LOST IN CYBER SPACE

ColdType

Why the mainstream media are losing the credibility battle against the new Internet alternatives

WILLIAM BOWLES

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"Oh god, Mike – do you take care of these sorts of things, or do we ignore them?"
– Judy Swallow, presenter of the BBC's World Service Newshour, sent
presumably to a BBC colleague concerning a letter sent by a listener to
Ms Swallow about the BBC's coverage (or lack thereof) of events in Fallujah
(Reported by medialens.org).

"Journalists are supposed to perform a watchdog function, not a lapdog function"
– Danny Schechter, editor of Mediachannel.org, and a former journalist
with CNN and ABC.

"At least 12 journalists" were killed by US military in Iraq
– Dominic Timms, Guardian, 18 February 2005.

Judging by its mishandling of the situation in Iraq and the 'war on terror', I have a feeling that the mass media may be unravelling. On many fronts, the corporate/state-run media is under concerted assault from the so-called alternative press for its complicity in covering up the crimes of the imperium as never before. As someone who has been involved in computer-mediated journalism since around 1980, I have been in a position to observe its evolution from the use of the Internet by a handful of 'geeks' and 'hackers' to the situation today, where there is not a single left or progressive group without a Web presence. In the early days (the 1980s) my first serious venture into online journalism (*New York On-Line,* 1983-92) was first and foremost dismissed by my 'left brethren' as irrelevant and worst of all, elitist. Computers were the 'tools of the devil'. Oh my – how things have changed! But, before we get carried away on a wave of self-righteous euphoria, it's vital to look to the future and put the process into some kind of context.

First, what is important is volume, for unlike earlier forms of 'alternative' journalism, we have reached a 'critical mass' of coverage that is impossible to ignore. But let's be clear here, this is due not simply to the fact that the Web has 'come of age' but that the public no longer trusts the corporate/state-run media to tell the truth and, thankfully, alternative voices are easily accessible, and for free! Hence we are an effect, not a cause, of a far more deep-seated malaise of capitalism and herein lies the potential and the danger of our challenge to the dominant culture's control of ideas. Unlike the coverage of previous imperial 'adven-

tures' where the 'alternative' media was merely ignored, we have moved to the position where collectively (and this is important), we are now being taken seriously. And we are a danger precisely because we *do* represent a serious threat to the status quo. Fortunately, so pervasive and ubiquitous is the medium of the Web, that short of a wholesale dismantling (or state takeover) of the Web infrastructure, it is now almost impossible to do anything to stop this momentum.

Why is 'volume' important? After years of marginalisation and being accused of 'bias', the sheer volume of coverage of events from a non-corporate position is now almost impossible to ignore. And this is reflected in the corporate media's response to the challenge of the 'blog'. The very fact that the opinion moulders are now being forced to take us (semi) seriously is borne out by no less a figure than Bill Keller, editor of the New York Times.

> "Keller edits what bloggers view as the biggest and baddest MSM [mainstream media] property around, the New York Times. And it turns out he gets it. He reads bloggers, understands where they're coming from and doesn't lapse into the knee-jerk defensiveness that many other Old Media types display toward the new usurpers:
>
> "In your open letter you propose to lead a delegation from the citizen's media to a kind of summit meeting with editors and reporters of The Times, where we would all 'vent,' eat bagels, and then negotiate some kind of cooperation. I'm enthusiastically in favor of healthy dialogue among people engaged in a common pursuit. [Managing Editor] Jill Abramson's presence at the recent blog conference in Cambridge demonstrates, I think, that I'm not the only one here who feels that way. At the same time, I'm not sure what you see as the possible fruit of a blog-Times meeting. Why would anyone who has the infinite audience of the Internet at his disposal want to vent for a select audience of MSM dinosaurs? And, in any case, what's the point of negotiating a compact with an institution you – or at least your more theological brethren in the blogosphere – regard as irrelevant?

Cyber-cease fire? The Washington Post, February 19, 2005 By Howard Kurtz
www.freepress.net/news/6841

So if you can't beat 'em, join 'em? But note that Keller's emphasis is on the 'old' versus the 'new' not the nature of the content and his comment about the "infinite audience of the Internet" avoids the essential role of the corporate press as a

mouthpiece for the corporate state. And note that the piece is written by another 'MSM', a writer for the Washington Post.

Keller goes on to say:

> "And, finally, what, aside from a little creative friction, is wrong with the relationship we have? We can and do use blogs as a source of tips, course corrections, leads and insights without requiring a more formal collaboration along the lines you seem to be suggesting. In turn, our website is one of the, if not the, most linked news source for bloggers; we are a major supplier of news and conversation for the blog world, without anyone having to organize a meeting or negotiate a protocol. In other words, for all the talk of rendering us obsolete, and all your concern about MSM condescension (more perceived than real, I believe, but that's easy for me to say), The Times and the blog world have an extremely robust relationship. Seriously, what does a meeting get either of us?"

Aside from the condescending nature of his comments regarding the 'blog' world, he dismisses/ignores the essential change that has taken place and perhaps for the first time in history, is actually on the defensive, as his "We can and do use blogs as a source of tips, course corrections, leads and insights" comment reveals. So Keller would rather present us as 'merely' a free 'wire service' not as an alternative presenter of news and information that an increasingly skeptical audience is turning to.

And, as the situation for the imperium becomes ever more untenable, so the corporate media becomes more desperate to cover up the crimes of its masters. But, much like a very leaky bucket, as one 'leak' is plugged, another one springs open and very soon it's a torrent.

A REVERSAL OF ROLES?

I think it's useful to look back over the past two years at just how the relationship between the corporate/state-run media and the 'consumer' of 'news' has changed, a relationship that is I think, now irreversible, the watershed most obviously being the invasion of Iraq.

Failing to convince the public that the invasion had any basis in fact, the state resorted to an increasingly desperate series of propaganda offensives, first trying one ploy and then another but with each digging a deeper hole and with the cor-

porate media desperately trying to keep pace with the twists and turns of the justification for the invasion.

In the UK, we can say that the first salvo fired by the state was the September 2002 'dodgy dossier' that was accepted without question by the corporate media. It wasn't until March, 2003, that it really came under fire with the Kelly/Gilligan gaff really letting the cat out of the bag. The state responded predictably by slapping down any dissenting voices in the BBC and anyone in the mainstream media who stepped out of line (eg spinmeister Campbell's vicious attacks on the press) but it did little to alter the gathering momentum for, by then, what had started out as a few voices lost in a blizzard of bytes had become a blizzard of dissent.

The state was, and still is, on the defensive, resorting to ever more desperate measures, borne out (in the UK) by the analysis of press coverage, especially by the state-run BBC, following the Kelly/Gilligan affair

> A ... study of the media was carried out by the Media Tenor group ... which looked at the performance of different broadcasters in five countries, found that the BBC gave least airtime to anti-war views with just 2% of airtime given over to opponents of the war. By contrast the American ABC gave 7% of airtime over to anti-war views. This is frightening because many people around the world, including the British people, followed world events (i.e. wars) on the BBC.

David Ward. (2004). Public Service Broadcasting in Europe and the Coverage of the Iraq War. 14th JAMCO International Symposium.

www.jamco.or.jp/2004_symposium2/en/02/ [1]

Another study by the Cardiff School of Journalism revealed that

> ... the BBC followed a more pro-government line than its commercial rivals. It stated that the BBC was more likely to unquestioningly relay false stories such as the non-existent scud missiles supposedly fired into Kuwait in the early stages of the war as well as the mythical Basra 'uprising'. The study also made reference to Tony Blair claim that captured British soldiers had been executed by the Iraqi authorities; a claim the British Government retracted the next day, but not the BBC. Professor Justin Lewis, the study leader concluded that the BBC is leading the way in its support for the British Government pro-war propaganda, and failing its responsibility to the people.

Justin Lewis. (2004). Television, Public Opinion and the War in Iraq: The Case of Britain Int. J. Pub. Opinion Res. Vol. 16 (3), 295-310.

ijpor.oupjournals.org/cgi/reprint/16/3/295 [2]

The second was Colin Powell's calamitous presentation to the UN that, while it showed that the State Department had mastered the use of Powerpoint, did little else but to open up floodgates of disbelief and derision. Every step taken by the state to justify its actions was matched (in real time) by a response from the 'blogosphere'. The fact that we were collectively ignored at the time no matter how much we hammered home the real story (eg fake Niger documents, non-existent WMDs etc) doesn't alter the fact that over the past two years there has been real alteration of the relationship between the media and the public it purportedly informs.

Studies reveal that increasingly, people are turning to the Web for news and information for they no longer trust TV and print sources. Most importantly, the public is increasingly able to distinguish fact from fiction even when presented with a plethora of news sources pointing to the central issue. Critical ability is the deciding factor: when presented with an overwhelming alternative interpretation of events – the ease with which explanations and analysis can be compared one to another – the power of the Web to inform shows just how powerful a tool it can become once it reaches the 'critical mass' I referred to above.

And, as the ability for the state to control the news has diminished, it has resorted to ever more transparent language to try and hide the crimes of its masters as the quote from the MediaLens piece at the head of this essay so clearly shows. That, so far, no response has been forthcoming from the BBC merely compounds its deliberate cover up of the overwhelming evidence of a massive war crime committed against the people of Fallujah. With each defeat suffered by the imperium in Iraq, the media has had to resort to the tried and trusted method of ignoring events deemed unpalatable. So we have now reached a point where, for example, BBC coverage of events in Iraq contains not a single dissenting voice.

A search of the BBC Website reveals the following:

> Between 1 February and 23 February 2005, the BBC carried 150 stories on Iraq. Of the 150 only three had topics that concerned events that challenged the status quo and all concerned one event, an anti-war rally and its consequences

Protesters stage anti-war rally

An anti-war rally is being held in Devon to call for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq.

16/02/2005

Demonstrators stage mass 'die-in'

Anti-war protesters stage a mass "die-in" outside Parliament in protest at British troops in Iraq.

15/02/2005 Iraq war challenged in High Court

Anti-war protesters launch appeals at the High Court against trespass convictions.

15/02/2005

The rest consist of typical headlines that paint a rosy and positive view of the situation in Iraq (I've picked two at random from the search results, but rest assured, I have not 'massaged' the results; do the search yourself)

Straw calls for support for Iraq

The foreign secretary calls for support for Iraq and its people as the results of its historic elections are announced.

13/02/2005

Poll 'a vote for Iraq' say exiles

UK-based Iraqis give BBC News their reaction as the election result is announced.

97% relevance [4]

For some time I have wrestled with the problem of the fragmented nature of news sources on the Web, for unlike mass circulation media, individual news sources have, by comparison small audiences, but as the Web matures and cross links increase this is becoming less of a problem and when taken collectively, the term 'alternative' to describe independent journalism becomes a nonsense. In a

very unscientific analysis (unscientific because many sites were reluctant or unable to disclose visitor numbers) I carried out last year of independent news sites, I estimated that monthly visits to just a handful of sites was around a quarter of a million people.

And we need to remember that we are still in the formative stages of the development of independent journalism in the age of the Web. One of the critical issues to emerge that as Finton Keane suggested in an interview he conducted with me recently on breakfornews.com, we are now hearing calls for the corporate and state-run press to be charged with aiding and abetting war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti and elsewhere, so blatant is their suppression of the real story. I contend that without the power of the 'blogosphere' such an idea would have been impossible even a year ago.[5]

The upshot is that the idea of the 'professional' journalist is at long last being seriously challenged, for when you strip away the veneer, a 'professional' journalist merely describes someone employed by a corporation and does nothing to validate the nature of the 'news'. That degrees in journalism are handed out by universities merely compounds the crime being committed on reality by the journalistic 'profession'.

All it takes is a little basic research to reveal the duplicity of the mainstream media in the art of dissembling concerning events that no amount of hiding behind the fiction of 'professional' can mask. Okay, so one needs to be reasonably literate and able to connect an idea together via a string of sentences, but it's not exactly rocket science. Indeed, implicit in the idea of the professional journalist is the fiction that journalism is a science, that there is some kind of 'objective' space that the journalist occupies.

The reality is that 'journalism' is defined by no more than a set of conventions, conventions defined by the dominant culture. What distinguishes truth from fiction is not grammar but whether or not the interests of the owner/controller of the media are explicit in the nature of the coverage of events. Let the reader decide on the basis of making critical judgements, judgements based on a set of common human values, the very 'values' our political leaders allegedly uphold.

NOTES

1. **'Accomplices in War Crimes'** By Ghali Hassan
informationclearinghouse.info/article8132.htm

2. *ibid*

3. *ibid*

4. *4. Using the BBC's Search engine, I entered the word 'Iraq' that returned a total of 1449 'hits] of which 150 fell between Feb 1-23 2005.*

http://newssearch.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/search/results.pl?q=Iraq&tab=news&scope= newsukfs&go.x=21&start=1&go.y=1

5. **'Media Held Guilty of Deception'** by Dahr Jamail 14/2/05

www.williambowles.info/iraq/2005/media_deception.html

SOME USEFUL REFERENCES (24/2/05)

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http://www.freepress.net/news/6890

'Web sites operator stirs up politics, journalism debate' – From Houston Chronicle, February 18, 2005 By Rachel Graves
www.freepress.net/news/6815

'Sleuths of spin' – From Alternet, February 22, 2005 By Bill Berkowitz
www.freepress.net/news/6839

'Blogging while Black' – From Afro-Netizen, February 18, 2005 By Christopher Rabb
www.freepress.net/news/6838

'No protection for bloggers' – From Wired, February 17, 2005 By Adam Penenberg
www.freepress.net/news/6791

'Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War'. – Steven Kull et al. (2003-2004). Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 118 (4).
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www.freepress.net/news/6861

'White House 'imposter' unmasked by bloggers' – 12 February 2005 By: Jemima Kiss
www.journalism.co.uk/news/story1253.shtml

SEE ALSO HOW THE BBC 'HANDLES' THE BLOGOSPHERE'

'American media vs the blogs' – BBC News, February 23, 2005 By Kevin Anderson
http://www.freepress.net/news/6878

THE AUTHOR

William Bowles has been an artist, writer, teacher, journalist, activist and musician for the past thirty five years. Born in London, he lived in NYC and Johannesburg, before returning to London where he publishes and writes for the I'n'I – Investigating 'new' Imperialism – a fulltime job that pays nada. His web site is http://www.williambowles.info

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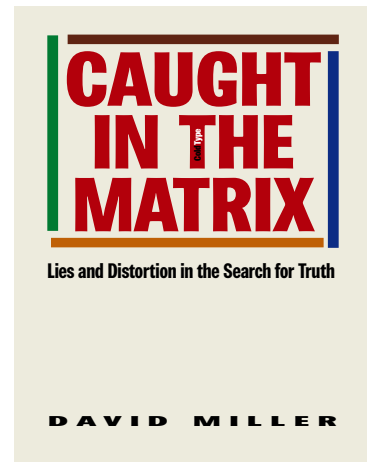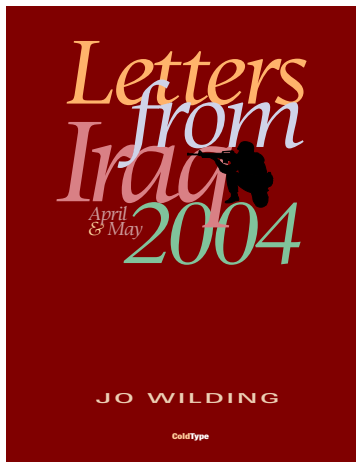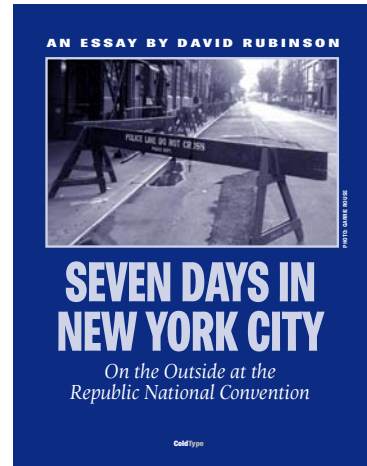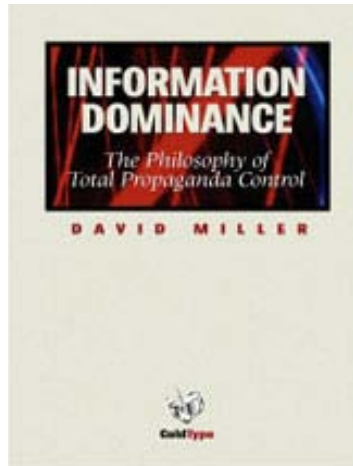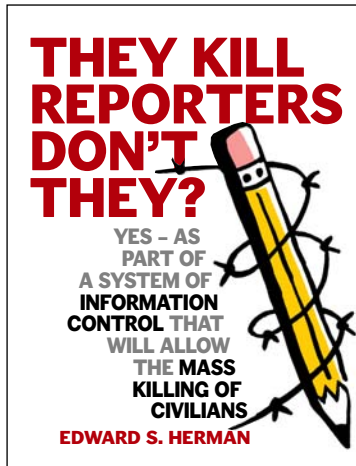
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