

Spinning the war - lessons in propaganda

HAVE YOU noticed that the recent pro-war demonstrations seem to have a cookie-cutter feel to them? The same plastic signs with the same slogans. The same droning "Ooo Esss Ay" chants repeated ad nauseam to the same frat boy tune of "drink, drink, drink." During the last month these loud little gatherings have been popping up around the country like zits on a boy scout. Their eerie similarity, however, is not by chance. According to The New York Times, most of these outbursts of bloodlust have been organized nationally by the same group – not a political organization per se, but the nation's largest owner of radio stations – Clear Channel Communications Corporation.

Clear Channel, owner of more than 1,200 commercial radio stations in the U.S., has emerged as the biggest benefactor of the Reagan era deregulation of the public airwaves and the industry authored Telecommunications Act of 1996. Both removed restrictions on corporations owning multiple stations and dominating local radio markets. Today, Clear Channel doesn't just buy stations – it buys markets – such as Rochester, where its xenophobic on-air personalities belt out their reactionary messages on seven radio stations, often using ethnic slurs to describe foreign leaders.

Clear Channel is run by executives with close ties to the Bush family, such as Vice Chair

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Tom Hicks, who bought the Texas Rangers from George W., transforming the now-president into a multimillionaire. For Clear Channel, supporting the Bush family's war is payback for past Republican support of airwave deregulation, and a deposit on pending deregulation plans that would allow the company to move into television.

The White House PR plan

Americans are now being assaulted with an unprecedented multimedia barrage of pro-war propaganda in the form of both popular culture and what now passes for "news." Far from being happenstance, this propaganda effort is the result of a carefully crafted public relations campaign coordinated by the White House Office of Global Communications (OGC), which follows in the footsteps of the Contra War-era Office of Public Diplomacy.

A recent report in PRWeek, a public relations industry publication, cites Bush spinmeister Suzy DeFrancis, who explained the plan, "When Americans wake up in the morning, they will first hear from the [Persian Gulf] region, maybe from General Tommy Franks. Then later in the day, they'll hear from the Pentagon, then the State Department, then later on the White House will brief." Under this plan, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer will "set the day's message," which will be echoed throughout the day's press events. Key to this propaganda plan is the judicious use of "embedded journalists" under US military control. PRWeek reports that the Bush administration plans to use these "reporters" as "one of their most reliable PR vehicles." The Toronto Star reports that Bush signed off on the "communications war plan," which centered on the use of 529 embedded reporters operating under "tough restrictions" in an effort to, as Bush put it, get the news out "in a co-coordinated way that reflects our efforts."

False stories so far reported

During the first week of the war, according to the normally conservative Editor and Publisher magazine, these reporters put out no less than 15 stories that have since been proved false. They are:

- 1) Saddam Hussein killed or severely wounded on day one (March 20)
- 2) Iraqi command "decapitated." (March 22)
- 3) City of Umm Qasr captured (March 22)
- 4) Iraqi soldiers refuse to fight – Surrender in droves (March 22)
- 5) Iraqi citizens greet Americans as liberators (March 22)
- 6) Entire division of 8,000 Iraqi troops surrenders (March 23)
- 7) Banned Scud missiles launched against Kuwait (March 23)
- 8) Fedayeen militia are few in number and pose no threat (March 23)

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- 9) City of Basra captured (March 23)
- 10) City of Umm Qasr captured for real (March 23)
- 11) Captured chemical plant in Najaf produced banned weapons (March 23)
- 12) City of Nassiriya captured (March 23)
- 13) City of Umm Qasr really really captured for real (March 24)
- 14) Major anti-Saddam rebellion occurs in Basra (March 24)
- 15) Republican Guard convoy of 1,000 vehicles heading south to engage US troops (March 25)

As is the case with propaganda, the pronouncements were loud while retractions, when they occurred, were mere whispers. Some of these stories, such as the use of banned Scud missiles and the discovery of a chemical weapons plant, are necessary to justify the war. Hence, American networks such as Fox, which is owned by a major Bush campaign financier and whose news division is run by President Bush Senior's former campaign manager, put out on-screen banners such as, "Huge Chemical Weapons Factory Found in So. Iraq." When the story proved false, there were no banners – since it was now an "old story." For the most part, the rest of the world's media has treated these allegations as allegations, and not fact – which was not only a professional move, but also a safe one as well given that they proved false.

Precise and surgical misinformation

The media is also telling us not to worry about the civilian population of Baghdad, since our bombs are precise and surgical and, therefore humane. News outlets such as NBC, which incidentally is owned by a company (GE) that made the guidance systems for the "Smart" bombs launched against Baghdad, assure us that the bombs (in effect, their bombs) are indeed precise, and despite thousands of launches, never miss their targets. The problem, according to media watchdog groups such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, is that news organizations are parroting claims of precision without verifying them. They quote one NBC report as saying, "every weapon is precision guided – deadly accuracy designed to kill only the targets, not innocent civilians." On the Today Show they reported, "More than a thousand missiles were dropped on Baghdad, three times the number from the entire Gulf War. And this time they're all precision guided, deadly accurate, designed to kill only the targets, not innocent civilians."

The problem is that this is similar rhetoric to that which we heard during the last Gulf War – which later proved false, with less than a fifth of the bombs dropped attaining precision strikes. The current rhetoric says US bombs have significantly improved since the last Gulf War, hence invalidating the false reports that the same media outlets fed us

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during that war. This time around, no doubt, the bombs are indeed more sophisticated and improved, but we know already that some of them not only missed their targets, but missed the whole damned country, raining down in Turkey and Iran, as well as 'accidentally' hitting a bus full of Syrian civilians in Northern Iraq. Not too smart.

Bad as the war reporting is, reporting from the home front is even worse. Stories about pro and antiwar demonstrations echo George W. Bush's simplistic "you are either with us or you are against us" rhetoric. Hence, mediawise, demonstrators fall into two categories – "antiwar" or "supporting the troops," with the implicit message being that antiwar protesters are anti-troops. Most antiwar protesters, however, identify themselves as also supporting the troops – since these soldiers are our friends, family members and members of our diverse communities. Antiwar protesters feel that dispatching troops to fight in this war (for reasons outlined in previous articles) is a disservice to those men and women who signed up to defend their country and uphold the US constitution.

Conversely, one would hardly describe a pro-war yahoo ready to send other people off to die in a war they themselves would not fight in, as "supporting our troops." Yet, the irony of Korean War and Vietnam-era draft dodgers making up the core of the Bush administration's pro-war hawks seems to be lost on a compliant press corps which callously bestows upon them the "supporting our troops" label while insinuating that people fighting to keep troops out of harm's way are somehow not supporting them.

More missing stories

American coverage of the global political fallout from the war is also deficient. Currently most major American embassies are under symbolic siege from constant protests. A global "Brand USA Boycott," modeled after the effective apartheid-era South African divestment campaign, is spreading and State Department officials stationed around the world are quitting in protest over the war. The UN is in disarray, American interests everywhere are under attack, the US is now widely seen by historical allies as a pariah nation and millions of antiwar protesters are taking to the world's streets. But that bigger picture is missing from the US media.

Also missing are stories about the American resistance to this war and to the Bush/media propaganda effort. Another 300,000 people marched in New York at the onset of the war. Last week 20,000 people marched on CNN's Los Angeles headquarters to protest against that network's pro-war bias. Thousands more marched on the Rockefeller Center in New York to protest against media bias. Last weekend's antiwar demonstration in Boston turned out to be the biggest demonstration of any sort that city has seen in over 30 years. All of these stories are either ignored, downplayed, or twisted.

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While the dominant media messages tell us repeatedly that pro-war support is growing, the opposite seems true. The conservative Business Week magazine reports, for example, that 56% of its readers oppose the war. Furthermore, only 14% supported spending more than \$100 billion on the war - as economists estimate that war costs are likely to hit \$600 billion. Only 19% of these businesspersons were comfortable with a military effort that would last six months or more – which also now seems to be a certainty. And just 11% of readers were comfortable with a US military presence in Iraq lasting more than four years. The Business Week story is not unique, but reflects a trend – of a powerful revolt from the very people who put the Bush junta into office. It needs to be better reported.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting conducted a quantitative analysis of ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS news reports leading up to the invasion, and found antiwar views, from all sources, to be almost invisible. In their study, which looked at a two-week period in the beginning of February, they found 75% of American on-air guests talking about the war to be current or former US government officials, with only one of these 199 people expressing any antiwar sentiment. Of a total of 393 people representing governments and people from around the world, only one person represented an organized antiwar organization. With this lack of balance, it's nearly impossible to maintain a democratic discourse on the war.

While ignoring antiwar views, the same media have proven to be quite adept at disseminating false information in support of the war. Take for instance the widely reported story about documents purporting to show Iraq attempting to buy uranium from the nation of Niger. The CIA reported in 2001 that the documents were forgeries – and that there was no evidence of Iraq attempting to obtain radioactive material. Still, George W. Bush continued to use this discredited evidence in 2002 and 2003 as he beat the drums for war, despite knowing the information he was disseminating was false.

Misled by Bush administration

Rep. Henry Waxman, who voted to give Bush the authority to wage war against Iraq, claims he and many others in Congress made their decision based upon this evidence. Now, he feels misled, and has recently attacked the Bush administration for deliberately falsifying an Iraqi threat and intentionally misleading Congress, the American people and the world. Waxman's complaints, like the original story of Bush's use of falsified data to sell an illegal war, have been ignored by the American media. Think about it: Bush's own CIA has discredited his statements as lies, but they are still seen as truths by most Americans – who have been misled by a compliant media.

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Also invisible in the American media is the universal international condemnation of American actions, such as the bombing of Iraqi TV studios. Amnesty International has warned that the US bombing raid that destroyed Iraq's civilian television studios may constitute a "war crime," said one cannot kill civilian media workers and bomb a civilian media facility "simply because it is being used for the purposes of propaganda." Human Rights Watch also questioned the legality of the attack under international law. The International Federation of Journalists, representing 500,000 journalists worldwide, argued that the attack may have violated the Geneva Convention on warfare. They argue that Iraqi TV was biased, and yes it was spreading propaganda, but it was still not a military target. By legitimizing the killing of journalists because of what they are reporting, the US has put all journalists in the world at risk of similar assassination. And this is not the first such American attack: Bill Clinton ordered a similar bombing of Yugoslavian TV in Belgrade during the Kosovo War. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cited Clinton's attack in Belgrade as the precedent when he ordered his troops to attack civilian media facilities in Palestinian territory. The continuation of these illegal and immoral attacks in Iraq threatens to legitimize the targeting of journalists the world over.

Are reporters legitimate targets?

Alarmingly, the American media has either been silent about these attacks, or has supported them. Fox News asked the question, "Should we take Iraqi TV off the air... should we put one down the stovepipe there?" Another Fox reporter bluntly stated, "I think they should have taken out the television..." The New York Times, CNN, NBC and CNBC all joined Fox in subtly endorsing the attack. CNN went as far as to editorialize that such a bombing "will take away a very important tool from the Iraqi leadership – that of showing their face, getting their message out to the Iraqi people, and really telling them that they are still in control." Of course, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting points out, CNN plays the very same function in the US. Yet I don't think CNN meant to declare their reporters, especially those who are still in Iraq, as legitimate military targets, but that is in effect what their Quisling statement indicates. Fox went as far as to take credit for the bombing raid against Iraqi TV, speculating that maybe their criticism of the military for not bombing Fox's Iraqi counterparts finally encouraged them to do so.

So far, the administration/media alliance has produced results: Nearly half of the American people mistakenly believe that Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi government was involved in the planning and execution of the 9/11 attack on America. This is false. The War on Terror and the Invasion of Iraq are separate stories. The fault for this confusion

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must land at the feet of the US media, which is ultimately responsible for gestating the myth. Juxtaposing images of the twin towers falling with coverage of the Iraq situation, superimposing "war on terrorism" logos on the screen while reporting on Iraq, and showing photos of Saddam Hussein while reporting on terrorism have contributed, intentionally, to this confusion. Given this prevalent ignorance and miscomprehension of world events, it's no wonder that a war against Iraq has a broad base of support among America's most ignorant citizens – those who depend on Fox and other TV sources for their news.

But there is a glimmer of good news. Nielsen/Netratings reports that nearly half of the visits to the websites of Britain's Guardian and Observer newspapers, for example, are now coming from the Americas. During the period from December 2002 through January 2003, when news websites in general saw an increase in visitors of three percent, these sites saw an increase of 10% while CNN's website saw a small decrease. Paul Krugman of The New York Times writes that American TV networks seem "to be reporting about a different planet than the one covered by foreign media." Americans, however, seem more and more interested in that other planet – the one inhabited by everyone else on earth. And more and more, those who can, are using their keypads and mice to get there. ●