domke argues in a forthcoming book – long harboured fantasies of a militarist reassertion of American hegemony. Where was the press after 9/11? Apparently too wrapped in its cultural-patriotic storytelling to find credible sources to challenge the Wolfowitz-Perle vision of a democratic 'domino theory' in the Middle East.

Thus, the administration was able to push a weak case for war based on fantastic assertions of an al-Qaida-Iraq link, and the even stealthier innuendos that Saddam Hussein was somehow involved in the 9/11 attacks – a connection that 71% of the public attributed to the administration as late as June 2003 (see Paul Krugman, "Bush and Blair, so far, face different fates", *International Herald Tribune* [5]).

The ironic self-fulfilling prophecy is that war has created a terrorist connection as Islamic fighters have poured into Iraq after the fall of Saddam to carry out a guerrilla campaign of bombings and sabotage. The capacity of the administration to successfully push deceptions and misrepresentations through a docile press to an emotionally volatile public may stand as the most ruthless press control operation in history – an operation of such sophistication that at least three distinct press-management factors must be counted separately.

## **2. Master scripting and directing by Karl Rove (a.k.a. Bush's brain).**

The Karl Rove communication operation makes President Reagan's press management under Michael Deaver and David Gergen in the 1980s seem modest by comparison. No news management opportunity was missed, from the elaborate military briefing set in Doha designed by Hollywood art director George Allison, to the edgy insertions of Iraq into the war on terror.

Even the president's deer-in-the-headlights media presence was countered with the relentless spin that he in fact has a natural "swagger." Bush's media "swagger" was introduced shortly after the 2001 inaugural in a *Washington Post* fashion column on Bush's appeal in jeans; it culminated with his carrier-landing that the *Post* front page described, *Maxim*-fashion: "When the Viking carrying Bush made its tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln off California yesterday, the scene brought presidential imagery to a whole new level. Bush emerged from the cockpit in full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun [6]" (thanks to Steve Livingston [7]).

From the micro-spin of Bush's confident *swagger* to the macro-linking of Iraq to the war on terror, the grand story held together despite implausibility (or at least plausible challenges) at virtually every point.

(The overwhelming majority of news references to Bush's service in the Air National Guard failed to note his undistinguished record that included a grounding, a possible 'absent without official leave', and an early exit to attend Harvard).

## **3. Beyond spin: intimidation**

Intimidation of journalists and news organisations began within hours of the 9/11 catastrophe, achieved a well-tuned efficiency during the Afghanistan war, and continued through the Iraq war

to discipline those who dared to raise questions. This intimidation campaign reached new lows against journalists who reported discouraging news from post-liberation Iraq.

When an ABC reporter aired the complaint of a soldier who felt so deceived by the war plan that he called for the resignation of his boss, Donald Rumsfeld, the journalist was denounced as gay – and a gay Canadian, at that (indicating the xenophobic level of the administration support network's discourse).

Columnist Maureen Dowd traced this particular circuit of deprecation from someone in the White House communication shop to Matt Drudge, who briefly posted this headline on his website: "ABC news reporter who filed troop complaints story – openly gay Canadian" (Maureen Dowd, "It's ugly when control freaks lose control," *International Herald Tribune*, 22 July 2003 [8] – subscription only).

But lest the press appear to be hapless victims of masterly spin and cruel intimidation, the fourth factor establishes most news organisations as willing collaborators in administration framing.

#### **4. The press em-bed with the military**

Scratch a good journalist and one is likely to find a vicarious adventurer who seeks to be at the scene of the action telling the Big Story. Apparently one could not be closer to the Iraq war story than inside a tank hurtling across the desert toward Baghdad. Nearly every respected journalist (including those too old to go into action themselves) initially hailed the military 'embedding' as a ringside ticket to great journalism, a perspective that would bring the uncensored reality of war to the American people.

Only later did some journalists admit what they might have seen beforehand: that the Big Story was dictated from Washington, and the scenes from inside the tanks were little more than B-movie filler that authenticated a story told by the government.

If the embedding operation was as telling about the dramaturgy of the press as about the press-control proclivities of the administration, the fifth factor moves us even farther into the realm of press responsibility.

#### **5. Maximum drama *and* most likely plot advancement**

When journalists make story choices, they favour narrative elements that are most likely to advance a coherent, dramatic story into the future. In some cases, those choices produce stories that ignore potentially damning evidence to the contrary. These cases typically involve looking away from sources less likely to deliver future instalments, and favouring (usually official) sources more prepared to deliver regular updates.

Consider three elements of the media coverage. First, the reporting decisions to downplay the volume of doubt linking al-Qaida (and, more generally, 9/11) to Iraq. Second, consider the volume of doubt about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. Although doubts were reported, they were pegged largely to foreign sources and domestic protesters that were dismissed insultingly by Rumsfeld and company.

Third, consider the widespread journalistic decisions to avoid confusing the Iraq-terrorism narrative with stronger evidence of links between al-Qaida, 9/11, and Saudi Arabia – stories that continued to demand major coverage even after the post-war revelation by Saudi officials that al-Qaida operatives conducted training operations as late as July 2003 on Saudi farms, and

even after the administration refused to release an intelligence report allegedly linking al-Qaida to prominent members of the Saudi political elite [8].

Seymour Hersh [9] published an early investigative report in *The New Yorker* [10] presenting evidence against the Iraq connection, while pointing something of a smoking gun at Saudi Arabia. These rare acts of investigative journalism were virtually ignored by the larger press community because standard Washington sources (aside from Richard Perle's statement that Hersh [11] was a 'terrorist') offered nothing to advance those stories, preferring to serve up daily instalments on Saddam and terrorism.

What would it have taken for the press to turn those potential blockbuster alternatives into serious frame challenges to the administration? Did I mention the Democrats?

## **6. Where were the Democrats?**

Apparently the defeated Democrats have been advised to offend no one and take no political risks. Although this advice might be questioned as making them seem even more offensive by looking weak and indecisive, they are apparently paying enough for their professional communication counsel to follow it.

Thus, neither the key players in Congress (apart from the Democratic party veteran Robert Byrd [12]) nor the host of presidential candidates jockeying for early press attention was willing to take on the war issue squarely.

The exception was Howard Dean [13], whose campaign was not acknowledged by the press as credible until spring 2003 fundraising figures anointed him with greater press legitimacy. News organisations are so dependent on prominent official sources to advance challenges to a leading news frame that the strategic silence of the Democrats all but killed media deliberation about the war.

Consider a small case in point. In January, 2003, I was called by a *Newsweek* reporter who asked the stunning question (I paraphrase): "We in the press have become aware of a substantial anti-war movement. Why do you think we are not reporting it?" Why, indeed, did the press fail to report organised large-scale opposition? I explained that the failure to report on the anti-war movement was due to the dependence of the press on official opposition or partisan engagement of institutional processes to elevate grassroots voices to regular members of the news cast.

Sure enough, a couple of weeks later, candidate John Kerry raised a small (trial balloon) question about the advisability of war over continued inspections and military quarantine, and the *New York Times* noted the rise of a substantial anti-war movement in the very same paragraph. But Kerry [14] promptly went into hospital, other Democrats stared blankly at Bush's post-9/11 popularity ratings, and so went the opening for the anti-war movement to have a prominent voice in the public sphere.

Subsequently, on 15 February 2003, when some 10 million people across the globe raised their voices in what may well be the largest coordinated public demonstrations in world history, the American press allowed the president to dismiss it as the ramblings of a "focus group" to which he would not respond.

## **7. The absence of credible progressive think tanks**

News stories are often advanced through reactions from experts at think tanks who promote the political policy objectives of those who fund these high level opinion-making operations. The right has enjoyed considerable media success through a combination of: a) aggressive news management (see point 2 above), b) dense networking of radio and TV talk pundits and conservative rapid response email lists to create a virtual public to support policy initiatives and attack opponents (point 3), and c) timely delivery of think-tank reports and experts to journalists when new initiatives are launched, or when old ones suffer MADS (media attention deficit syndrome) and need new life.

Perhaps it is because of funding disparities between left and right – or simply because of the dim capacities of the left to understand how the press works – that there was virtually no coordinated expertise to counter Bush administration war frames. (The [Brookings Institution](#) [15] has been so closely identified with promoting the doctrine of Democratic moderation that it seldom advances progressive media positions).

## **8. Press construction of a spectator public**

It is hard to attribute public responses to the war entirely, or perhaps even largely, to the administration's far-reaching rationales, even if popular reason remained subdued by the lingering after-effects of 9/11. It is important to realise that publics form their opinions only in part in response to the cueing of voices in the news. In their lives outside of media representations, people surely look elsewhere for clues about what to think.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about public opinion as measured by polls up to the eve of the invasion was that clear majorities favoured war only if the administration could build an international coalition (one suspects that a "coalition of the willing" that included Palau and Tonga over France and Germany was not what they had in mind).

Even though pre-war opinion polls only imperfectly reflected administration media cues, the ways in which the news reported those polls (along with other indicators of opinion, such as demonstrations) suggests that our images of the importance of publics in various political contexts are overwhelmingly media constructions.

As the news narrative built toward inevitable war, the divisions among polled publics were seldom elevated beyond notations for the record, nor were those polls used as frames to bring large scale protests into credible opposition status. It seems that the press once again forgot that publics might occupy active roles in the news story of a democracy, consigning them once again to passive media audiences for the democratic spectacle that Murray Edelman described in such detail in [The Politics of Misinformation](#) [16].

Thus, when the tide of public opinion rose predictably into a patriotic rally with the outbreak of the war, it would have been easy to conclude that the public supported the rationale for the war as well. Indeed, questions about just what the public was supporting would have been hard to air in the midst of a national patriotic rally that was led as much by a cheerleading press as by the administration.

## **9. Press ethnocentrism**

More than any other western democratic press system, the US press is remarkably closed to world opinion. Perhaps this reflects the press's implicit mirroring of the confusing popular cultural impulses of isolationism and patriotic intervention. The inward turn of American journalism may also reflect the unwillingness of most politicians (also known as 'leading news

sources') to risk their patriotic credentials either by questioning the values and motives behind government decisions to use force, or by crediting outsiders when they do so.

In any event, international reactions of outrage to the administration's "you're either with us or against us" stand on Iraq were duly noted for the news record, and then easily spun away by administration news sources and journalists alike. While news features reported on boycotts of French wine and the renaming of French fries as 'freedom fries', many commentators adopted a condescending tone for discussing the din of international criticism.

No national news organisation was more aggressive in its patriotic support for the war – or its vitriolic condemnation of administration critics, foreign and domestic – than the Murdoch-owned Fox network.

## **10. The Fox Effect**

This is the last, and I think, the least important factor explaining why the press faithfully reported so many administration claims that could have been challenged. Because of the levels of patriotic cant from Fox reporters, anchors, and talk show hosts, many observers felt that Fox exercised a chilling effect on a competition that was worried about ratings losses among audiences allegedly swept with patriotic fervour.

It is true that new standards of jingo-journalism may have been set by the Fox anchor who described anti-war protesters in Switzerland as "hundreds of knuckleheads," or by the decision to run a banner at the bottom of the screen branding nations that refused to join the "coalition of the willing" as the "axis of weasels." ([Ken Auletta \[17\]](#), "Vox Fox," *The New Yorker*, 26 May 2003). But Fox's hyperbolic reporting notwithstanding, we should not forget the stiff competition among television news organisations during the 1991 war – long before Fox News was a gleam in the eyes of Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch – to display their patriotic credentials.

Even if Fox seized the opportunity presented by the Iraq war to pass its cable competition in audience ratings, these are still small audiences in absolute numbers. If the right were as numerous as its media volume is loud, we might expect Fox to soar into ratings competition with the broadcast networks. And, if the Bush White House was more likely to watch Fox than CNN during the war, one suspects they tuned in for the political cheerleading. I cannot imagine they were, as the original CNN Effect debate would have it, monitoring for information that would actually be "news".

If [Fox's competition \[18\]](#) effectively took a pass on critical journalism and caved in at opportunities to contest administration news frames, I would argue that the effects of factors 1-9 were considerably more important than looking over their journalistic shoulders at the Fox Effect.

## **What next?**

Although Operation Perfect Storm may have exceeded Desert Storm's levels of press complicity, many other aspects of the two situations remain strikingly similar. Even after "major combat operations" ended, and questions might have been raised about the aftermath, the Democrats remained, as before the war, frozen in their familiar finger-in-the-wind profile.

Here is the minority (Democratic) leader in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in response to a pre-war television interview question on where are the democrats: "The Democrats are where they are. One at a time, one at a time. This is a vote of conscience, as

war is for everyone.” (Dan Baltz, “The Democrats’ Dilemma (Cont’d)”, *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 14-20 April 2003).

Apparently having taken that page from the Gulf War Party Playbook, Nancy Pelosi was forced to ad lib a response to a post-war question about the party’s reaction to the failure to find weapons of mass destruction. She first waffled on the failure, saying that it was “difficult to understand,” then ventured that she was “sort of agnostic on it: that is to say, maybe they are there”, and finally settled on saluting the president for the unrealised goal behind the war: “I salute the president for the goal of removing weapons of mass destruction.” (Dana Milbank and Jim VandeHei, “No Weapons? No Complaints from Democrats,” *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 26 May – 1 June, 2003).

I suspect that, just like their Gulf war forebears, the Democrats are hoping the downswing in the economy will linger until the next election. If only they could find campaigners like Bill Clinton and Ross Perot to explain the situation to the people. If the economy staggers under the Bush tax plan, or if a trail of smoking deception about the war somehow reaches the Oval Office, the press may well turn on the man they endowed with Texas ‘swagger’, and send him into early retirement like they did his father.

But this reversal of political fortune, if it occurs, will not likely be due to much dogged reporting on critical questions (for those questions have been there all along). It will be because the press has found a better story.

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