

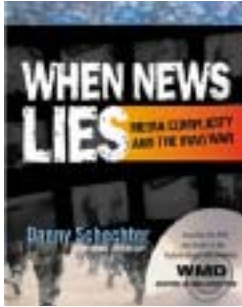


"He sees clearly through to the ridiculousness, the cravenness, the pretensions, the corporate phobias, the small-time, pathetic, yellow-dog cowardliness that can only but get us into loads of trouble. You can't help but laugh before you weep."

– Michael Wolff,
Vanity Fair

DANNY
SCHECHTER
TWO BOOKS
AND AN ESSAY

TWO NEW BOOKS BY DANNY SCHECHTER



WHEN NEWS LIES

Media Complicity and The Iraq War

Published by Select Books

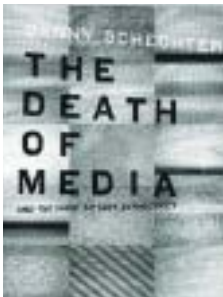
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\$27.95 US

146 pages

Included With Book: DVD of full length feature film,
WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception and Film Script

A new book from Danny Schechter offers an up to date indictment of the role media played in promoting and misreporting the war on Iraq. It is an analysis of how and why the media got it wrong, pinpoints the failures of journalism and the collusion of media companies with the Bush Administration. The book includes the feature-length DVD of the prize-winning film *WMD* (Weapons of Mass Deception and the complete script.) *WHEN NEWS LIES* also includes a foreword by acclaimed media writer and Vanity Fair columnist Michael Wolff and prefaces by independent Iraq reporter Dahr Jamail and information warfare specialist Colonel (Ret) Sam Gardiner, a war analyst for the PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer.



THE DEATH OF MEDIA

And the Fight to Save Democracy

Published by Melville House Publishing

ISBN: 0-9766583-6-4

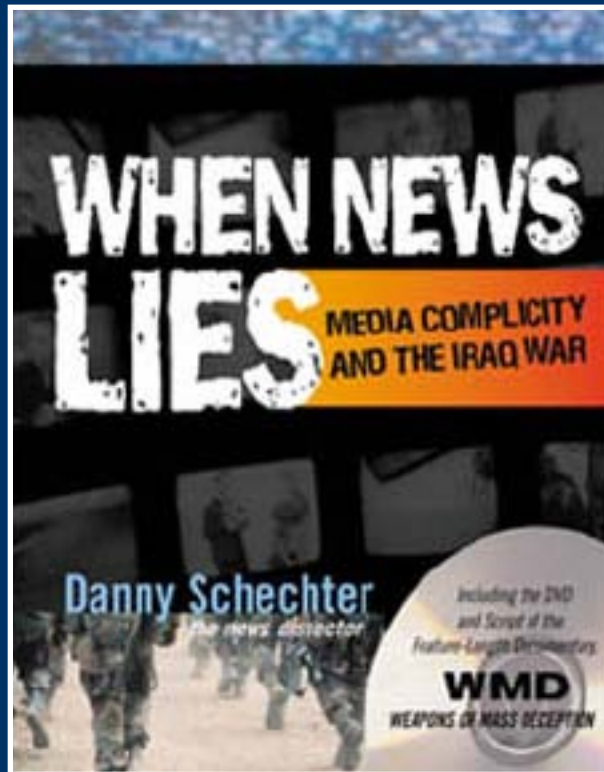
\$10 US/\$15 CAN.

173 pages

Emmy-award winning journalist Danny Schechter, the "News Dissector," takes a close look at today's big media news outlets, the new media that's striving to replace them, and what it means for our democracy. A self-proclaimed "refugee" from mainstream media – Schechter was a producer at ABC's "20/20" and at CNN – he examines the evidence: plummeting newspaper circulation, the dive in network ratings, unprecedented media concentration, and more. It's no wonder, he says, that polls have put media dissatisfaction at up to 70%. Yet a healthy, active media is crucial to the functioning of a democracy.

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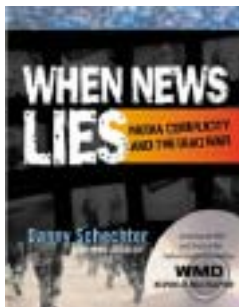


Forward

By Michael Wolff

Opening salvo

By Danny Schechter



Forward

By Michael Wolff

On a hot summer day in 2003 – not long back from covering the invasion of Iraq from the information-deprivation tank that was Centcom’s headquarters in the Persian Gulf – I helped organize with Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper a conference at the New School in New York to discuss the media’s performance in the war.

It was a hot summer day because, frankly, I thought if we waited until cooler weather and a bigger audience in September, nobody would be all that interested in the war anymore. The story would certainly have peaked by then.

That’s why I was a little taken aback when, just before the conference, Danny Schechter called me and asked if he could film the event for a documentary he was doing.

But then I have always thought that documentaries were bizarre in that way. How can you spend months and months or more on a topic of immediate interest and possibly hope it will be relevant when it finally – and often by a circuitous route – gets to its audience?

In a way, the answer to why Danny was at my conference with his film crew goes to the heart of both the documentary form and the Iraq war.

Documentaries reflect a certain sort of obsessiveness – certainly made by obsessives. This compulsion to record every detail, this need to tell the whole story, this myopic focus on solving a puzzle – why did these events happen as they happened, and what do they mean – can vividly recreate the fascination of the train wreck. Even in a peaceful world, I realized when I first saw it,

Danny's film would be riveting – divorced from the event itself, Danny's portrait of hacks at war (or not at war, as the case may be) approaches high comedy. It's Evelyn Waugh in *Scoop* – that most famous novel of journalism's bracing incompetence.

But the other point is about the War itself and what Danny understood. While I was seeing the Iraq war as just another grievous example of media incompetence and mendacity which would shortly pass, upstaged – perhaps as soon as Autumn came around – by some other unimagined example of grievous incompetence and mendacity, Danny, more accurately, saw Iraq as, in itself, an epic story.

Not only would the story still be around when they weather got cooler, it would grow ever larger, increasingly complex, more disturbing and tragic – Abu Ghraib was still months away – and show no signs of doing anything but continuing to become more dangerous and corrupting and incompetent as I write this two summers later.

At the time of our conference, fewer than 200 American soldiers had died in Iraq. Now, 1740 are dead. By the time you read this... well, the math is running at about three soldiers a day.

IN SOME SENSE, I think Danny's early and instinctive understanding that Iraq was on its way to becoming a disaster of epic proportions – the signal disaster of our time – comes from his long acquaintance with what happens when the media punts.

At the center of Danny's film lurks the unsettling – and one might hope, guilt-ridden – issue of what might have happened if the U.S. media had been more skeptical of the Bush White House's stated reasons for going to war and of its cheerful forecasts of how *doable* it would be to wage such a war.

The largely unasked questions are haunting:

How was it possible that a nation under draconian economic sanctions could have developed and maintained a sophisticated, technologically demanding advanced weapons program? (Answer: it wasn't possible.)

What was the plan if Iraqis fought back? If, in fact, we were not greeted with flowers? (Indeed, on what basis was everybody thinking we would be greeted with flowers?)

Beyond getting rid of Saddam Hussein himself, what then? What was the larg-

er goal – and, by the way, how would we accomplish it?

Once in, if it all went wrong, how would we get out?

The perfect obviousness of these questions, the clear necessity of having to ask these questions, and the failure of the media to make them a central part of the story, demonstrates, rather painfully, that the American media was either hopelessly asleep at the switch, or so conflicted in its desires (to curry favor with the Bush administration, to please the managers of the media corporations that owned the news outlets, not to disturb the shareholders of these corporations, not to look foolish, when, if as the administration was promising, the war got over fast) that it was unable to do its job.

The fact that the media eschewed almost every bit of basic skepticism – decorating its coverage with flag graphics, patriotic icons, and grandiose rubrics – had two literally mortal effects:

The first was that we went to war at all. A reasonable amount of doubt, some serious questioning of the underlying assumptions, some dutiful reporting on the basic situation, would surely have made the Bush case for war much harder to make.

The second was that once we were there, the media had to continue to support the effort – in many ways they continue to support it still – because it was, in effect, defending itself. Even now, with the WMD canard wholly destroyed – with the press shown up to be fools and dupes – the best you get from the media poobahs are lots of tortured and circumlocuted explanations which ultimately add up to the conclusion that while the media was absolutely wrong about everything it was ultimately right anyhow. And, obviously you can see, *our intentions were surely good.*

Danny, not least because he has been covering the media longer and more consistently than anybody else, understood that this what-me-worry, see-no-evil, let's-get-on-with-the-show countenance on the part of the American media was a sure-fire recipe for the epic disaster that we now have on our hands.

THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE to add here about the fact that Danny, doing his job as long as he has been doing it, has become something like the 2000-year-old media critic – he's one of the few guys who can be counted on to consistently know the real score.

Virtually everybody who writes about the media nowadays is in the thrall of the

media. Media reporters tend to be like political reporters – we’re in the Beltway, and deeply impressed with ourselves for being here. Indeed, this is who we want to be (media people) and where we want to work (in the center of the media business). So don’t do anything or say anything to get us into trouble.

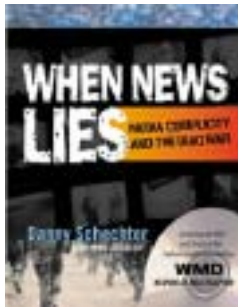
Danny (aka “Danny Schechter the news dissector” back at WBCN, in Boston, in the 1970s) got over this a long time ago. Danny Schechter in *Weapons of Mass Deception* is to the news media what Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* is to the American Military and the Second World War.

Our News Dissector finds the media to be not only mendacious and incompetent, but absurd. It’s absurd because it doesn’t even know that it is mendacious or incompetent. Or, even that mendacity and incompetence has become so woven into the fabric of its function, that mendacity and incompetence has become the standard of a job well done.

Danny, by the way, is always laughing. It invariably puts me in a good mood to see him. The reason he’s always laughing, I believe, has to do with his 2000 years of experience as a media critic. Unlike most of our fellow media critics, Danny is long past trying to come up with a strangled rationale for the world we live and work in. He sees clearly through to the ridiculousness, the cravenness, the pretensions, the corporate phobias, the small-time, pathetic, yellow-dog cowardliness that can only but get us into loads of trouble.

You can’t help but laugh before you weep.

Michael Wolff is probably America’s most provocative media writer. He is a columnist and contributing editor at Vanity Fair magazine and former columnist at New York magazine. His books include: Burn Rate: How I Survived the Gold Rush Years on the Internet (Simon & Schuster, 1998) and Autumn of the Moguls: My Misadventures with the Titans, Poseurs, and Money Guys Who Mastered and Messed Up Big Media (Harper Collins, 2003). He is the 2002 winner of the National Magazine Award for columns and commentary.



Opening salvo

By Danny Schechter

When *News Lies* details an examination of media coverage of the Iraq War through the war's second anniversary in the spring of 2005. This book and companion film, *WMD*, together tell a multi-layered story of the war itself and the way in which it was spun and mis-covered by so many journalists and leading media outlets in the U.S.

The story of the role of the media in the Iraq War was begun in my earlier tome, *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*, in which I tracked the TV coverage that Americans were exposed to from the run-up of the war through the summer of 2003. *When News Lies* brings the story up-to-date, furthering the chronicle while trying to ferret out the shifting rationales given for engaging in the war in the first place. When *Embedded* was written, it was a rather lonely dissent focused on the media coverage of the Iraq War, even as a rather large, global anti-war movement challenged the Bush Administration's decision.

There were a few journalists who complained that journalists were failing. In the *Independent* in London, Mary Dejevsky wrote under the heading: "Let's be honest: journalists failed" (3/2/04):

It is hard now to think back to September 2002 and January 2003 when the government issued its two dossiers on Iraq's weapons. To hazard that these [the WMDS] might not exist was to invite ridicule. . . . Very few of us have anything like the specialist expertise needed to assess the technical

information we were given [about the alleged existence of WMD].

In 2005, a *New York Times* writer called the critics of the day “lonely people.” “Lonely?” Had he missed the 30 million people in the street in the largest protest in the history of the world? In fact, there were critics on media outlets worldwide, and many in the U.S., especially in the independent media sector. The problem is they were largely ignored, and still are.

Two years later, *When News Lies* revisits the media coverage of the ongoing war with a deeper indictment of the role of the media. The addition of the film, *WMD*, adds a visual dimension to the story I’ve been telling through *Embedded*; various essays, columns and articles that have appeared in print; and my daily blog at Mediachannel.org about the media war being fought alongside of the military conflict. In many ways I consider myself at war with the war and its coverage.

My concerns are, and for a long time have been, focused on the uses and convergence of media in an era, as Marshall McLuhan once put it, in which “the coverage is the war, ... news men and media men around the world are the fighters, not the soldiers any more.” (*Understanding Media*, 1964).

When News Lies offers a subjective assessment and a personal perspective of the subject because it is also about this journalist’s own fight for larger truths. My battle is being fought not in some academic institution but in the media trenches, where my weaponry “deploys” the ammunition of words, online and off, through media appearances, lectures, panels and op-ed columns, along with the power of documentary cinema to expose and challenge a carefully constructed pro-war narrative disseminated by the U.S. media.

The film itself as a subject is included in *When News Lies* not as a self-promotional exercise but because I believe why and how our media is made (including my own) is a legitimate topic to examine. My first book, *The More You Watch, the Less You Know*, delved into the internal culture of media companies to try to explain their arcane decision-making processes. This is important not only to expose the intricacies of mainstream media but also to discuss the politics and impact of counter or alternative media in challenging a dominant media paradigm. In my view, it takes a media insider to best explain how it all works, and an activist to evaluate what effect it has. *When News Lies* not only critiques the mainstream media but dissects my own work as well.

I am a believer in participatory journalism. I don’t pretend, like so many of my

colleagues, to be a detached “objective” observer. I don’t deny I have a point of view or that I can make mistakes. At the same time, I try to be careful in my conclusions and to avoid simplistic media bashing. After all, I am a media maker, too, struggling to get my work read and seen in an environment of declining respect for fact-based journalism.

I often put myself into my work as a witness, explaining my motivations and rationale. It makes for more honesty. In *When News Lies*, I also speak personally, and sometimes humorously, about what a struggle the *WMD* film project has been without minimizing the obstacles that independent filmmakers face. The journalists who covered the war were well-equipped and well-compensated by big media companies. Those of us who challenge them are not.

When News Lies is based on my own close observations and monitoring of many media outlets from the run-up to the “shock and awe” campaign, to the devastation it created in the cradle of civilization, to the continuing occupation and the ongoing battle to engineer a partial exit strategy. It peers into the way our media system helped make the Iraq War palatable to a frightened public and therefore possible and also examines the media crisis inside a much larger political crisis.

When News Lies represents an attempt to probe below the surface of the issues and behind the scenes of the coverage. I recognize that I am only one media analyst in a sea of media folk with louder voices and larger followings. It was harder for me to get heard with only a low-budget megaphone and an online electronic media platform.

Our hyper-competitive media world today is an insecure one where journalists and media executives feel constant pressure and experience intense anxiety. It is no wonder that many mainstream journalists tend toward defensiveness or even outright hostility at unwelcome criticisms, especially from anyone whom they perceive to be on the margins. When you live through the coverage of a war, you don’t always want to hear carping from someone who didn’t. I remember how my own credibility as a Vietnam War critic was strengthened after I had gone there. In the case of Iraq, they were there. I wasn’t. Yet the TV coverage did bring me closer to the action. My complaints are less about individual journalists, including the embeds, than the media companies that exploited the war for their own reasons.

When News Lies further explores an ongoing debate about the war that is perhaps more advanced in other countries than in our own. In February 2005, I tes-

tified in Rome before a citizens' World Tribunal on Iraq in a session that examined the role of the media and found its conduct highly immoral and perhaps illegal. It also examined media complicity in promoting the war. My testimony is included here to help open the forum to domestic debate as well.

As I write, there is still a great deal that we don't know about why the U.S. went to war or how the war is being fought. Many of these decisions and practices are still smothered in secrecy and laced with disinformation. Prominent experts and journalists still disagree not only on the whys but also on the whats. There is no definitive accepted history, even on the "facts."

I have focused on the problem of deception because the Iraq War was and is deceptive in all of its dimensions from its rationale to its method, from its military tactics to its reconstruction commitments. Not surprisingly, a deceptive war begat deceptive news coverage and the other way around. We now know thanks to recently released internal documents like the Downing Street Memo, a report on a leaked high-level intelligence briefing in London, that the U.S. and its allies were busy inventing and reinventing their rationales for the war, a process that included "fixing" the intelligence to bring it in line with government strategies. I believe the coverage was also "fixed."

This book is about "crossing the line," not by individual reporters but in a larger sense by media companies and our media system which was (and is) far more collusive with the war makers than is publicly understood. I am in no position to judge the specific choices and work of individual colleagues, but I can and do make judgments about the coverage overall. A World Tribunal on Iraq which did sit in symbolic judgment in February 2005 judged the coverage harshly.

And so *When News Lies* is not just an academic treatise but a call to action. It is more than a polemic because the issues it raises go to the heart of the future of democracy. The media companies who rallied the public to war were not just bad journalists but criminally complicit in an illegal and immoral undertaking. This is serious. They relinquished their constitutional duty, neglected professional standards and, as the World Tribunal found, violated international law.

The words of the late United States Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black on the "duty" of a free press must not be forgotten:

Paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them

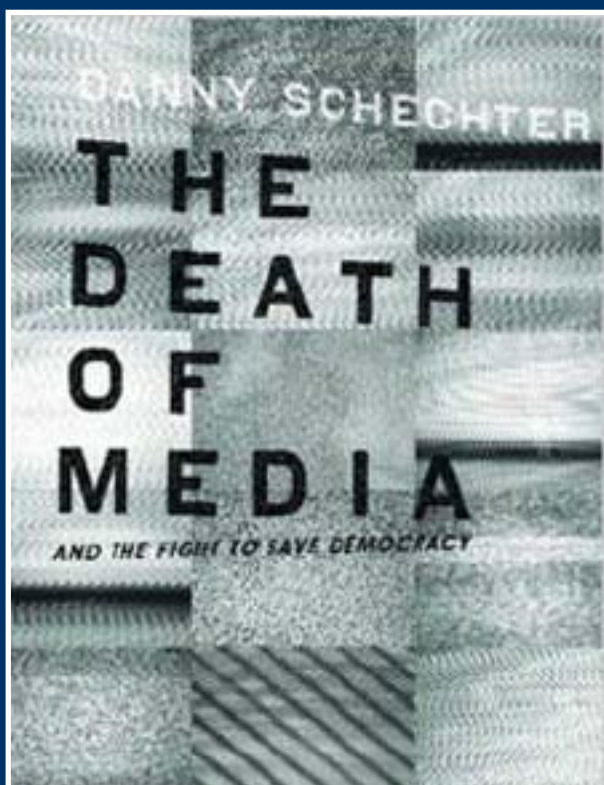
off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.

American democracy was invaded by the invasion of Iraq. A response and a counter-narrative are vital in the fight for a deeper understanding and more truth in media. My films and books are my contributions to this profound and ongoing challenge. I bring an insider's experience and an outsider's perspective to the task. I have done the best I can to be as accurate as I can, and of course am responsible for all errors and omissions.

The stakes in the fight for truth are high, as veteran PBS producer Bill Moyers made clear in a speech to a National Media Reform Conference in mid-May 2005:

An unconscious people, an indoctrinated people, a people fed only partisan information and opinion that confirm their own bias, a people made morbidly obese in mind and spirit by the junk food of propaganda, is less inclined to put up a fight, ask questions and be skeptical. And just as a democracy can die of too many lies, that kind of orthodoxy can kill us, too.

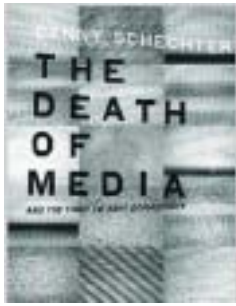
It is my sincere hope that *When News Lies* will challenge our contemporary media-fed war dances and point to some of the answers we urgently need if we are to renew our media and save our democracies.



Prologue

**We cannot afford
not to fight back**

By Danny Schechter



We cannot afford not to fight back

By Danny Schechter

It takes a media maven to spot media fraud – a couple of decades in journalism as a reporter, writer, editor, radio news director, TV correspondent, local TV producer, CNN producer, ABC News producer and independent filmmaker/program maker and on-line blogger has a way of sensitizing you to how the media works and doesn't work. Add in a lifetime of news dissecting, critiquing and more recently, writing books cataloguing issues and interests, and you end up believing that your experience as a media warrior qualifies you for more than the retirement dinner you will never have.

You begin to think you have something to say. But what? Is there anything that has gone unsaid? Our media system could collapse under the sheer weight of all the tomes that have been published calling for a renewal of journalism and a reform of a system and industry badly in need of reform.

Many of my colleagues who labor inside the media beast have heard it all before. They agree with you privately but most feel stuck, or worse, indifferent. A mix of utilitarian self-satisfaction and insularity/insecurity stalks their media environment, Some greet your critiques with cynicism because becoming jaded is often the personal cost of surviving in huge companies that increasingly operate as factories. Individuals who have long been assimilated or seduced to join “the team” are rarely open to calls for self-reflection, much less change.

When you are part of a dominant news culture, that news culture becomes part

of you. “All journalists are ignoramuses,” H.L. Mencken once wrote, “and proud of it.” I once heard Dan Rather quip about his colleagues (and himself): “Some of us are not educable.”

The companies journalists work for may be more resistant to change because executives seem more obsessed with internal Darwinian type survival-of-the-slickest competitions. Internally divided, economically volatile, and insecure about their futures, these corporate cartels seem to be tottering thanks to constant internal shape-ups, illegal transactions, and the egomaniacal pursuits of their corporate chieftains.

Just look at the recent history of corporate overreaching, as the mighty moguls rise and fall. TimeWarner merges with AOL in an event christened the most brilliant maneuver of the century. Hundreds of millions of dollars are wasted. When the parent company discovers their near-catastrophic problems with AOL the division is given autonomy and may have gone off on its own by the time you read this. TimeWarner later paid \$600 million in fines for financial violations in connection with its transactions. Scratch most mega media companies and scandals will not be hard to find.

Viacom appears to be a master of synergistic combination, until they realize that splitting the company is preferable to uniting it. Disney is offered ABC for \$11 billion two years before it agrees to buy it . . . for \$19 billion. Its guiding genius, Michael Eisner, is finally forced to step down after this and other blunders – such as hiring his best friend, Mike Ovitz, as president, then firing him with an enormous payout – destroying shareholder value in the process. Author James Stewart’s expose, *Disney Wars*, details his dishonesty. And on and on.

The true values of the media industry best reveal themselves in their day-to-day shark-like avariciousness. These companies are entangled with each other through strategic alliances and the constant flow of managers that move between them. They in turn, grease the political wheels with airtime and contributions. Politicians in turn spend most of their time raising money to buy airtime for political commercials, pumping even more money back into the media apparatus.

The public interest seems to be last on their intertwined agendas. The status quo is their only quo.

It’s easier to detail defects than to outline what might be done to correct the situation – even if you believe as strongly as I do that transforming our media system is a top priority for the salvation of democracy. But even saying that is not

saying much. That's why the challenge Valerie Merians and Dennis Loy Johnson, the publishers of feisty Melville House Publishing company, gave me is at once so exciting and intimidating. Go Forth draft thee a manifesto, youg man.

Were he alive, their patron saint Herman Melville might recognize an echo of his Moby Dick story in the mad pursuit of "more " that drives the titans of this industry – the need for more holdings, more media platforms, more money – more, more, more. And yet, paradoxically a reaction has set in as resistance to this paradigm emerges. Many viewers, readers and listeners are voting with their eyeballs and seem to want less – less, that is of what Big media is offering and more of what independent and alternative media is offering.

The old media is slowly dying and a new media is quickly emerging. This is a process with many observers insisting that media 'r us, that they meet human needs and can never die.

Norman Liebmann writes on the Ether Zone website:

“Mark Twain said the reports of his death were greatly exaggerated. Similarly, the death of the mainstream media has been greatly over-reported, although, as Shakespeare put it, “Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.””

Media plays a role in all of our lives but the question is what kind of media. The science writer Bruce Sterling makes clear that in the end it's not the shifting technologies that matter but what kind of personal relationships we forge with the many worlds of media, how we use it, how we insure that we are not used by it.

In a speech in 1995, he explained; “Media is a commodity. Media is something that is sold to us. Media can be something that we are sold to, even. Media is an everyday thing. You can buy bandwidth in job lots. You can watch television, buy books, videos, records, CDs, but that's not it. That's not what's interesting.

- Media is an extension of the senses.
- Media is a mode of consciousness.
- Media is extra-somatic memory. It's a crystallization of human thought that survives the death of the individual. generates simulacra. The mechanical reproduction of images is media.
- Media is a means of social interaction.
- Media is a means of command and ontrol.
- Media is the means of civil society and public opinion. Media is means

of debate and decision and agitpropaganda”

Media is being transformed every day, It is changing, evolving, and devolving, What can those of who envision a different kind of media system do?

This ‘What is to Be Done’ question arises after every speech I’ve ever given or film I have every shown. How do you take on this beast? Is there anything we can do? To keep going, we all need to believe that there are answers, strategies and tactics for fighting back against irresonsible media. We can no longer afford NOT to fight back,

We all recognize that the media landscape is going through bewildering changes. We all have seen new technologies come and go, and want to believe in the prospects of media transformation, No one person has all the answers, but there is a need for brainstorming with issues like the one this book addresses.

Their charge to craft a media manifesto comes against the history of the many who have conferred on this issue and written about over all these years, A recent book, *Our Unfree Press* (The New Press) collects media criticism that goes back into the beginning of the last century. Henry George wrote about the “bondage of the press” in his book *The Menace of Privilege* in 1906.

Today, there is a growing media and democracy movement in America powered not only by a critique but by a program for change and a vision of what can be done, A media reform conference brought 2500 activists, journalists, advocates and organizers to St Louis in May 2005 to insist that transforming the media is essential to renewing our democracy – and possible. This is not a new idea but not one fully shared by Democrats or even the left.

In Bush’s America, bashing the president with putdowns and polemics is far more common impulse than analyzing and challenging a media that legitimizes his rule.

When you sit down to write, rant, or blow the bugle on this issue, you never know who might be listening or open to recognizing that media is an issue we all need to confront. My experience tells me that consumers and the industry are listening and that calls for media reform transcend partisan and national divides.

For instance, I am writing this preface a day after returning from Italy where I showed my film *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception* at a Film Festival in Bologna. Waiting for me in my email in-box was a letter in fractured English from a young man named Frederico Staccia whom I don’t remember meeting. It brought home

to me the fact that there are so many others I don't know who share my alarm about the media, and want to do something.

"I'm a 20-year-old boy who studies in Bologna, and I've been really pleased to know you personally here in Bologna. Tonight I watched your film (*Weapons of Mass Deception*) at Lumiere cinema and I'm really happy to see that there's still someone who fight against the 'media oppression'. Here in Italy there's a situation (about information and politic) really similar to the American one, as you may know.

"Well, I can't see how to dismantle this oppressive structure even with the help of free press when there's a so strict control by politic and economic power over information. Actually there's always someone disposed to obey rich men's orders and to keep safe the 'status quo' of society. Where do you think could start such a 'revolution?' And, above all, how?

"I hope you will answer me, bye."

This short book is the beginning of my answer to Frederico and all the Fredericos and Francescas, and to you too, if you are willing to hear thoughts that grew in part out of my work at MediaChannel.org, Globalvision and all the media "homes" I have passed through in a career that hasn't always achieved its highest hopes but has had a few not insubstantial "victories" to boast of.

Few can claim their ideas as their own. Mine were influenced by my work, my friends, my family, my colleagues, my formal and informal education, and the struggles I have been a part of and am still a part of.

I have gone from the '60s to sixty and still have somewhat fading hopes that my media dreams will be realized. I watched (and participated) in the fall of racial segregation in our South and apartheid in South Africa; I resisted the Vietnam War and watched that country reunify. And now I am challenging the war in Iraq. I know that history "happens" nothing stands still. I know that the great Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (after whom a street is named in Bologna) was right when he called for "pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will."

Journalism has its own Hall of Fame, and a legacy of great work and important values. To honor those who have fought this fight before us and all those who fight it now, we need to engage – and not let go.

**New York,
June 2005**



Essay

Bush and bomb threats

By Danny Schechter



Bush and bomb threats

By Danny Schechter

The recent news that President George W. Bush might have threatened to bomb Al Jazeera is hard to believe. We don't want to believe it. And given the source of the allegation – a British tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mirror* – it deserves scrutiny. But it also deserves investigation, which so far the American press has been slow in pursuing. Here's the background:

Last week the *Daily Mirror* reported leaks of another memo from 10 Downing Street (a website in England called *Blair Watch* reports there may actually be two memos). The memo allegedly reported that, in a 2004 meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Bush discussed bombing Al Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar. According to the allegation, Blair talked him out of it. The meeting between Bush and Blair occurred as U.S. troops were engaged in brutal combat in Fallujah – an offensive aired with all its gore by Al Jazeera but mostly sanitized in the United States. Bush was reportedly outraged that Al Jazeera was reporting the high number of Iraqi civilians killed in the assault.

The White House dismissed the bomb threat report as “outlandish.” For his part, Tony Blair tried to ignore it, and later derided it as a “conspiracy” theory.

The specter of Bush threatening the Middle East's most popular information source becomes less far-fetched when you consider the lengths this White House has pursued to censor damning information and the record of U.S. military attacks on the media. Many Americans don't recall how, under George W. Bush, the U.S. military knocked out Saddam's TV complex and attacked Al Jazeera offices in Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003. These incidents have for many U.S.

viewers become “fog facts,” in writer Larry Beinhart’s phrase – information we once knew, but has since disappeared from view.

How credible is the allegation that Bush threatened to bomb a major media facility? Until the document is published, we won’t know the full context, but members of the Bush administration have branded Al Jazeera as terrorist TV. The White House has long disliked the media outlet for its unvarnished reporting of U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.

An article by Jim Lobe this week on *InterPress News Service* notes that *The New York Times* has previously reported the Bush administration’s antipathy toward Al Jazeera. The *Times* reported that Bush administration got into “fiery debates about ‘what to do about’” Al Jazeera that “sometimes erupted into shouting matches.” The pro-U.S. administration in Baghdad, along with other pro-western Arab states, have banned Al Jazeera’s reporters. One of their reporters was killed by the U.S. military, and others were jailed in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Journalists there told me they often felt under siege.

On Tuesday night, the reporter who broke the story in the *Mirror*, Kevin Maguire, discussed the memo on a panel held at the Frontline Club in London, a media hangout. Maguire offered the following account of how he learned of Bush’s threat (based on notes an Al Jazeera blogger took at the event):

“A source (which Maguire will not name) approached the *Mirror* with details of a top-secret memo, which had “accidentally” found its way into the papers of a certain MP. Noting that the memo contained, amongst other things, details of U.K. and U.S. troop movements in Iraq, said MP turned it back to Downing Street.

“The *Mirror*, out of courtesy, informs Downing Street that they will be publishing details of this memo. Downing Street has a hissy fit, and the White House, according to Maguire, ‘went berserk,’ leading to threats of the Official Secrets Act against anybody who is even considering publishing the document.

“Of course,” said Maguire, “the government wouldn’t be using the Official Secrets Act if the reports weren’t true. This government will go to great lengths to keep this memo secret.”

This news of Bush’s alleged threat also upset Al Jazeera, which learned from the

press how close their news institution and small facility, which I visited earlier this year, might have come to conflagration. A bomb dropped on the 24-hour news outlet could have caused many deaths and casualties.

Blair refuses to meet with Al Jazeera's director Wadah Khanfar, who is in London. The station now says it is considering legal action against President Bush – a ploy which will probably go nowhere in Washington, where international law is considered an endangered species. The Committee to Protect Journalists is lending its support to Al Jazeera's appeal to the British government to release the documents.

“We have a newspaper that is reporting very serious charges and saying that there are minutes to this meeting in which this was said,” says Joel Campagna of CPJ. “The quickest way to find out is to release these documents.”

Khanfar says the release of the memo is in the public interest: “Al Jazeera is not just a TV station. It has become something people are very attached to. People are angry.”

Al Jazeera staffers have created “Don't Bomb Us” blog, where they're posting a growing list of outlets which pledge they will publish the secret memo if they get their hands on it.

Last week, Britain's chief legal officer Lord Goldsmith issued a stern warning to national newspapers not to reveal the contents of the secret memo, lest they be charged with violating the Official Secrets Act. On Monday, he appeared to be backing away from the warning, saying: “I wasn't seeking to gag newspapers; what I said to newspapers was you need to take legal advice.”

And yesterday, a British official and another man appeared in court after being charged under the Official Secrets Act with leaking the document, which was reportedly sent to the office of a member of Parliament. The official, David Keogh, a former cabinet office communications officer, was arrested along with Leo O'Connor, a former parliamentary researcher, in April 2004, but only charged on Nov. 17 this year. The circumstances surrounding these charges raise many questions. As BBC Newsnight asked: “... how can the case proceed when defense lawyers haven't seen the memo? And why did it take the government so long to decide to prosecute?”

The press in the U.K. and the rest of the world is covering the story about Bush's alleged threat, but, like many stories embarrassing to the Bush administration, the threat has only played briefly, if at all, in most U.S. outlets, despite the fact that

President Bush is the main protagonist.

The media treatment of the shocking allegation is one more chapter in the great gap that persists between the “all about us” coverage of Iraq by the U.S. media and the reporting in the rest of the world. Much of the U.S. media downplayed the story of the bombing threat after first ridiculing it as a “joke” – intimating that if the comment had been made at all, it wasn’t intended to be taken seriously. But how will the world know whether or not Bush was joking if the media won't even investigate the memo? It remains to be seen if U.S. media outlets will return to this and many other unanswered questions about the allegation. Surely, such a hot-button issue that has inflamed antagonisms in the world – and the world of media – deserves more investigation and outrage.

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