

Is our media covering up its errors?

By Danny Schechter
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As more mainstream media outlets admit their failures in covering the Iraq War, a question must be asked: Are we seeing a real coming to grips with the media role that helped “sell the war” to the American public? Or could these recent mea culpas be something more insidious, more like what the CIA used to call a “limited hang out?” That phrase translates as “you concede a little to hide a lot.”

As the author of a book and maker of a film on Iraq war coverage, I am delighted to see some acknowledgement of errors and omissions on the part of media outlets that, when it really counted, became transmission belts for unsubstantiated government claims and pro-war propaganda.

It does give media critics some faith in the capacity of media outlets to acknowledge wrongdoing, correct mistakes and admit they drank the Administration’s Kool Aid. Bear in mind that many of these same outlets were often arrogant and self-righteous at the time, impervious to critics – who were treated largely as lepers in denial about real threats and the need for preemptive war. It has taken a long time for these admissions to surface, alas, well after they can do any good in terms of influencing policy.

In fact, some prominent politicians including a presidential candidate are saying in effect, that none of this matters; that, knowing what they know, they would still have supported the war even if all of its rationalizations were invented and/or deliberately deceptive.

To this day, they won’t let the facts get in the way of a politically popular opinion. That may be because the emerging media debate remains narrowly focused, avoiding deeper questions about the media’s performance.

Last week when I was asked to appear on a national TV news program to take part in a panel on these issues. I was told that we would talking about the pre-war coverage of WMDs. That call came, predictably, after the Washington Post carried a story that second-guessed its coverage, focusing entirely on the run-up to the war. Once again TV producers were following a newspaper’s lead. Post media critic Howard Kurtz reported that a story in

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his paper challenging the evidence on Iraq's weapon stockpiles, "ran into stiff resistance from the paper's editors." The Post's managing editor Bob Woodward, author of two insider books that are largely positive about President Bush admitted, "We did our job but we didn't do enough, and I blame myself mightily for not pushing harder."

In his story, Kurtz intimated that the Post's performance was understandable since its chief competitor, the New York Times, was just as bad. He took a subtle swipe at the Times, noting, "The New York Times ran an editor's note last month saying the paper's aggressive reporting on WMDs was 'not as rigorous as it should have been' and overplayed stories with 'dire claims about Iraq,' adding: "Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.' "

In an apparent response, the Times last week cast a skeptical 'ours was better than yours eye,' on the Post expose, noting: "For all of its contrition, Mr. Kurtz's article does not represent an official statement on behalf of The Post. In an interview yesterday, Steve Coll, the paper's managing editor, said that the idea for the article had been Mr. Kurtz's, and that he and Mr. Downie had recused themselves from editing it. 'We did not make a determination from our offices that we needed to commission an investigation into these issues,' Mr. Coll said."

There you have it, no investigation needed. None!

To contrast his paper's efforts, Jacques Steinberg of the Times explained, "The New York Times published a 1,220-word article in which the newspaper's editors acknowledged that in the run-up to war they had not been skeptical enough about articles that depended at least in part on information from a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on 'regime change' in Iraq whose credibility has come under increasing public debate."

So here we have the Times using its news columns to put down the Post. But both papers and most of the TV coverage is guilty of far more than what has so been conceded. Complicity and collusion are two words that come to mind. As the conscience of the Senate Robert Byrd put it on CNN last week, "The media fell for the war hook, line and sinker."

A real investigation of the media role would probe deeper questions not only about the run-up to the war but the ongoing coverage up to the present day.

Is the conflict in Iraq being covered well? What's missing and why?

First, why did we stage a pre-emptive war in the first place? What was the real agenda? Do we know and is the media investigating? On August 10, former war commander Tommy Franks said in a talk only covered by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency – and not picked up by major media: "The reason we could not afford to give up time is because we wanted the water infrastructure to remain in place,' Franks said Monday at the National

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Press Club. 'We wanted the oil infrastructure in Iraq to remain in place. We did not want to subject ourselves and Israel to the potential consequence of a long-range missile being fired into Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.'

How much media time and energy was spent investigating this Israel connection to this war? How much on military preparedness or the "plan" that got us into Baghdad quickly and then stirred a hornets nest of resistance that plunged the country into chaos? How many of our media experts, pundits, experts, prognosticators and Mensa Men predicted us or prepared us for what was to happen next and the war we have not won – and may never win?

Second, What about the real conduct of the US military operations, the less than "pinpoint" bombing that took out the infrastructure including electricity, the widespread civilian casualties, the use of cluster bombs, napalm like fire bombs, and weapons hardened with radioactive depleted uranium? What about the privatization of the war – who is getting what and why?

Third, what about systematic war crimes and human rights abuses – the atrocities in Abu Ghraib prison were known as early as June, 2003, but only exposed in April, 2004. How could we justify the bombing of civilians in Falujah and, just last week, in Najav? How is it that outlets in other countries can report on Iraqi protests against US military practices in Iraq and ours cannot? Why did Mr. Murdoch's newspaper "The Australian" call U.S. military operations in Najav a "slaughter" while our media focused on a raid on a dissident cleric's home.

In short, most of our media – with the exception, perhaps, of excellent reporting by Knight Ridder and some exemplary dissenting journalists – still largely support the war, including the government's rationalizations and narrative. ("Support" can be measured in what is covered and what is not, what experts we hear from and which we do not, and how many thoughtful Iraqis themselves make it into our news.)

These larger media failures have still not been admitted, much less debated. That's why the term "weapons of mass deception" still applies to our media coverage of a war that is at war with the truth.

News Dissector Danny Schechter authored "Embedded Weapons of Mass Deception" on media failures (Prometheus Books and ColdType.net) and is finishing an independent film, WMD, that brings the story up to date. (www.embeddedwmd.com)