

MAY 16

News media and the madness of militarism

Media activism has achieved a lot. But I don't believe there's anything to be satisfied with — considering the present-day realities of corporate media and the warfare state.

War has become a constant of U.S. foreign policy, and media flackery for the war-makers in Washington is routine — boosting militarism that tilts the country in more authoritarian directions. The dominant news outlets provide an ongoing debate over how to fine-tune the machinery of war. What we need is a debate over how to dismantle the war machine.

When there are appreciable splits within or between the two major political parties, the mainstream news coverage is apt to include some divergent outlooks. But when elites in Washington close ranks for war, the major media are more inclined to shut down real discourse.

Here's an example: In late February 2003, three weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq began, management at MSNBC cancelled the nightly "Donahue" program. A leaked in-house report said Phil Donahue's show would present a "difficult public face for NBC in a time of war." The problem: "He seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush and skeptical of the administration's motives." The danger — quickly averted by NBC — was that the show could become "a home for the liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity."

When the two parties close ranks, so do the big U.S. media. The silence of politicians and media must not be our silence.

In the last months of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the necessity of challenging the warfare state. In January 1968, he said: "I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism..." In March 1968, he said: "The bombs in Vietnam explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America."

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In 2005, we can say: "The bombs in Iraq explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America." Soldiers return from their killing missions with terrible injuries to body and spirit. Suffering festers due to the tremendous waste of resources spent on war instead of helping to meet human needs. Meanwhile, corruption of language embraces death.

Factual information that undermines the patterns of wartime deception doesn't get much ink or airtime. But also, another kind of spiking takes place in psychological and emotional realms. It's essential that we confront the falsehoods repeatedly greasing the path to war, as when New York Times front pages smoothed the way for the invasion of Iraq with deceptions about supposed weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, there is also the crucial need to throw light on the human suffering that IS war. We need to do both — exposing the lies and the horrific results. Illuminating just one or the other is not enough.

In recent weeks, a lot of media attention has gone to the Bush administration's flagrant efforts to manipulate public television. And we're hearing about the need to defend PBS. That's understandable, given the right-wing assault on the network. If you're starving, you understandably would want some crumbs back. But that doesn't mean what you really want is restoration of the crumbs. What we actually need, and should demand, is genuine public broadcasting.

There was no golden era of PBS. The crown jewel of the network's news programming — with the most viewership and influence — has long been the nightly "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer." As with many other subjects, the program's coverage of war has relied heavily on official U.S. sources and perspectives in sync with them. The media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) has documented that during one war after another — such as the Gulf War in 1991, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq two years ago — the NewsHour's failure to provide independent coverage has been empirical and deplorable. Such failures are routine and longstanding for the show, as FAIR's research makes clear.

To accept such a baseline of journalistic standards — or, worse yet, to tout it as an admirable legacy for public broadcasting — is to swallow too much and demand too little. A military-industrial-media complex has grown huge while sitting on the windpipe of the First Amendment. And a media siege is normalizing the murderous functions of the warfare state. We are encouraged to see it as normality, not madness.

This article was adapted from a presentation at the National Conference for Media Reform, held May 13-15 in St. Louis.