

## The U.S. Media and the War on Iraq: War Coverage or War Cheerleading?

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*"The public mind, was now seen as an entity to be manufactured, not reasoned with."*

—Stuart Ewen, World War I-era social historian

On April 21, 2003 MSNBC's Dr. Bob Arnot is reporting from the center of what he termed a "rough" section of Baghdad. He stands in the middle of a group of energetic young Iraqi boys aged 9-14 who, surrounded by depressing scenes of enormous devastation, are only too happy for some diversion—perhaps their only shot at a brief moment of fleeting fame. They wave and make faces for the cameras. Arnot, with a huge US tank as his backdrop, begins by pronouncing in no uncertain terms that the Iraqi people are 'extremely grateful' that the U.S. military is 'now in charge.' Only hours before, the reporter tells us, the American military saved the lives of four Iraqi civilians who had sustained life-threatening burns. Dr. Arnot summons a very young Black soldier guarding the tank and prevails upon him to answer a few questions. Unable to hide his reluctance to speak, the soldier agrees to the reporter's request. "I understand that American soldiers provided the transportation without which the Iraqi women and children would have died?" "Yes sir," the soldier replies impassively. Arnot continues. "I understand they are not only surviving but now doing extremely well." "Yes Sir," the soldier replies again. Arnot tries to elicit more dramatic detail but to no avail. He remains alone in his enthusiasm as the soldier, looking somewhat embarrassed, lowers his head and returns to his lonely post. Arnot assures his viewers, who are no doubt watching from the Homeland with pride, that American soldiers are nothing less than angels on a mission of mercy.

Overcome with alternating waves of sadness and anger I shut off the TV. Several questions left unasked and unanswered by Dr. Arnot came flooding into my mind. How did those civilians get burned? Who will report to us about the thousands of dead and dying civilians victimized by our military's 'shock and awe' campaign, piled up in Iraq's hospitals without basic sanitation, drugs, electricity or water? What is being done about the literally thousands of unexploded cluster bombs now littering the roads and neighborhoods of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities? Who will tell the American people that these bombs, dropped by American military aircraft and paid for with our hard-earned tax dollars, are illegal—banned by the Geneva Convention—and that each and every day civilians are being killed and maimed by these innocent-looking pieces of metal as they explode when a child or other civilian accidentally disturbs it. Sadly it will most likely not be a reporter from the American mainstream media.

Watching MSNBC from the comfort of their homes, American viewers are not presented with images or questions which may prove disturbing or may cause them to question their government's foreign policy. On the contrary they are comforted by Dr. Arnot's distorted picture which leads them to believe that our troops, instead of carrying out an economic and geopolitical agenda to benefit huge oil and defense conglomerates, are busy doing humanitarian work for the good of the average Iraqi. Television news, which is a relatively new medium in the history of humanity, has evolved into a powerful tool for propaganda. Stories like these, packaged in full and living color and beamed into millions of living rooms, have helped to create support for a foreign policy of pre-emptive invasion of sovereign nations. Who will point out to our citizens that during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals in WWII, this policy has been declared illegal under international law? Today, the misuse of our public airwaves for the dissemination of information overwhelmingly one-sided in favor of the current Administration in Washington D.C., threatens the very fabric of our democracy and the future self-determination of peoples around the world.

At a recent seminar entitled *The War and the Media*, held at Rutgers University, Peter Hart from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) stated that the number one quality missing from mainstream media coverage of the war in Iraq is *skepticism*. As an example, when Secretary of State Colin Powell presented his so-called "evidence" to the United Nations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and was linked with the 911 terrorists, his allegations were strongly challenged by the press throughout Europe as well as by members of the British Intelligence Service. In addition, Powell's submission of a plagiarized 12-year-old college thesis (used without the student's permission) as evidence of Iraq's guilt was met with derision from journalists and politicians all over the world. "But if you were watching television in the United States," Hart states, "you would not know that." The media's mandate to inform, scrutinize, challenge, correct and provide a broad perspective has been turned on its head. Shortly before the war 61% of Americans were expressing *opposition* to an American invasion of Iraq without United Nations support. As soon as the war started, however, the percentages reversed to over 70% *in favor* of a unilateral American invasion. How did this happen?

Back in 'The Homeland,' we are inundated with a steady stream of talking heads on round-the-clock 24/7 'news' shows supposedly offering us objective and true information. But, we must ask: Who are the people TV networks are talking to? According to FAIR's research, in the current war crisis, 60-70% were government officials. Even more disturbing, out of 393 sources analyzed, only *three* were openly anti-war. Out of those three only *one* was an American! Clearly this data exposes any claim the media may make for objectivity or fairness as patently false. In a rare interview recently given to Pacifica Radio's daytime news show *Democracy Now!*, reporter Jeremy Skahill questioned CNN news anchorman Aaron Brown about the practice of hiring former generals to 'inform' the public about the war. Brown replied that the generals "are not *advocates* . . . they're

*consultants!*" Regarding the near absence of dissenting voices on network news shows, Skahill then asked, "Why don't the networks, in addition to hiring former generals as on-air 'consultants', hire at least one peace activist as a consultant as well?" In a telling response, Aaron Brown simply replied, "That's ridiculous . . . *we're* at war!"

Brown's attitude exposes the not-so-hidden dirty little secret of mainstream American journalism. In the modern era of corporate dominance, the principle of journalistic independence has been virtually abandoned. We must face the sad fact that our publicly-owned airwaves have been hijacked by a corporate-government nexus virtually impervious to independent, critical voices. Is it just a coincidence that the Federal Communications Commission is headed by Secretary of State Colin Powell's son Michael Powell? Whose interests are served by the current process of deregulation of media ownership being frenetically lobbied for by a handful of huge conglomerates like Viacom, Disney and General Electric? As our country, now being referred to as a "hyperpower," is poised to launch what former CIA Director James Woolsey recently termed "World War IV", government spin doctors work hand-in-hand with the most powerful corporations in the world—The U.S. Media.

Speaking at *The War and the Media* seminar at Rutgers University, independent journalist Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* asked a simple yet provocative question: "If American networks were 'state-run' media enterprises, how would the coverage be different from what we are subjected to now?" Commenting further on Aaron Brown's assertion that civilian casualties are not being shown on CNN's news reports because they are 'tasteless,' she stated: "If the true horrors of war were shown to the American public . . . if we saw innocent Iraqi citizens . . . children, women and men laying without arms, covered with blood and missing portions of their heads . . . if we saw *those* images . . . **war would end!**" Amy then wondered out loud about the unending commentary delivered by former generals, almost delirious in their descriptions of the awesome capabilities of our satellite-guided missiles and bunker-busting bombs. "What if the networks hired doctors as consultants to provide analysis of what our bombs and missiles do to flesh and blood bodies on the ground? What if Dr. Bob Arnot heeded the ancient pledge taken by doctors for centuries, the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm." What if Dr. Arnot reported the truth about the real costs of war . . . the awful and painful truth about the scarred, maimed bodies and psyches of ordinary, defenseless people . . . homes, businesses and the cultural heritage of an ancient civilization devastated by our addiction to unbridled power and greed. What if the good doctor exposed the leukemia and birth defects which will result from the use of depleted uranium shells fired from the gun sticking out of that multi-million-dollar tank he so proudly poses beside. What if?