

How to silence an awkward newspaper

The editor of the Daily Mirror, Britain's most famous mass-circulation newspaper, was sacked because he ran the only English-language popular paper to expose the "war on terror" as a fraud and the invasion of Iraq as a crime. He was marked long before the Mirror published the notorious, apparently faked pictures of British troops torturing Iraqi prisoners.

On 4 July 2002, American Independence Day, the Mirror published a report of mine, displayed on the front page under the headline "Mourn on the Fourth of July" and showing Bush flanked by the Stars and Stripes. Above him were the words: "George W Bush's policy of bomb first and find out later has killed double the number of civilians who died on 11 September. The USA is now the world's leading rogue state".

It was the Mirror at its most potent; not since it distinguished itself as the first mass-circulation paper in the western world to oppose the US invasion of Vietnam and, before that, the British invasion of Suez, had it confronted the rapacious policies of a British government and its principal ally. Most of the Western media were then consumed and manipulated by the fake issue of Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction: "45 minutes from attack", said the London Evening Standard front page; "He's got 'em... let's get him", said the London Sun.

In contrast, the Mirror reported that Bush and Blair were lying, that the "liberation" of Afghanistan had installed warlords as barbaric as the Taliban, that US forces had killed almost double the number of civilians killed in the twin towers on 11 September 2001, and that the coming invasion of Iraq had been long planned. It was certainly not the first to say this, but it made sense of it for a popular readership.

The day after the "Mourn on the Fourth of July" piece was published, a senior executive of the New York investment company Tweedy Browne, major

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shareholders in the Trinity Mirror newspaper group, called the Mirror and shouted down the phone at senior management, demanding Morgan's head and mine. This pressure continued as the Murdoch press in the United States and other lunar right-wing papers and broadcasters railed against the "treacherous" Mirror. When, on 1 May last, the Mirror published its "torture" photographs, Tweedy Browne again led the charge of powerful shareholders, notably Fidelity Asset Management, the biggest mutual company in America, run by the billionaire Edward C Johnson III, a donor to the Bush re-election campaign. "We will have to look very carefully," said an executive of Deutsche Asset Management, another shareholder, "at what Trinity Mirror does next in order to protect the value of the Mirror brand."

Was corporate influence on the press, and its right to be wrong, ever more eloquently expressed? Morgan had only just survived a year earlier when a new Trinity Mirror senior management under the chief executive, Sly Bailey, ordered him to "tone down" the anti-war coverage and return the paper to celebrities and faithless royal butlers (who had never departed). In the following months, the Mirror, along with the other anti-war daily newspaper in Britain, the Independent, was vindicated. Today, Bush and Blair are universally distrusted and reviled, and the defeat of their atrocious enterprise seems assured.

In bringing this truth to the public, the Mirror departed from the pack as no popular paper has, and the part it played ought not to be buried in the mire of the British tabloid world. For two years, the Mirror represented a majority of the British people, whose critical understanding of Blair's pre-invasion charade was always ahead of journalists'. The Mirror did what a newspaper is meant to do: it kept the record straight. Instead of channelling and amplifying official lies, the Mirror more often than not challenged and exposed them to a readership often dismissed or patronised by those claiming to know what "the public really wants".

Since Morgan's departure, no newspaper has demanded that the Ministry of Defence produce the "incontrovertible evidence" that the Mirror's photographs were faked. The hearsay and apologetics of a regiment with a documented record of brutality in Iraq, facing at least five murder prosecutions, have been accepted. If the Mirror was stitched up, was it merely for money? Instead of pursuing that, as the editors of MediaLens website point out, "a cowed media lined up to heap invective on the sacked editor and to declare the decision 'correct', 'necessary', 'inevitable'".

The BBC, having got rid of the one reporter, Andrew Gilligan, who caught out

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Blair, and having duly disported itself before the whitewashing Hutton inquiry, allowed Andrew Neil to dominate its news of Morgan's sacking with an attack on the Mirror's "very slanted and skewed journalism" – and this from a former Murdoch editor, a caricature who waved his champagne glass at 5,000 men sacked by his master, whose scurrilous London Sunday Times smear campaigns included the notorious campaign against the current affairs programme Death on the Rock, which had lifted a veil on the secret British state and its terrorism.

The collusion of the respectable media in the epic crime in Iraq is rarely discussed. Recently, there have been honourable exceptions. David Rose, who wrote major investigative articles for the Observer that linked Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda and to the anthrax attacks in America – claims long discredited – wrote in the Evening Standard that he looked "back with shame and disbelief" at his support for the invasion. In the United States, a number of journalists have written regretfully about the supine way the freest press in the world allowed the Bush regime to get away with its lies.

Charles Lewis, a former CBS star reporter and now director of the Centre for Public Integrity, told me that had the media "fulfilled their unique constitutional role and challenged the administration's lies, such as those tying Iraq to al-Qaeda, there is a very, very good chance we would not have gone to war". With the exception of the Mirror, the Independent and intermittently the Guardian, the same can be said of the British media. British television rarely showed the full horror of "shock and awe" that the Arab world saw via its satellite broadcasters. Videotape and photographs were sanitised.

Phillip Knightley points out that there was an "unwritten agreement that nothing too horrific made it on to the screen or the front pages. Take the photograph of a weeping Iraqi grandfather cradling in his arms his little granddaughter, severely injured in a Coalition bomb attack on Basra... You cannot recall it? I am not surprised..." This picture, like so many pictures of suffering civilians, ran in its entirety in the Arab press, but was cropped in Britain and America so that what was left of the little girl's horribly mangled feet was not visible. The excuse was that it was not "tasteful".

The campaign against the BBC by Blair's spin-master, by the Murdoch press and Conrad Black's Telegraph and finally by Hutton, was Goebbels-quality: a deliberate distraction, and perverse in the extreme. No follower of the government's war agenda was more faithful than the BBC. A comprehensive Media Tenor survey of coverage of Iraq by the world's leading broadcasters' found that the BBC had given just 2 per cent to demonstrations of anti-war

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dissent – less even than American broadcasters. A Cardiff University study found no evidence that the BBC was anything but pro-war. Historically, the BBC has always supported the establishment's wars by declaring the status quo (war) neutral and dissent "biased". Propaganda made respectable dominates the very language and tone of news and current affairs.

Thus, BBC1's Panorama on 23 September 2002 claimed to have "hard evidence" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, having accepted as true a fake story about a secret biological weapons laboratory under a major hospital in Baghdad. In common with most of the media, the BBC went along with the greatest hoax of all: Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council in February last year as a final justification for the invasion. This was made up of cartoon-like drawings, such as "Slide 21", of which Powell said: "Here you see both truck- and railcar-mounted mobile factories." Powell called this "diagramising". Of the satellite images he presented, he said, "The photos that I am about to show you are sometimes hard for the average person to interpret, hard for me. The painstaking work of photo analysis takes experts with years and years of experience, poring for hours and hours over light tables." This was the "irrefutable evidence" for "65 facilities [that have] housed chemical weapons". It was all fake, as the profoundly cynical Powell has since hinted. Bush himself has since joked about the lack of evidence of weapons; Paul Wolfowitz has revealed that the WDM "story" was "agreed" as one that the public would swallow; Donald Rumsfeld has admitted there was no link between Iraq and al-Qaeda. Thanks to their propaganda, played unchallenged through most of the media, millions of Americans still believe it.

In Iraq, soldiers talk about killing and mistreating Iraqis "as payback for 9/11". In Britain, protecting the reputation of the British army from the current contagion of revelations is a priority task. Ironically, Piers Morgan, who has a brother in the army, was always reluctant to publish anything that suggested "our boys" were like their rampaging allies. When the Mirror published its "torture" photographs on 1 May, the paper stressed that the transgressors were "rogue" soldiers. It was wrong. Hoax or otherwise, what the Mirror's photographs revealed was a trail of abuse and worse that runs right through the British army in Iraq. Much of the evidence for this has been collected by a tireless Birmingham solicitor, Phil Shiner, acting for 13 Iraqi families, and by the Independent on Sunday, whose outstanding investigations almost salvage the honour of British journalism. The IoS reveals there are now nearly 40 cases of allegedly unlawful killings of Iraqi civilians and prisoners by British forces since the invasion. When

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compared with the 37 suspicious deaths of prisoners held by the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, the potential scale of the British crime becomes evident, although it is clear these figures represent only the surface. Evidence that soldiers of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment carried out systematic torture under the direction of an officer is to go to the high court. "In some cases officers actually took part," says Amnesty International. Yet on 14 May, a colonel from this regiment had the nerve to suggest that Morgan's "ego" was the price of "the life of the soldier" – a line almost certainly spun for him.

Journalists are well aware of what Amnesty calls systematic abuse. A year ago, the Sun published "artist's impressions" of photographs taken by soldiers of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers showing them stringing up Iraqi prisoners of war from a fork-lift truck and forcing them to simulate sex acts. Several of the soldiers have been prosecuted. A BBC newsreader referred to such photographs as "mere mementoes". Imagine the response, had they been of Iraqis torturing British PoWs. On the day Morgan was sacked, a BBC reporter, Nicholas Witchell, said: "After the appalling reality of what the Americans have been doing, the Mirror's pictures threatened to compromise the work of every British soldier." By contrasting the "reality" of American abuse with the unreality of "the Mirror's pictures", Witchell managed to whitewash the British army while fretting that its good "work" in Iraq might be "compromised". Are BBC trainees taught sophistry like this?

The British army is doing no worse in Iraq than it has done in its long history of colonial occupations. Torture was deployed as a strategy in Palestine (where the British pioneered the terror tactic of home demolitions), in Cyprus, the British Cameroons, Brunei, British Guiana, Aden, Borneo and Northern Ireland. In Malaya, the conversion of entire villages to concentration camps and the use of carcinogenic defoliants were copied by the Americans in Vietnam. In Northern Ireland, British interrogators refined their methods, reported Amnesty, "for the purpose or effect of causing a malfunction or breakdown of a man's mental processes".

Little of this was reported at the time. Today, thanks to a couple of "rogue" newspapers, the digital camera and the internet, the public is getting the truth, day by day, image by image, fact by fact. Michael Berg, whose son Nick was beheaded in Iraq and who blames Bush and Rumsfeld, asks: "How can you take responsibility when there are no consequences?" As they manipulate the United Nations to set up a stooge regime in Baghdad, the Americans and British are

granting their own troops immunity from prosecution. After all, said a BBC commentator, the soldiers' misdeeds "do not compare with Saddam Hussein's systematic tortures and executions". So the tyranny of Saddam Hussein is now the west's moral compass, is it?

Will journalists allow Blair to get away with yet another charade? Or will they ask why Article 7 of the statute of the International Criminal Court, to which Britain is a signatory, is not being invoked? This makes clear that British and American behaviour in Iraq is categorised under "crimes against humanity", for which the ultimate responsibility lies, as ever, at the top. **JP**