

Political coverage is an echo of war

By Danny Schechter
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During the run-up to the war in Iraq and through the US invasion, it was obvious that our media system had signed up as an unofficial megaphone for war. There was a uniformity of perspective, a reliance on the same “facts,” and a dismissal of critics and dissenters.

Journalists outside America compared our TV coverage to that of a “state-run media” even though most U.S. media outlets are in private hands and nominally competitive with each other.

A year and a half later, some journalists and newspapers took a second look at their coverage and acknowledged it had been flawed. There were admissions of misreporting, especially on supporting the government’s allegations of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

These media admissions never rose to the level of institutional post-mortems or real mea culpas. They haven’t led to more diversity of perspective, investigative journalism or dissection of government claims. The modalities of coverage continue.

The New York Times spent more time and space exposing the fraudulent but minor inventions of a troubled reporter, Jayson Blair, than on its own role in the selling of a war that its own public editor Daniel Okrent would later pinpoint as an “institutional failure.”

The Washington Post’s ombudsman Michael Getler selectively critiqued his newspaper’s coverage, as did media correspondent Howard Kurtz. Editorially, the newspaper said little and refused to mount an internal investigation.

The three television networks that most Americans rely on for their news and information about the war also said little or nothing. They moved on to other stories without any acknowledgement that the modes of coverage that we saw during the war need to be changed fundamentally.

Mili-tainment Goes Political

The Administration, which successfully mobilized the media and public opinion behind

Political coverage is an echo of war / 2

their military venture in Iraq, are using the same techniques to fight a political war against their Democratic opponents. The embedded reporters may be gone but the routines of political coverage and their deferential approach can be relied on to achieve the same results.

A new book analyzing the White House spin assesses why the administration's media machine is so successful. In "All the President's Spin," Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer and Brendan Nyhan explain: "Bush's White House has broken new ground in its press relations strategy, exploiting the weaknesses and failings of the political media more systematically than any of its predecessors. The administration combines tight message discipline and image management – Reagan's trademarks – with the artful use of half- or partial truths and elaborate news management – Clinton's specialties – in a combination that is near-lethal for the press."

The authors cite four "key weaknesses" of the press that helps a determined media spin operation get its message – and none other – through: "First and foremost, reporters are constrained by the norm of objectivity, which frequently causes them to avoid evaluating the truth of politicians' statements. In addition, because reporters are dependent upon the White House for news, the administration can shape the coverage it receives by restricting the flow of information to the press. The media are also vulnerable to political pressure and reprisal, which the Bush White House has aggressively dished out against critical journalists. Finally, the press' unending pursuit of scandal and entertaining news often blinds it to serious issues of public policy."

The White House handles the press the way TV producers package programs with careful pre-planning, structured themes and packaged information. And so the "militainment" we saw during the war has given way to "electo-tainment." The dynamics of coverage remain largely the same: simplistic, superficial, and uncritical.

Only a few commentators in the media have even commented on the "Iraqization" of our domestic election coverage. Paul Krugman of the New York Times is one of them, writing: "...the triumph of the trivial is not a trivial matter. The failure of TV news to inform the public about the policy proposals of this year's presidential candidates is, in its own way, as serious a journalistic betrayal as the failure to raise questions about the rush to invade Iraq."

Preceding the war, there were months of demonization of Saddam Hussein. A dictator in a sanctions crippled society that the US had put in power in the first place and armed for years was pictured as prepared to attack the United States or the world, take your pick. He was compared to Adolph Hitler, Time Magazine even redid a cover of the Fuhrer replacing his face with the "butcher of Baghdad."

Political coverage is an echo of war / 3

The Hollywood Playbook

To sell its war the Administration dipped into the playbook of Hollywood narrative technique, relying on story telling, not sloganizing. A master narrative was concocted that fit the good guy/bad guy formula that works so well on the silver screen. The narrative was simplified into themes justifying pre-emptive intervention as the only recourse. Corporate PR pros helped plan and execute the strategy. Andrew Card, the President's top aid compared the launch of the war to a "product roll-out."

With some modifications, they are doing it again. This time their media plan relies on demonizing John Kerry with repeated charges like "flip flopper" and distorted information about his military service, knowing that a media that readily accepted their WMD claims will do little to scrutinize attacks on the Democratic candidate's character.

We heard them endlessly: "The war was forced on us;" "We will either fight them there or here;" "Saddam Hussein was a weapon of Mass Destruction;" "Kerry was for the war until he was against it;" etc., etc.

The GOP convention showcased all of these techniques built around vicious personal attacks, and distorted arguments that ignored any and all information that had earlier debunked them. They also used techniques honed in Qatar to build the case for their own political cruise missile: "Dubya".

This master narrative for The Garden was a tale of a humble Texan whose character was forged by an epiphany of Biblical proportions after America came under attack by a foreign evil, and who by attacking Iraq has kept American families safe from terror ever since. The conveniently added subplot: bringing freedom, "a gift from the almighty," to those poor Arabs suffering under ruthless extremists in the Middle East.

It was as if the 9-11 Commission had never happened, or the Senate Intelligence Committee report was never issued. The Republicans paid no respect for fact; instead they hammered home a simple, made-for-TV narrative that delegates could mindlessly repeat like a mantra of received truth.

Media Shy Away from a Hard Truth

Perhaps you would expect that from politicians but what of the media? Were news organizations fact checking and debunking distortions? A few did but most did not. When Zell Miller, their keynoter finished his rant, he did find himself challenged aggressively by a few journalists – Chris Matthews on MSNBC and Wolf Blitzer on CNN. That was it. John Stewart featured the confrontations as a high point on his comedy channel show without mentioning that their challenges were the exception to uncritical coverage.

The Washington Post's sometime liberal columnist call Miller's diatribe' a "Category Five

Political coverage is an echo of war / 4

lie,” and characterized the speech as “as mad an eruption of hate as I have witnessed in politics. Some time back, Kerry must have dissed Miller. This was personal.”

But was it? Miller actually published a book that most of the press corps had bothered to dig out called “A National Party No More,” In it he trashes all the Democratic White House hopefuls at the time in the nastiest terms. The Republicans knew where Miller stood even if the press corps didn’t bother to find it.

Most of the convention was then treated as a triumph for Bush because of his “Likeability.” His speech was not scrutinized. The largest protest at any convention in American history with more than 1,800 arrests, as opposed to 600 in Chicago in 1968, was contained by police state tactics, treated as a nuisance by the GOP and ignored in most of the press, except on the Sunday before the event began.

Ignoring the Protesters at Your Gate

The streets around The Garden came to resemble Baghdad’s high security Green Zone.

There were protests against the media coverage in New York that were also largely ignored.

I know. I spoke at one outside Fox News and down the block from CNN studios. The only wire story that I read about the event was by Agence France Press on a Turkish news website. I was interviewed on Canadian public radio, not NPR. One newspaper was there: The Toledo Blade.

The Blade’s Jim Drew wrote: “For those of us with the ‘limited access’ credentials that couldn’t get us on the convention floor, the streets were an option. And the guerrilla reporters found by far the most important and interesting story. In the age of international terrorism, the patriotic right of political dissent in the United States is in crisis.”

He quoted Peter Hart, of Fairness and Accuracy in Media, which helped organize the march: “Mr. Hart said activists ‘demand a more accountable media,’ and they marched to the headquarters of ‘corporate media’ to celebrate the independent and alternative press.”

“These are the people who sold us a war. The biggest media companies get bigger and bigger based on favors from the government. They sell ideas; that assistance to the poor must be reformed, and free trade is the only way. These are the ideas that the mainstream media are selling – and we’re not buying,” Hart told Drew.

I was quoted too saying, “I’ve never seen the level of defensiveness in the major media, the level of disenchantment, and the level of dread; journalists on the front lines representing the public in some way feeling they can’t play that role.”

And why? Because their bosses and the culture of corporate news makes it impossible.

At least some media outlets have not lost the spirit of independence and crusading that

Political coverage is an echo of war / 5

the US press used to be known for. The Toledo Blade's coverage of the protests mirrored its relentless and award winning coverage of war crimes in Vietnam.

Not the alleged "crimes" of John Kerry being blasted inside The Garden but real crimes committed in Vietnam 35 years ago by an American military unit that had all but been ignored by major media then and now. The Blade uncovered massacres by US troops and bravely made it news. And now the Pentagon is being force by their persistence to reopen the issue.

And so, once again, the coverage of war or lack of coverage is linked in this case by a heroic example of a newspaper in a small Ohio city in the heart of a battleground state.

The media battle, the political battle and the fight for truth about war is being joined.

– *News Dissector Danny Schechter edits MediaChannel.org. His new film WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception) analyzes the media coverage of the war in Iraq.*