

May 15, 2003

THE MEDIA MATRIX IS ALWAYS LOADED

Alice and Wonderland had a description of it: “curiouser and curiouser.” Or perhaps the line, “what a web we weave when first we practice to deceive” is more appropriate. We all know that most institutions resort to various types of deception when confronted with evidence of malfeasance. We see this in the corporate world. We see it daily in government, but we rarely see it all hang out in the world of media where “reputation management” has been elevated to high art.

That’s why it is so peculiar to read a New York Times story by media writer Jaques Steinberg, who was covering the deliberations of his own newspaper in the aftermath of the plagiarism scandal to which it has devoted more print than most world crises. Everyone at the Times was allowed into the meeting except Mr Steinberg and other members of the press, all of whom were barred from covering this fascinating affair. There is this editorial note in the story tucked away on Page 31: “The Times meeting was closed to news coverage. As a result, Mr. Steinberg, The Times’s media writer, did not attend it.” Sounds like the Matrix – a virtual world. So much for full transparency.

But he, and others, did write about it because staffers were willing to spill their guts to anyone who would listen. Forget the details of the Jayson Blair affair, they have been told –or at least we think they have. Look instead at what came out about the way the Times works; that was more

interesting because for years critics compared the newspaper to Pravda, a top-down buttoned-up bureaucracy where employees lived in fear of dictatorial editors. So much for freedom IN the free press. The notion that the people who serve our democracy are among the least democratic institutions was furthered when Times’s editor reported on how he believes many of his own employees think of him .

First there was his mea-culpa, an attempt to neuter criticism by taking responsibility but without stepping down. “I was guilty of a failure of vigilance that, since I sit in this chair where the buck stops, I should have prevented,” he said. (Note he was not fired, did not quit, and many at the Times expect nothing much to change.)

But then came the disclosure – and when you listen to it, think of any number of other media executives who operate institutions along similar lines. (These are the guys who fault “command economies” elsewhere, but practice them themselves.) Here is editor supremo Howell Raines, a product of the New York Times culture and a man revered in the dominant media culture.

“You view me as inaccessible and arrogant,” Mr. Raines said, ticking off a list he had compiled from his own newsroom interviews in recent days. You believe the newsroom is too hierarchical, that my ideas get acted on and others get ignored. I heard that you were convinced there’s a star system that singles out my favorites for elevation.

“Fear,” he added, “is a problem to such extent, I

was told, that editors are scared to bring me bad news.”

THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO FEAR IS...

IF “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” many of us are very afraid these days. Afraid that a jumbo jet was allowed to dip over the Statue of Liberty and scare the you-know-what out of many New Yorkers who, in these jittery times, feared IT (and you know what I mean again) was threatening again. Oops. Sorry, says the FAA. That won’t happen again. We just wanted some returning troops to see a statute that is still standing (even if it came from those “weasels” over there. Merci Boucoup.)

And we should FEAR that more terror attacks are coming. It turns out that a high-level US official had been in Saudi Arabia over the weekend asking that security be tightened at one of the compounds that was later hit by car bombers. Watch all the pundits blasting the royal family over there, but nary a mention of the terrorist warning in this country that were ignored before 9/11. And no discussion of the alleged probe into 9/11 that is being limited by restrictions on information even before it hits its stride. Jeff Gerth reported in the Times today: “The director of the C.I.A. has not given the names of those who waited 20 months before adding to a federal watch list two suspected terrorists who wound up as hijackers.”

Beau Groscoup, a professor who writes about terror, says of the perpetrators: “It’s curious that they have not claimed responsibility.... Just as the U.S. government backed Saddam Hussein during the height of his atrocities and the Taliban were deemed useful and politically acceptable business

partners if they would make pipeline deals, so too might allegations of Saudi Arabia’s ties to terrorist groups be used as a justification for military action against the Saudi monarchy if it doesn’t co-operate with western oil interests in the future.”

Bill Hartung of the World Policy Institute calls attention to another relatively unexplored angle “The fact that one of the targets in Saudi Arabia was a U.S. private military corporation called Vinnell raises serious questions about the role of ‘executive mercenaries’ and corporations that profit from war and instability.”

Pratap Chatterjee of Corp Watch tells us more about this shadowy corporation. “[Vinnell] has been controlled in the past through a web of interlocking ownership by a partnership that included James A. Baker III and Frank Carlucci, former U.S. secretaries of state and defense under presidents George [H.W.] Bush and Ronald Reagan respectively In an interview with Newsweek, a former U.S. Army officer who now works for Vinnell described the company’s first recruitment as putting together “a ragtag army of Vietnam veterans for a paradoxical mission: to train Saudi Arabian troops to defend the very oil fields that Henry Kissinger recently warned the U.S. might one day have to invade.”

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER BODY COUNT

TODAY is the day that Palestinians mark as day of disgrace, the forced exodus, they say, of many of their people from their homes in what is now Israel in 1948. Ariel Sharon and the Israeli Defense Force marked the day with an armed attack on people they described as terrorists. A 12 year old boy was killed in this incident. (The Atlantic carries a fascinating dissection of the killing of an

another Palestining “martyr” Mohammed al-Dura back in 2000, written by James Fallows who analyzes the competing claims of who killed him suggesting that the media got it wrong or at least missed part of the story).

Usually these incidents are reported on after the fact. We see the body counts and sometimes some bang bang footage but the horror of it passes quickly. That was not the case yesterday on KPFA radio in Berkely where Dennis Bernstein was on the phone with peace activist Anne Gwynne when the incident occurred. You can hear it yourself at: <http://www.flashpoints.net/>

Here’s part of the transcript:

“00:00 Dennis Bernstein: introduction: Another five Palestinians killed today, a 12-year-old shot in the head on the grounds of a hospital ... live ‘under-fire’ reports from Welsh nurse Anne Gwynne in Nablus... Sharon tears up the ‘roadmap to peace’, says he has no intention of dismantling illegal settlements as required...

“01:00 Dennis: now with Anne Gwynne (Anne’s media library) in Nablus... two friends shot from behind as we attempted to walk away from a tank...

“Anne: a beautiful sunny morning... in the main street outside Nablus city hall... a sniper shot at me, the bullet ricocheted... a lot of shooting drew me here... the jeeps facing us... all the cars, taxis coming up the street don’t know they are here... drivers panicing, trying to turn around... this is my taxi driver friend... coming to pick up anyone... Israelis arrested six people last night, including a mother of five... her husband bombed to smithereens... supposed to...

“Anne: the tanks were firing rockets... a small rocket, 200 mm in length, shot down here... I am a 65-year-old grandmother, believe me, there is

nobody here with weapons... I wish I could get out... (sounds of gunfire)... that wasn’t a good idea, they just shot at the door...

“One youngster in the hospital... a bullet in his chest... likely to die... this was somebody who just threw a stone... OH MY GOD!.. Here they come again in force... parked right by us... the brave BBC is here... Nablus TV... an AP photographer... some brave people here, but never anyone from Europe... THIS IS JUST TERRORISM... THEY ENCOURAGE THE KIDS TO GATHER, THROW STONES, AND THEN THEY SHOT THEM... my friend here, his last child shot... they have another child now... to be a journalist here, takes a lot of courage... now another jeep on the right hand side... difficult to explain how angry you get... (sounds of gunfire).. YOU BASTARD!.. coming our way, the one who just shot at us., not six feet away, guns from every window... six young ambulance workers., one got a bullet through his testicles... brave brave drivers... now here comes the jeep back to terrorize us from the other side... between the jeeps...

“Anne: we’ve got to run (breathless running)... sound of sirens... can anyone in SF imagine this?!”

THE GREAT EMBED DEBATE

WOW, pretty gripping. Radio reports like that are more vivid and bring war home in ways that the Iraq TV war coverage never did. To my surprise, American Journalism Review editor Rem Rieder praises the Pentagon’s embedding program in AJR’s new issue as a “winner for journalists and their audiences... the great embedding experiment was a home run as far as the news media – and the American people are concern.

No way, says veteran media watcher and Project Censored founder Robert Jensen who says that

the military co-opted the media and that distorted the coverage who raises deeper questions:

“First, clear criteria are needed to evaluate news media performance, based on what citizens in a democracy need from journalists:

“1) an independent source of factual information;

“2) the historical, political, and social context in which to make sense of those facts; and

“3) exposure to the widest range of opinion available in the society.

“News media failures on #2 and #3 are the most obvious. U.S. media provided woefully limited background and context... On television, current military officers were “balanced” with retired military officers... Studies of the op-ed pages of The Washington Post, often considered to be a liberal newspaper, showed that the pro-war opinions dominated – by a 3-to-1 ratio from December 1 through February 21, according to Todd Gitlin’s analysis in The American Prospect.

“The media didn’t even provide the straight facts well. At the core of coverage of this war was the system of “embedding” reporters with troops, allowing reporters to travel with military units – so long as they followed the rules. Those rules said reporters could not travel independently (which meant they could not really report independently), interviews had to be on the record (which meant lower-level service members were less likely to say anything critical), and officers could censor copy and temporarily restrict electronic transmissions for “operational security” (which, in practice, could be defined as whatever field commanders want to censor)...”

CARRYING WATER

WRITING in Slate.com, Meghan O Rourke

summed it up this way: “So far the American networks choices look less like editorial wisdom and more like carrying water for the Bush Administration.”

Today, columnist Molly Ivins indicts the lack of follow-up on the missing WMD story. “Funny how media attention slips just at the diciest moments. I doubt the United States was in this much danger at any point during the actual war. Whether this endeavor in Iraq will turn out to be worth the doing is now at a critical point, and the media have decided it’s no longer a story. Boy, are we not being served well by American journalism.’

Tom Dispatch.com praises French YV coverage and contrasts it to what he saw: “Sometime toward the end of our recent little war, I suddenly discovered that at 7 pm in New York on some obscure cable channel I could get subtitled news off French television. Their war coverage was startling. They weren’t simply embedded with the American troops. Their reporters were actually racing around Baghdad among other places sticking microphones in the faces of ... brace yourself, actual Iraqis, more Iraqis in one night than I think I had seen talking on American television in the three weeks of war – even, brace yourself again, Iraqis with differing points of view.

“Somehow on our news, the Big Picture was already agreed upon. Yet watching TV news on whatever channel each day was like watching some unknown picture being smashed into a thousand fragments (and then on TV the visual fragments, often bearing not the slightest relation to each other would be put in little differently sized frames, one next to or above the other, leaving you guessing as to why). Here’s what was so curious about the French newscasts – they were

actually trying to put together some kind of narrative for each day. It was so old-fashioned. It was, quite honestly, like stumbling into another war on another planet.”

REMEMBER JESSICA?

TO add to our list of deceptive stories let us return to the one big US military triumph, a story we saw over and over on TV News, the story of pretty Jessica Lynch, the POW who became a heroine when dramatically rescued by US forces. London’s Guardian returns to this story today, reporting

“Jessica Lynch became an icon of the war. An all-American heroine, the story of her capture by the Iraqis and her rescue by US special forces became one of the great patriotic moments of the conflict. It couldn’t have happened at a more crucial moment, when the talk was of coalition forces bogged down, of a victory too slow in coming.

“Her rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived. It provides a remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon’s media managers, and has produced a template from which America hopes to present its future wars.

“But the American media tactics, culminating in the Lynch episode, infuriated the British, who were supposed to be working alongside them in Doha, Qatar. This Sunday, the BBC’s Correspondent program reveals the inside story of the rescue that may not have been as heroic as portrayed, and of divisions at the heart of the allies’ media operation.

“In reality we had two different styles of news media management,” says Group Captain Al

Lockwood, the British army spokesman at central command. “I feel fortunate to have been part of the UK one.”

CENSORSHIP THERE....

WHILE we begin to learn what we weren’t supposed to know, Iraqis are confronting a new type of censorship Reuters reports: The US-sponsored Iraqi television station began broadcasts Tuesday after complaining of American censorship, including efforts to stop it airing passages from the Koran, the Muslim holy book. At the start of what is being trumpeted as a new broadcasting era in a nation fed on a diet of state propaganda, Baghdad residents with electricity saw the Iraqi flag appear on their screens as a pan-Arab nationalist anthem played. Deprived of any locally produced television since US troops ousted Saddam Hussein, Iraqis watched canned interviews and decades-old music shows....

US officials made no comment on the censorship allegations. They had earlier said the station would be a welcome change from the Hussein era.

“This is not American propaganda. This is the first time in 25 years Iraqis are getting TV that is not propaganda,” said Robert Teasdale, a US adviser to the network.

“But North said the US-led administration’s Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance had requested the station’s news programs be reviewed by the wife of Jalal Talabani, a Kurdish leader and a major figure in the postwar politics of Iraq. “Could you imagine a political leader being able to check the content of any Western media?” North said. The news program would be postponed for a week because of the wrangling, said North, himself hired by the Office of Reconstruction.

CENSORSHIP HERE

THERE is another kind of wrangling going on in the US as the FCC discusses what to do about Clear Channel Communications, the radio powerhouse that owns 11% of America's 11,000 radio stations. Even though its stations reach millions, the NY Times still covers the issue in the business section, back on page C10 today. What the story deals with are complaints about minor problems involving Clear Channel's monopolization of some rural markets.

Left out is its larger impact as described in a column by Saul Landau:

"Clear Channel literally fogs the airwaves with ultra right slogans that appeal to the fundamentalist white, Christian soldiers of God. Now, shudder, Clear Channel plans to capture the Spanish speaking radio audience as well. They await only a tiny change of rules by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Clear Channel expects the FCC to approve its nearly \$2.5 billion deal that would, according to Eric Boehlert in the April 24,

2003 Salon, "link the Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation, the leader in Spanish-language radio stations in the U.S., and Univision Communications – already the market leader in Spanish-language TV, cable and music." This new entity "would create a new company that controls nearly 70 percent of Spanish-language advertising revenue in the United States." Currently, Clear Channel owns 26 percent of Hispanic Broadcasting....

"Clear Channel executives expect the FCC to reinterpret the "public interest" to mean a near monopoly over TV and radio for their stations along with their ideological pal Rupert Murdoch's Fox network, the electronic and defense titan General Electric and the CNN patriots. Imagine these sources as the "information" providers for the majority of Americans. According to Boehlert, Clear Channel "took advantage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996" to grow from "40 stations then to approximately 1,200 stations today, or roughly 970 more than its closest competitor."...

