

July 25, 2003

# JOURNOS DEBATE OUR ROLE IN WAR

**W**e will let you know as soon as we know. We are waiting for the video tape. We expect it soon.” That’s what CNN was saying and hyping when I watched this morning – a breathless buildup to the release of pooled video images of the dead bodies of Saddam’s two boys – and presumably their dead nephew – shot up, we are told like swiss cheese by no less than 350 US soldiers. Uday and Qusay, repeatedly pictured as victimizers, are now seen by some in Iraq as victims, even as martyrs for holding off their pursuers like Butch Cassidy for as long as six hours. Yesterday the US government released grotesque photographs of their puffed-up faces and death-mask look. That was apparently not considered enough. So two video crews, along with one from Al Jazeera, are being let in to show their remains to the world? Snuff videos anyone? The idea is that the Iraqi people will only end their resistance to the

US occupation when they know that these feared and hated twins of terror are really dead. Not mentioned of course is that many of the people who detested these “cubs” rather liked Saddam. (An Iranian friend of mine, no Baghdad booster himself, believes there is a “little Saddam in every Iraqi. They have been brainwashed to adore him!”)

So while some points will be scored in the propaganda war, it is not clear if they might blow back. The last time a dead body of a hunted leader

demonized by the West was shown to the press – I am thinking of the late el Che Guevara – his image ended up as a T-shirt icon for forty years. Clearly these two guys were not that popular, but actions often produce unpredicted consequences and can rebound or “blow back. Also remember all the outrage when those maniacs showed the video death of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl. The lesson: When we do it, it is ok.

Yesterday President Bush took great pleasure in announcing that their “careers” as “henchmen” no less had come to an end. (I hadn’t heard of that career before. Are there also “henchwomen?”) Jokes aside, what is doubly bizarre, is that this is the same administration that went berserk when Al Jazeera showed pictures of captured US GI’s. “How dare they” was the refrain. The New York Post denounced the pictures and then branded the Iraqis “SAVAGES” in big bold headlines for allowing the pictures to be taken. Al Jazeera was verbally vivisected by one Donald Rumsfeld. CNN at that time said it was taking it off the air. Al Jazeera’s office in Baghdad would later be bombed even though the Defense Department was given its coordinates. As Murray Kempton once wrote: “There is a time when the mind no longer judges. It simply records.”

## **AL JAZEERA**

**IN** fact, according to the network’s Hafez Al-Mirazi, the Washington Bureau Chief, the planes came twice. Al Jazeera is still waiting for an expla-

nation of the incident that took the life of one of its correspondents. Al-Mirazi told this story and others at an all-day conference of “The Media at War” sponsored by New York Magazine, the Guardian, and the World Policy Institute. He spoke of the contradictions among Washington decision makers reminding those assembled that in the early days Al Jazeera was denounced by official Arab broadcasters as a CIA-backed and pro-Israeli outlet because it, alone in the Arab world, carried interviews with Israeli leaders.

### DEBATING THE MEDIA AT WAR

**THE** uses and abuses of the press was the subject of the 9-5 talkathon with 22 panelist and a talk by Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger. I guess it is symptomatic of our media condition that a weekly magazine, which this week features “100 great cheap meals,” should be the one with the conscience and concern to sponsor the assessment of media malignancy in the coverage of the war. That is thanks to media columnist Michael Wolff who went to the CENTCOM briefings in Doha and exposed them for the fraud and carnival of media manipulation that they were. He made a provocative MC.

Some of the discussion was strong and the clashes in views very pronounced. The first panel considered but largely evaded Wolff’s main question to journalists who covered the war: “was it about all about us?” To what degree was the media the story? Only Al Jazeera’s man on the panel suggested that the antics of US media companies made their own efforts more important than the sufferings of the people whose country was invaded. My partner Rory O Connor reminded those assembled of a quote by Tommy

Franks in the New Yorker, which reported on the Pentagon. It cites a war with four fronts: the military front, the intelligence front, the political front, and the media front. “We’ve gone,” he quipped, “from being the fourth estate to the fourth front.”

### DID THE MEDIA SELL OUT?

**THE** second panel was more inflammatory: Did the US media sell out? Rick MacArthur, publisher of Harper’s, author of the Second Front, the best book on media coverage of Gulf War 1 argued that it/we had. He was passionate. He cited chapter and verse of manufactured news and phony intelligence findings that were accepted as fact. On the other side, Mike Eliot of Time couldn’t say enough good things about US coverage and Bill Hemmer of CNN couldn’t say enough good things about CNN. There seemed to be a defensive shield like star wars that led these media lions to protect themselves and their institutions from criticism while shooting down all of the missiles of media criticism headed their way. Gary Younge, the Guardian’s man in New York, tried to soften the blows by acknowledging that countries at war don’t always cover their own crimes well. He referenced British coverage of Ireland and French reporting in Algeria.

Missing on the panel –and throughout the day – were the media executives who planned, managed, and packaged the coverage that mesmerized and misinformed millions. (This point was made to me by Sandy Soclow, Walter Cronkite’s one time producer.) They were wisely and shamelessly not on hand to be held accountable. I was surprised at how many print people including MacArthur are more attentive to the sins of elite media like the New York Times than the networks which influence how most Americans

understand the world. At one point, a New School media student who told of a graphic artist at CNN who has been ordered to “Sex up the graphics.” Just like Tony Blair was accused of “sex-ing up” his “dodgy dossier.”

### **EMBEDS HAD FUN**

**AFTER** lunch it was time to talk embeds. Johnathan Foreman of the New York Post, that paper’s film critic, an ex-Marxist turned Minister of Murdochology, was quite funny in describing how he tried to tell it like it was only to find misleading headlines tacked on his pieces. He told me he had lots of fun. The most powerful and thoughtful panelist was John Donvan of ABC’s Nightline, the only network correspondent present who shared his disgust for war with some frustrations about the difficulties of interviewing Iraqis who would not accept his claims that he and his colleagues were neutral. “They were right,” he admitted. He condemned much of the coverage for not really showing what war is, especially all the gore and bloodshed. Other admitted that too when pressed by Kara McLaughlin, a student interning at Mediachannel who slammed what she saw as arrogance and insensitivity.

Alan Russbridger, the Guardian editor was especially eloquent in his discussion of how a global newspaper like The Guardian, considered a writer’s paper, had covered the war. He said they were surprised and delighted when two million American came to their website. He spoke of the duty they felt as journalists. The Guardian is now considering launching a publication in the US. Journalist Sidney Blumenthal, the author and Clinton advisor, has been gossiped about as a possible editor, but he told me no deal has been done. Blumenthal discussed how the Bush White

House is now unraveling as it scrambled to find a fall guy for the President’s lack of fact checking. He said he thinks the CIA is that fall guy.

### **SPINS AND LIES**

**THE** final panel was on spin and lies. We heard from the BBC’s head of newsgathering Adrian Van Kaveren who said that they will be fully vindicated for their controversial reporting based on information supplied by the late Dr. David Kelly. Mark Whitaker, editor of Newsweek, said that they have yet to find manufactured intelligence in the US. Karl Meyer of World Policy Journal spoke of how the Bush Administration had dissed the UN but is now coming back to the world body seeking support. He cited a UN-bashing article from a neocon in England that located the UN itself “on the Hudson River.”

John Kampfner of the New Statesman showed part of his film debunking the Jessica Lynch affair. Former NBC producer Mark Kuznets sought to challenge the facts in his BBC Correspondent report from the floor but it was too late in the day for a consideration of all the detailed points he disputed. Mr. K (no relation to Dr K) was unable to shake Kampfner on the fundamental points. Meanwhile, there may be a new wrinkle in these events.

### **DID WE SAVE THE WRONG SOLDIER?**

**OUR** contributor Jackie Newberry writes: “On CNN the other night, or maybe it was Peter Jennings, there was a report about a soldier in the same company who was killed. His parents were upset that he wasn’t getting the attention that Lynch was. According to them, the Lynch story that came out was actually about him. It appar-

ently went out over bad phone lines and “he” was mistaken for “she”. The shootings and stabbings [in the Lynch myth] were actually all related to this young man. He bravely fought off the Iraqi attackers and lost his life in the process. It hasn’t been picked up by the press, until this report. And the military has done a sorry job about bringing it to anyone’s attention.”

The debate about war coverage is continuing. I am happy to report that my book on the subject will be published by Prometheus Books in the fall. (It is available as an e-book through [mediachannel.org/giving now](http://mediachannel.org/givingnow).) Also on the media coverage, the other day I reported on a round table discussion involving war coverage in England sponsored by REPORTING THE WORLD.

### REPORTING THE WORLD: A MUST READ

**IN** the piece I referred to journalist and moderator of the affair Anabel McGoldrick as Anabel X. (I had used the X only to remind myself to double check the spelling of her last name and then forgot about it.) She writes: “Hi Danny, great to read in your weblog that the July 15 discussion at the Guardian got a mention...and an honour to be mysteriously named, Anabel X...does that mean I am sending kisses to everyone or a dangerous woman with links to Malcolm (and I promise not to sell out)? Is there any chance of updating things to say Annabel McGoldrick and to put a link to our website so that people can read the transcript and commentary?”

Yes of course, I said it with an embarrassing disclosure. By all means, one and all, check out: the 2003 events on their website.

They write: The full transcript now available at [www.reportingtheworld.org](http://www.reportingtheworld.org) (click on 2003

events) is posted with a commentary which examines these issues and begins a discussion about possible solutions:

“Always trying to assess, against independent expertise, the plausibility of claims about, eg, weapons systems BEFORE deciding to repeat them

“Testing the arguments for war by juxtaposing them with alternative propositions – widening the net, if necessary, to highlight alternatives put forward by non-traditional sources

Weaning ourselves off the assumption that what politicians say is automatically news; preparing to identify what is not said and the key questions elided by self-serving formulations”

The url again: <http://www.reportingtheworld.org>

### 9-11 REPORT INDICTS SPY AGENCIES

**THE** first reports on flawed intelligence vis-à-vis September 11 is out although the main investigation led by former New Jersey Governor Tom Kean is still underway. Palmer Frith writes: “Beyond the big intelligence flap, there’s the stonewalling of the committee investigating the 9-11 affair, and Dick Cheney refusing to say anything about how he arrived at the energy policy. On that, Judicial Watch, not exactly a hotbed of liberalism, reported that it used the FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] to discover that Cheney’s energy group had maps, charts, etc. of Iraqi oil fields, refineries, pipelines, etc. before the war. There might be an explanation, and probably is, for Cheney to have all this information; but why did he try to keep secret the fact that he had it? Will this administration ever learn that by holding back everything except what they put their spin

on, people will eventually not believe a word they say?”

The attempt to blame the intelligence agencies takes the attention off the Bush White House. In this connection, we may remind you of an earlier report on the US government and the Bin Ladens by Greg Palast in the Guardian in November 2001:

<http://www.gregpalast.com/detail.cfm?artid=103&row=0>>

### THE PROBE IN ENGLAND

**LORD** Hutton, the judge in Britain investigating the death of Dr Kelly and the BBC reports, says his inquiry intended to inform the public will now NOT be televised. Media Lens, a media watchdog group in the UK, cites my report on the BBC in its critique of the affair:

### ASSESSING THE BBC

**“NEW** Labour’s attack on the BBC is plainly irrational – similar claims of government mendacity have been made throughout the media. Moreover, the idea that the BBC was pursuing an “anti-war” agenda – as the government’s director of communications, Alastair Campbell, has claimed - is a further example of “pure invention”.

“In fact the BBC faithfully echoed government propaganda in the lead up to the war, and even more so during the war itself. The issue raging now is over whether the BBC was impartial or anti-war. The impact of this false debate has reached even dissident circles. In an article published on ZNet, Danny Schechter of MediaChannel writes:

“The BBC boasts, often with legitimacy, of the impartiality it brings to the coverage of the news.” (Schechter, ‘Behind Blair vs The Beeb The BBC’s Next War - Why The Knives Are Out for Aunty’,

[www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org), July 23, 2003)

“This is remarkable. As Schechter himself acknowledges, a Cardiff University report found that the BBC “displayed the most ‘pro-war’ agenda of any broadcaster” (Matt Wells, ‘Study deals a blow to claims of anti-war bias in BBC news’, the Guardian, July 4, 2003).” So why is the government targeting the BBC. Most of the British press say it is a power struggle or payback by Blair Media Advisor Alistair Campbell (who some press reports say is on the way out) or to deflect attention from the WMD.

My view is that there are INTERESTS here as well as issues, and that all of this is designed to clip the institutional power of an independent BBC – which has high approval ratings for its impartiality – and strengthen the power of private broadcasters, including the Murdoch interests. There is more to this confrontation than meets the eye.

### BEHIND THE CONGRESSIONAL VOTE YESTERDAY

**EVEN** media writers are scratching their heads about the Congressional vote against the big media companies. Here’s Howard Kurtz in the Washington Post yesterday: “Nobody much likes Big Media these days,” he writes. “But who woulda thunk that it would become a hot political issue? Not me.”

Kurtz goes on to say, “The rare move by the Republican-controlled House to buck the administration on a regulatory issue – especially given the clout of the broadcast industry, which hands out plenty of campaign cash – suggests that this issue has struck some kind of nerve.”

Who woulda thunk? We woulda thunk, that’s

who! – DS

For more on the Congressional vote yesterday and its implications see John Nichols report in the Nation.com. He writes in part: “While the Bush White House continues to promote the big-media agenda as part of an overall strategy of reworking regulations to favor large corporate campaign givers – raising the prospect that the president might veto Congressional moves to prevent the FCC from implementing this rule change – veteran Capitol Hill observers say public opposition to the FCC rule changes has grown so powerful that even the president could change his tune. “If the White House is threatening a veto on this, they offer that at their own peril,” explained Andy Davis, an aide to US Sen. Ernest Hollings, the powerful South Carolina Democrat who is a key player behind the Senate effort to reverse the FCC’s June 2 decision to raise the television ownership cap from 35 percent to 45 percent. “This is an issue that has enormously broad bipartisan support. People are very passionate about this issue.”

Republican leaders in the House felt that passion this week, as many members of their own

caucus signaled that they would support reversal of the FCC’s decision to raise the ownership cap. That caused the leadership to back off efforts to strip the appropriations bill language that prevents the FCC from implementing the change.”

### **NEW YORK TIMES: WRONG FIGHT, WRONG TIME**

“The New York Times says this is the wrong fight. (The Times company LOBBIED for media rule changes that would allow newspapers to buy TV stations in the markets they serve.)

“The whole fight to keep the networks from owning too many stations is actually last year’s, or last decade’s, battle. The networks themselves are now struggling players in a new communications environment in which a vast majority of Americans no longer get their TV signals from the airwaves. If Congress has a genuine interest in keeping a tiny number of corporations from controlling most of TV’s content, it should establish limits on the amount of programming controlled by the cable giants and tighten rules that bar the distributors from discriminating against their competitors’ products.”

