

APRIL 15

How the 'NewsHour' changed history

When the anchor of public television's main news program goes out of his way to tell viewers that he's setting the record straight about a recent historic event, the people watching are apt to assume that they're getting accurate information. But with war intensifying in Iraq, a bizarre episode raises some very troubling concerns about the "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer."

Here's what happened: During a panel discussion April 7 on the NewsHour, while battles raged in close to a dozen Iraqi cities, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel referred to the American authorities' closure of a newspaper that had served as a megaphone for the anti-occupation Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr. "The immediate problem we have to remember is we started this ... with the aggressive policies towards Sadr that came from us, shutting down his press," Col. Sam Gardiner said.

The program's anchor spoke next. Jim Lehrer: "The reason we shut down his press is because it was calling for violence and anti-American."

Col. Gardiner: "Sure."

Lehrer: "I just want to get that on the record."

But Lehrer's comment – ostensibly setting the record straight – was at odds with the available factual record about Sadr's newspaper. In sync with other news accounts, the New York Times had reported two days earlier that "the paper did not print any calls for attacks."

I contacted the NewsHour and asked whether Lehrer's statement had been based on information contrary to what had been reported in the April 5 edition of the Times. If so, I asked for any citation that backed up his assertion. Or, if Lehrer did not have such a citation, I asked if there were plans for an on-air correction to set the factual record straight on the program (which reaches nearly 3 million viewers across the United States each night).

In reply to my inquiry, a NewsHour spokesperson cited two articles: A Chicago Tribune piece, dated April 5, said that "the pro-Sadr newspaper Al Hawza was shut down ... for allegedly printing false information that incited violence against the

coalition." And an April 6 New York Times piece said that the Sadr newspaper "was closed last week after American authorities accused it of printing lies that incited violence."

The NewsHour spokesperson, Lete Childs, told me: "I hope these two articles help you understand the citations for Jim Lehrer's statement to Col. Gardiner."

But the two articles that the NewsHour cited only seemed to underscore the disconnect. Apparently, the NewsHour staff hadn't been able to find a single source to back up Lehrer's on-air statement that "the reason we shut down his press is because it was calling for violence." And the NewsHour did not provide any explanation for why, in sharp contrast to the flat-out report in the New York Times that "the paper did not print any calls for attacks," Lehrer had gone on the air and claimed that it did.

I reached the reporter in Baghdad who'd written the Chicago Tribune article, Vincent Schodolski, and asked if he was aware of any evidence that the American authorities shut down Al Hawza because it was "calling for violence." Schodolski replied: "I have no other citations than the reasons given by the CPA itself." My search of the official Web site for the Coalition Provisional Authority, the U.S.-led occupation authority in Iraq, turned up briefings and news releases with references to Sadr's newspaper – but no backup for what Lehrer had said on the air.

At a March 30 press conference, Dan Senor of the CPA charged that Al Hawza had tried to "incite violence." That was very much in keeping with what the April 5 New York Times reported – that while "the American authorities said false reporting, including articles that ascribed suicide bombings to Americans, could touch off violence," nevertheless "the paper did not print any calls for attacks."

Lehrer's refusal to correct his evident error is especially striking because he had emphasized his incorrect statement on the air by immediately adding: "I just want to get that on the record." (My request to a NewsHour spokesperson for a direct comment from Lehrer did not yield any statement from him.)

When I asked whether a decision had been made, one way or the other, about doing a correction on the NewsHour to set the factual record straight, the last piece of stone in the damage-control wall moved into place. I got the message: "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer stands behind the 'Iraq: What Now?' discussion segment from April 7 and will not be making a correction."

Journalists should scrutinize U.S. government spin, not contribute to it.

Here we have what some people believe to be the nation's most credible news program compounding a factual error by refusing to make a correction.

First-rate journalists change history. But not this way.