

# A crisis for journalism

**O**n 8 April, newspapers around the world carried a despatch from a Reuters correspondent, “embedded” with the US army, about the murder of a ten-year-old Iraqi boy. An American private had “unloaded machine-gun fire and the boy . . . fell dead on a garbage-strewn stretch of wasteland”. The tone of the report was highly sympathetic to the soldier, “a softly spoken 21-year-old” who, “although he has no regrets about opening fire, it is clear he would rather it was not a child he killed”.

According to Reuters, children were “apparently” being used as “fighters or more often as scouts and weapons collectors. US officers and soldiers say that turns them into legitimate targets.” The child-killing soldier was allowed uncritically to describe those like his victim as “cowards”. There was no suggestion that the Americans were invading the victim’s homeland. Reuters then allowed the soldier’s platoon leader to defend the killer: “Does it haunt him? Absolutely. It haunts me and I didn’t even pull the trigger. It blows my mind that they can put their children in that kind of situation.” Perhaps guessing that readers might be feeling just a touch uncomfortable at this stage, the Reuters correspondent added his own reassuring words: “Before – like many young soldiers – he [the soldier] says he was anxious to get his first ‘kill’ in a war. Now, he seems more mature.”

I read in the Observer last Sunday that “Iraq was worth £20m to Reuters”. This was the profit the company would make from the war. Reuters was described on the business pages as “a model company, its illustrious brand and reputation second to none. As a newsgathering organisation, it is lauded for its accuracy and objectivity.” The Observer article lamented that the “world’s hotspots” generated only about 7 per cent of the model company’s £3.6bn revenue last year. The other 93 per cent comes from “more than 400,000 computer terminals in financial institutions around the world”, churning out “financial information” for a voracious, profiteering “market” that has nothing to do with true journalism:

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indeed, it is the antithesis of true journalism, because it has nothing to do with true humanity. It is the system that underwrote the illegal and unprovoked attack on a stricken and mostly defenceless country whose population is 42 percent children, like the boy who was killed by a soldier who, says the Reuters story, “now seems more mature”.

There is something deeply corrupt consuming this craft of mine. It is not a recent phenomenon; look back on the “coverage” of the First World War by journalists who were subsequently knighted for their services to the concealment of the truth of that great slaughter.

What makes the difference today is the technology that produces an avalanche of repetitive information, which in the United States has been the source of arguably the most vociferous brainwashing in that country’s history.

A war that was hardly a war, that was so one-sided it ought to be despatched with shame in the military annals, was reported like a Formula One race, as we watched the home teams speed to the chequered flag in Baghdad’s Firdos Square, where a statue of the dictator created and sustained by “us” was pulled down in a ceremony that was as close to fakery as you could get. There was the CIA’s man, an Iraqi fixer of the American stooge Ahmad Chalabi, orchestrating that joyous media moment of “liberation”, attended by “hundreds” – or was it “dozens”? – of cheering people, with three American tanks neatly guarding the entrances to the media stage. “Thanks, guys,” said a marine to the BBC’s Middle East correspondent in appreciation of the BBC’s “coverage”. His gratitude was hardly surprising. As the media analyst David Miller points out, a study of the reporting of the war in five countries shows that the BBC allowed the least anti-war dissent of them all. Its 2 per cent dissenting views was lower even than the 7 per cent on the American channel ABC.

The honourable exceptions are few and famous. Of course, no one doubts that it is difficult for journalists in the field. There is dust and deadlines and danger, and a dependent relationship on an alien military system. It is unfathomable which of these constraints contributed to the Reuters travesty described above. None, I suspect; for what it represented was the essence of propaganda. The protection of and apologising for “our” side is voluntary; it comes, it seems, with mother’s milk. The “others” are simply not the same as “us”.

Imagine the terror of a mother, cowering with her children on the road as the “softly spoken 21-year-olds” decide whether to kill them, or kill the old man failing to stop his car? The children are clearly “scouts”; the old man is, well, who knows and who cares? Now imagine that happening in a British high street

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during an invasion of this country. Absurd? That only happens in countries like Iraq, which can be attacked at will and without a semblance of legitimacy or morality: weak countries, of course, and never countries with weapons of mass destruction; the Americans knew Saddam Hussein was disarmed.

The corruption of journalism is most vivid back in the commentary booth, far from the dust and death. “Yes, too many died in the war,” wrote Andrew Rawnsley in the Observer. “Too many people always die in war. War is nasty and brutish, but at least this conflict was mercifully short. The death toll has been nothing like as high as had been widely feared. Thousands have died in the war; millions have died at the hands of Saddam.”

Mark his logic, for it is at the heart of what is dispensed day after day, night after night. The clear implication is that it is all right to have killed thousands of people in the invasion of their homeland, because “millions” died at the hands of their dictator. The lazy language, the idle dismissal of human life – each life part of so many other lives – is striking. Saddam Hussein killed a great many people, but “millions”? – the league of Stalin and Hitler? David Edwards of MediaLens asked Amnesty International about this. Amnesty produced a catalogue of Saddam’s killings that amounted mostly to hundreds every year, not millions. It is an appalling record that does not require the exaggeration of state-inspired propaganda – propaganda whose aim, in Rawnsley’s case, is to protect Tony Blair from the grave charges of which many people all over the world believe he is guilty.

There is, for example, not a single mention by Rawnsley of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who died as a direct result of the 12-year, medieval siege of Iraq conducted by America and backed by Britain – and enthusiastically by Blair. Professor Joy Gordon in Connecticut has spent three years studying this embargo as a weapon of social destruction. A preview of her voluminous, shocking work appeared in Harper’s Magazine. She describes “a legitimised act of mass slaughter”.

The protectors of Blair regard the entirely predictable crushing of a third-world minnow by the world’s superpower as a “vindication”. The great Israeli journalist and internationalist Uri Avnery wrote recently about this corruption of intellect and morality. “Let’s pose the question in the most provocative manner,” he wrote on 18 April. “What would have happened if Adolf Hitler had triumphed in World War Two? Would this have turned his war into a just one? Let’s assume that Hitler would have indicted his enemies at the Nuremberg war crimes court: Churchill for the terrible air raid on Dresden, Truman for dropping the atom

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bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Stalin for murdering millions in the Gulag camps. Would the historians have regarded this as a just war? A war that ends with the victory of the aggressor is worse than a war that ends with their defeat. It is more destructive, both morally and physically.” **JP**