

June 10, 2003

THE EROSION OF MEDIA TRUST

The dangers this morning: monkey pox on the rise, Hillary Clinton overexposed on every TV outlet, and the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian “pieces” process that may have been a mirage to begin with.

But at least the sun is out.

ISRAEL'S MANY “GESTURES”

THE NEW YORK TIMES hit a note of optimism by putting an “Israeli gesture,” the removal of a tower near a settlement, on page one. That story took up six paragraphs at the top of the report. By paragraph seven, we were getting into what we used to call the “nitty gritty”—other less symbolic gestures. 13 more Palestinian homes demolished in Northern Gaza, part of a long standing policy of collective retribution. And that was before our old friend Gerald Kessel popped up on CNN to tell us of another helicopter attack on a Hamas spokesperson which was followed by vows of more retribution. I am glad that President Bush has taken personal charge of this process, aren't you?

If you leave the pacific and orderly waters of mainstream media and have a listen to a report aired last night on KPFA Radio in Berkeley, there is more emotional content to the reporting. Consider:

Dennis Bernstein: now to the West Bank with our special correspondent, Anne Gwynne, about the killing of five Israeli soldiers in Gaza.

Anne: “the lockdown is much more severe now

than even two weeks ago ... under complete lockdown ... every checkpoint full of long lines ... long lines of blindfolded, handcuffed students ... started arresting women at the checkpoints ... three young schoolgirls, held for six hours, their mobile phones thrown to the ground, stomped on ... searched intimately by men ... even ambulances not allowed through the checkpoints at all ... yesterday an ambulance stolen on the Nablus to Jenin road ... a sick patient and driver both arrested and the ambulance driven away ... using the attack on the soldiers in Gaza as a pretext ... six Palestinians killed last week, 16 homes demolished ... hundreds of people arrested ... absolutely unbelievable ... 17 children injured here in Nablus in two days ... 12 seriously injured ... 25mm shells smash a child's bones ... eyes gone, blood loss terrible..

Dennis: “ Hamas and two other groups claim responsibility for the shooting of the Israeli soldiers...”

Anne: “the ‘Peace Process’s number one condition is that the Palestinian stop the violence ... how about the violence against Palestinians?”

LOOTED OIL RESOURCES

AND so it goes. In Iraq, where the promise of oil revenues seemed so attractive to foreign eyes, the word is that the oil industry, which the US military was supposed to “secure” is a wreck. Headline: “WIDESPREAD LOOTING LEAVES OIL INDUSTRY IN RUINS.” So far there have been no

calls for accountability on why the military invasion force did not do more to preserve the country's resources, especially when it was openly proclaimed that the sale of oil would pay for the war.

Paul Krugman remains furious in his op-ed perch at the Times this morning on the deceptions of the Iraq war. He cites government deceptions but not the role of his own newspaper in not flagging them fully in the buildup to the war:

"It's now two months since Baghdad fell and, according to The AP, military units searching for W.M.D.'s have run out of places to look. One last point: the Bush administration's determination to see what it wanted to see led not just to a gross exaggeration of the threat Iraq posed, but to a severe underestimation of the problems of post-war occupation. When Gen. Eric Shinseki, the Army chief of staff, warned that occupying Iraq might require hundreds of thousands of soldiers for an extended period, Paul Wolfowitz said he was "wildly off the mark" and the secretary of the Army may have been fired for backing up the general.

"Now a force of 150,000 is stretched thin, facing increasingly frequent guerrilla attacks, and a senior officer told The Washington Post that it might be two years before an Iraqi government takes over. The Independent reports that British military chiefs are resisting calls to send more forces, fearing being "sucked into a quagmire."

"I'll tell you what's outrageous. It's not the fact that people are criticizing the administration; it's the fact that nobody is being held accountable for misleading the nation into war."

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SOURCES OF SURPRESSED INFORMATION

ON the misleading information front, one subject of my forthcoming book, *EMBEDDED: WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION*, Tom Dispatch takes on the Times to show how misleading sources are quoted and quoted again:

"For the last year, of course, this administration has been strategically leaking like a sieve whatever information it wanted in the media, including the Times. But here, really for the first time since this what-did-the-president-know-and-when scandal began, is some news, something we couldn't have known (as far as I can tell anyway) before the war. Somebody(bodies) is (are) leaking reports on CIA interrogations, somebody(bodies) referred to as "several intelligence officials" in paragraph one.

"Now, let's stop for a moment and consider the author of this piece, a Pulitzer Prize winning Times journalist with a "national security" beat, who covers the "intelligence community" and whose last book was "The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown With the KGB," which he coauthored with Milton Bearden, who just happens to be the CIA's former Soviet-Eastern European division head during the years of the Soviet collapse (a subject on which, by the way, the CIA had a dreadful record, predictively speaking).

"So here we may once again have a case of "retired officer syndrome." Certainly, (James) Risen himself is well connected. Now, let's look at his piece again, this time without any of the content, just its sourcing. What you find is but a single named source, Bill Harlow, "a spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency," who (absurdly enough) refuses comment on the story. So the only named source says not a word, while a myr-

iad of unnamed ones blab away. Here, then, are the other sources, as described in the piece, in addition to the “several intelligence officials” in paragraph one of a story only seventeen paragraphs long.

INDICTING MEDIA COVERAGE

JON CARROL of the San Francisco Chronicle has also lashed out at his own profession for covering up, rather than uncovering many of these stories: “None of the doubts about the existence of these weapons reached the ears of the public through the media. Led by Fox News and the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal, the media took for granted the truthfulness of administration claims. A few newspapers that demurred (this one, the New York Times, the Washington Post) were quickly barraged with hate-filled mis-sives and angry talk-show rhetoric.

“These few newspapers were described as “liberal,” a word that has essentially no meaning in American politics today. I infer from my own mail that “liberal” means “anyone who did not think Bill Clinton should be impeached for lying about having sex with an intern.” It is amazing how the loopy right is keeping Clinton’s flame alive.

“What is not so clearly understood is that the administration was, in essence, using the Roger Ailes playbook. Ailes, the right-wing politico turned Fox News president, decided to use the big lie right from the start: “We report. You decide.” Of course, he had nothing like that in mind. We report, we decide, and oh boy do we have an agenda.

RITTER: “ADMIT IT”

Finally, Scott Ritter, the former UN inspector, has

weighed in again: Islam Online reports: “The United States and Britain should admit they lied when claiming the ousted Baghdad regime had weapons of mass destruction, Scott Ritter, a former U.N. senior weapons inspector in Iraq, said in an interview published here Friday, June 6.

Ritter, speaking to the Swiss daily Le Temps, called on U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to “have the courage to be held responsible” for telling lies to the public into backing the conflict, Agence France-Presse (AFP) said.

“An outspoken critic of Bush’s handling of the conflict, the ex-Marine said the two leaders should “explain frankly and honestly why they went to war.”

“They should “admit their lies,” he said.

“Ritter’s comments were published in French.

“If this is a noble crusade to liberate the world from a crazy dictator, admit it,” he said.

I talked with Ritter last night at a Miramax Books party for music industry exec Danny Goldberg who has just published “Dispatches From The Culture Wars: How the Left Lost its Teen Spirit.” More on his insights in a later column. Ritter was there with Beau Freidlander, the publisher of Context Books, which is publishing a second book by Ritter on WMDs.

TRUST IN MEDIA SLIPS

HOW do Americans view the media? According to Journalism professor Walt Brasch “Only about one-fifth of all Americans even believe “all or most” of the stories in their newspapers, according to a survey by the Pew Center in 2002; a separate poll revealed that almost half of all Americans thought news stories “are often inaccurate.” The L.A. Times, Newsweek, and dozens of other pub-

lications reported that even when some sources tried to report errors, they were met by an arrogance in which editors didn't return phone calls – a common problem among all major media, not just the Times.

He compares cheating in journalism to cheating in education: “students don't see that cheating, lying, or plagiarizing are necessarily immoral or unethical. Almost half of high school students, according to the Josephson Institute of Ethics, believe “a person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed.” College graduates pad their resumes; references lie in their recommendations.

Psychologist Robert Feldman of the University of Massachusetts found that among 11-16-year-old students, there was a high correlation between lying and popularity. Feldman told the Associated Press, “Politicians have known for a very long time that telling people what they want to hear is a very good social tactic.” Politicians and CEOs, aided by hordes of PR professionals, also know they can spin the truth because the media, often faced by increased work loads and diminished resources, have largely abrogated their roles of cynical watchdogs.”

MEDIA ECOLOGY

THE Media forms part of the cultural environment in America, and has inspired a school of analysis called “media ecology.” Film maker/writer Michael Lee attended a recent conference by these ecologists and reports for Mediachannel.org:

“The Media Ecology Association (www.mediaecology.org) held its Fourth Annual Conference at Hofstra University on Long Island over the past weekend. What is media ecology? Aha! That was the topic not only of one of the first major panels

of the conference but also of at least a few moments of nearly every conversation.

“Janet Sternberg, Executive Director of the MEA and professor at Fordham, calls media ecology “the study of information environments.” Others “the dialectic between viewed and viewer” or “they became what they beheld,” quoting Blake.

“What everyone can agree on is that it media ecology is the school of study which has grown from the extensions of the work by Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Daniel Boorstein, and others into the role media as a process, form, and quality plays in the world, regardless of its content. What nobody is sure about is how far back it actually goes. “God may be the first media ecologist,” one scholar said, referring to the 2nd Commandment, regulating the worshipping of imagery.

“In his keynote address, Columbia's James Carey, traced the “founding” of media ecology to 1948, when the Cold War and mass TV were beginning, and Harold Ennis, an early theorist of globalization, wrote his “Empire of Communication,” among other works. Ennis and McLuhan were about to host a seminar in Toronto on Values and Civilization that would point toward the seminal work of both in forming their media theories. Carey extended his famous parallel of the telegraph with the Internet, characterizing the Age of the Telegraph as “the First Wave of globalization” which crashed dead with the onset of the First World War. Carey believes now that 9-11 has come as the front edge of the end of our Second Phase of globalization, and suggested that the potential for a much faster rebuilding still exists if we apply democratic and positivist principles. Ironically, he pointed out, very undemocratic principles were applied in the building of the WTC in

the first place in the 1960s, when eminent domain was forced on an unwilling neighborhood by the Port Authority acting as advance team for the Rockefellers.

PAGLIA: "MONROE'S BREASTS ARE A CULTURAL HALLUCINATION"

"CAMILLE PAGLIA was the star of the show (as she is wherever she goes), shouting again and again in her slide-filled address that today's Photoshop-distended limbs and faces are radically transforming the body image of Western society and that young people, especially women, **DESPERATELY NEED TO SEE IMAGES** from the history of art proving that more natural forms have been lauded through 90% of world history. The "cultural hallucination" that Marilyn Monroe had large breasts is an early result of the propaganda machine which has radically altered our relationship to reality in every other media-saturated realm.

What I got from the conference is that media ecology is cross-disciplinary and open-armed, welcoming anyone into its folds – or at least into its discussions -who says they are a media ecologist. This is a small group which aims to change the world, or at least provide a road map for the activists (for media ecology is not **NECESSARILY** active) and unlike many small groups with that purpose they are not exclusionary. The field of media ecology, which has existed for at least 50 years according to some, since the beginning of mankind for others, has in the last four years begun to organize and attempt to grow. It is a field that media critics should get to know as well as possible. Check out their site.

BEWARE THE BLACK DOT

IF McLuhan was Canada's best known media theorist, Adbusters is now Canada's best known center of media resistance. They are unleashing a new campaign featuring a "black spot." Look for it. Here's what it is about:

"In the coming months a black spot will pop up everywhere . . . on store windows and newspaper boxes, on gas pumps and supermarket shelves. Open a magazine or newspaper – it's there. It's on TV. It stains the logos and smears the nerve centers of the world's biggest corporations.

"This is the mark of the people who don't approve of President Bush's plan to control the world, who don't want countries liberated without UN backing, who can't stand any more neocon bravado shoved down their throats.

"This is the mark of the people who want the Kyoto Protocol for the environment, who want the International Criminal Court for greater justice, who want a world where all nations, including the U.S.A., are free of weapons of mass destruction.

<http://unbrandamerica.org>

TOTAL INFORMATION AWARENESS????

THE Electronic Frontier Foundation has issued a report on the Bush Administration's new Big Brother agency. "The Bush Administration released its long-awaited report to Congress on the "Total Information Awareness" program today (now renamed "Terrorism Information Awareness").

"The report is disappointing – after more than a hundred pages, you don't know anything more about whether TIA will work or whether your

civil liberties will be safe against it,” said EFF Senior Staff Attorney Lee Tien.

“It’s also disingenuous for a report about new technologies for monitoring people to keep saying, ‘don’t worry, we’ll follow existing privacy law.’ Privacy law is already behind the technology curve, and the Bush Administration fully understands that TIA will only make the problem worse.”

THE PLUG-IN DRUG

FINALLY, this report from the Media Guardian in England this morning: it is headlined: “Children who can’t live without TV: Television has become the “background noise” for a generation of children who no longer regard radio as required listening.

“The squawk-box in the corner – increasingly, a box in every bedroom – is like a “noisy light bulb” that is never switched off. Some children, according to research released by the television regulators yesterday, cannot imagine life without it.

“The television is almost like a member of the family in its own right,” the report said.”

HILL AND BILL IS SO SILL

I SAVED Hilary C. for last. On BBC World Service yesterday, I mentioned that her media barnstorming is about selling, not telling. I was with some people who know her last night who commented that the interviews that have been plastered all over the tube reveal very little about her. I did learn that she is also reaching out to people who criticized her for not opposing the war. Alessandra Stanley calls her a Type-A political personality in the Times today: “And that grit is what was on display in her multiple television appearances this week, not her heart or deepest inner thoughts. With iron discipline, aplomb and maddening half-truths (“I am a very private person”), Senator Clinton revealed exactly as much of her private reaction to her husband’s affair with Monica Lewinsky as she felt was needed to sell her book.”

