BaJ2 Contextual studies
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'A great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part in of doubtful character' (Clausewitz). Is this a true assertion about modern war reporting?

It is an acknowledged fact that the case for the Iraq war was built on two main 'misperceptions'. Firstly, that Saddam Hussein was in liaison with Al-Quaeda and therefore the executioner of the attack on the World Trade Centre, and secondly that Iraq possessed biological and chemical weapons - which were ready to be launched within 45 minutes of the order given. In fact, they were both fabrications. Thus, establishing how public opinion was largely bypassed, the laws of the United Nations overridden and the rest of the world ignored seems an apt task as the war, after six years, has officially been declared over. Hence, it could with ease be appreciated that military theorist Clausewitz, albeit some 170 years prior to its outbreak, was in fact referring to the Iraq war when compiling his world renown military strategy *On War*. Intricately, he presented the concept "fog of war", which suggests that when in the very midst of warfare judgments can be clouded and it can be hard to perceive things clearly – a description characteristic for the Iraq war, as I aim to showcase.

After all, the mere prevalence of a whole array of names, as it is known as the War in Iraq for some, the invasion of Iraq for others, for the Operation Iraqi Freedom by the coalition forces at the time, for Gulf War II–strictly speaking–for historians, but also comes under the bigger umbrella term 'the war on terrorism, is – if nothing else –a manifestation of its surrounding ambiguity.

By many scholars compared to a second Vietnam and denounced as the most covered up war in history, it could suggestively also be called the most covered war in history. Thus, my field of study has been narrowed down to focus on the media's treatment of information in the aftermath of 9/11, which indisputably proved to be crucial in the build-up of a war, as it failed to detect the falsehoods and erroneous material. I also address the differences between embedded reportage and behind the lines reportage as well as actions by individual journalists, in contributing to muddying the understanding of the war by saturating the information space with far too much information of questionable content. For this purpose I have focused mainly on the internationally acclaimed US newspaper, New York Times. The concentration of my study stretches to the outbreak of the war, 19 march 2003, and the months following where the failure to present WMD in the end became the turning point for the mainstream press, as the fight for the minds and hearts of the world audience was lost. My method is two divide the essay into three chapters, where I provide a set of quotes indicative of the area of discussion. My aim is to highlight the complex relationships between the US government – in effect the Bush administration – the military, the intelligence community and the media which, as we will see, fervently blames the responsibility of this arguably embarrassing chapter in modern history on each other. Thus, I argue, it is only then we can begin to grasp the mere cacophony of assumptions, misinterpretations, guesstimates, dubious material, forged documents and downright lies, which were the cause of this war of retribution.

'One of the most entrenched and disturbing features of American journalism [is] its pack mentality.
Editors and journalists don't like to diverge too sharply from what everyone else is writing'
(Michael Massing, The New York Review of Books,
February 26, 2004).

1. The case for war: Framing terrorism

As America and the Western world was still traumatised by the events on 9/11, the alleged terrorist link between Iraq and Al-Qaeda and the supposed possession of WMD served the purpose of directing vengeance towards a country that did not attack them, and simultaneously justifying the morale for the war, convincing the citizens that a direct confrontation with Iraq, as one step in the war on terrorism, was necessary. Subsequently, the bulk of Americans who tallied in the polls for President George W Bush's war declaration were unaware of the nature of this gross accusation, and additionally believed that world opinion supported an invasion. The founder of *Free Press* Bob McChesney holds especially commercial television–most notably the questionable methods employed by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News–accountable for failing to get the truth out (Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism, 2004), but the main focus of this study will address the flaws of the printed media, as suggested by Massing's quote above.

Some point to the inherent notion of American exceptionalism, much favoured by US foreign policymakers and which was summarised by neocon and Bush supporter Charles Krauthammer three months prior to 9/11 as, "We run a uniquely benign emporium," (Solomon 2005) a claim which has caused outrage around the world, but has –according to Robert Jensen[1] - proven to be 'shamefully easy to peddle to the US public'. That is, that the United States of America fulfils something reminiscent of a community service in the world, in exerting their power over other nations. (www.nthposition.com/warmadeeasy.php) Solomon continues to explain the prevailing conception among the US public that, "If This War Is Wrong, the Media Will Tell US"(Solomon 2005). Hence, a conception which could explain the course of events that followed.

A major operation was initiated, by way of execution not very unlike other in 20th century history, where convincing the populace was the aim and which came to infuse every part of life of American citizens. Kellner stresses the importance of framing the 9/11 incident and terrorism to generate something best described as 'war hysteria', where the scenes of the planes crashing through the WTC buildings were fervently repeated, and resulted in promoting fear – but without wider context - a devise to swing public opinion. He continues by explaining that newspaper readers are in the position of selecting from a wide array of newspapers to get reinforcement of their perception of the world, and in times of national crises there is an underlying tendency of readers to choose news messages in sync with those very perceptions to expose themselves to. Thus, if preconceived perceptions are based on

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already slanted news coverage of reality, the risk is that that image is allowed to take precedence. He calls this notion *selective exposure* (Berenger 2004).

Norris poses a prescient analogy when he states that as the Cold war frame had lost its coherence, it opened up for a new framework with the variables 'friends' and 'enemies' –enter the war on terrorism. Along these lines, one method employed in lobbying the American public, and the world, was the usage of good and evil rhetoric and the projection of the evil onto the 'other – as in the 'Axis of Evil' concept - which was systematically repeated (Silverstone 2006): "The danger to our country is grave"(President GW Bush 28 September, 2002 in a radio address to the nation), and "[…]before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed. The United States of America has the sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security. […] The terrorist threat to America and the world will be diminished the moment that Saddam Hussein is disarmed" (GW Bush address to the nation, 18 March 2003). The President also made clear that, "Either you are with us, or you are with he terrorists"(Address to Congress 20 September, 2001), which was foremost directed at journalists when posing questions such as 'why' and 'how' were, at best, deemed as unpatriotic, at worst, as treason (Miller et.al 2003).

A news framework, explains Kellner, is a certain set of frames to which journalists are bound to and indirectly pose the social construction of reality. Hence, as framing of terrorism has a one-sided leaning this results in journalists automatically promoting a certain view in adhering to the broader frames of society, which indirectly influences their narratives but can mount to self-censorship (Norris 2003). Knightley, along with many others, states the dangers of covert managing of news – that conducted by constitutionally free and democratic countries – in the form of the above mentioned self-censorship, omission and the balancing of bad news with good news, as far worse than the overt method of state censorship. This is because people fail to realise when they are being propagandised as it is not in their immediate view, but perhaps more crucially, journalists waving their banner of press freedom are unconsciously being misled and thus project the sentiments of their government. He concludes that war's first casualty is the truth (Knightley 2004). Another important observation, made by Kuypers, notes the relation between an issues amount of news coverage, and the resulting level of importance to the audience (Berenger 2004).

In a heightened partisan environment, as the one that followed in the 9/11 aftermath, Miller notes that the government attempted to withhold information on the claims of secrecy and national security interest, posing a very serious problem in journalistic terms. Norris adds that in the case of press freedom versus national security in wartime, the latter overrides the former, whether actual or fictional. Thus, the censorship that followed 9/11 has been explained, based on the First Amendment, as protecting democratic rights and preserving American values (Norris 2003). More controversially, Finnegan claims that the press was in effect bullied into compliance by the Bush administration and major media networks to withhold information and to promote a pro-war consensus (Finnegan 2006). Accordingly, despite the fact that millions demonstrated against the war there was a conspicuous

failure to publish and report dissident and grassroots sentiments on the invasion. One example is former top weapons inspector and key whistleblower Scott Ritter, who rejected the claims of WMD at an early stage, but was denied writing space in the NY Times, let alone air time by broadcasters, in the months leading up to the war (Greenwald 2004).

The tools for justifying the war was a selection of iconic images and voices for 'expert' commentary, notably NY Times' Pulitzer winning journalist Judith Miller, who was a prominent voice in favour of the invasion and sympathiser of the Bush administration. But, whose stories would prove to a great extent contain erroneous or exaggerated material (Finnegan 2006).

For example, her headlines such as "An Iraqi Defector Tells of Work on at Least 20 Hidden Weapons Sites" (NY Times 20 December, 2001) and "U.S Said Hussein Intensified Quest for A-Bomb Parts." (NY Times 8 September 2002) were commonplace in the build of the invasion in 2003 and functioned to 'massage' the public's opinion to believe that it was under an imminent threat by Iraq (Miller 2003 p.78).

An opinion piece published in the NY Times two days prior to the invasion reflects the sentiments that Bush's retaliation, and overriding the UN, was 'illegal but legitimate', saying that 'UN constraints[…] cannot be a straitjacket, preventing nations from defending themselves of pursuing what they perceive to be their nation's vital national security interests' (NY Times 18 March, 2003). This approach, effectively, undermined the mere existence of the UN and advocated the US as exempt of international laws. Keeping this morale for the war afloat, President Bush somewhat persistently would continue to reassure the world several months into the invasion, "The larger point is and the fundamental question is, did Saddam Hussein have a weapons program? The answer is absolutely"(GW Bush news conference, 14 July, 2003). It is here worth noticing the intentionally subtler use of 'weapons program', instead of weapons of mass destruction.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

<p style="text-align:center">'[…] in the case of war, ignorance is bliss!</p>
<p style="text-align:right">(Mark Laity, cited in Connelly 2005, p.281).</p>

2. Information overflow, half-facts and a clean image

One of the key issues with war reporting – as was also the case with Vietnam- is the notion presented by Laity that 'once the tone of the coverage has been set it is hard to shift regardless of events', and- added to that equation- acknowledges the fact that first impressions are often based on sketchy, initial reports, which are allowed to set the framework for he whole coverage (Connelly 2005). And so, the image of a 'clean' war, liberating the Iraqis with minor casualties was carefully maintained through the usage of sanitised military terminology such as 'collateral damage'- which skilfully removed the human element from the conflict – and the exclusion of images of the real carnage in Iraq, which was accepted by the majority of Western mainstream media (Berenger 2004).

The embed system, which was fully executed during the Iraq war, has caused much debate among scholars and journalists a like. Miller, Knightley and Franks all resoundingly agree that the embed system was the biggest PR stunt of the whole war, when upon arrival the journalists had to sign a contract with the military to adjust themselves after a 50-point plan, issued by the Pentagon, in order to be granted access to the grounds. Supposedly, this were only guidelines but in reality laid down in detail what could be reported and not, and so material had to pass through an approval process before reaching the information space. It did undisputedly render the reporters unprecedented access to fighting, albeit the fighting the military wanted to showcase. Most journalists argued that they experienced 'total freedom' in coverage, but according to Miller, they were blinded by the suggested transparency of the system such as on a daily basis receiving information at press briefings at the information centres in Qatar and Kuwait - which were subordinate to Washington and London policy (Miller 2003).

Moorcraft and Taylor points out the frequent striking of deals in order to remain on site, and they note that sharing a few days under fire can turn any individuals into friends. This can be exemplified by Chris Ayres vivid account of embedding where he confessed that the ideals of objective reporting surrendered to mere perseverance instincts: 'It was then I realised the true genius of the embedding scheme. *It had turned me into a Marine*. I was thinking like a fighter, not a reporter. And yet I wasn't a fighter. I was an idiot in a blue flak jacket'(Ayres 2005, p.153).

This identification of journalists with their troops and 'all for one, one for all' mentality - eating, drinking, sleeping together - often resulted in generating the same values, and portraying the war through the soilders' eyes. Moorcraft and Taylor even suggest that the paradigm 'seeing is believing' turned into 'believing is seeing', with the propensity to side with the side that provided personal safety (Moorcraft and Taylor 2008).

Similarly, embedded war reporter Tim Franks reminisce his time in the Iraqi desert in the words of a senior officer who explained to him "We are in the business of news management. We are not interested in the anti-war view." The result of this was that reporters had to put together what they witnessed and 'write engagingly about it,' even if it meant generalising the situation (Franks, BJR, vol. 14, no2, 2003).

However, not all reporters stayed in their designated pool but ventured outside the Green Zone - resulting in often encountering 'friendly fire' and other mishaps. Many journalists today believe that most incidents involving journalists were deliberate, as the Palestine Hotel, the Al-Jazeera studio in Baghdad and Abu Dhabi TV were all attacked on the same day, despite being established centres of communication. Knightley, discarding the conception that the war was a media triumph as an illusion, is of the same view when he compares the situation to a state of 'You can write what you like, but if we don't like it we'll shoot you,' in what he declares is a dangerous development of the craft of war reporting in the 21st century. He pinpoints the very essence of the confusion surrounding the war, fuelled by the abundance of information, that when watching Al-Jazeera and other Arab broadcasters

it was like looking at two different wars (Knightley, BJR, vol.14, no2, 2003). Alternatively, the situation could be described as "the Americans are on another planet", expressed by a senior Whitehall official in relation to the war on terror, as cited by Pilger (Pilger 2005 p.555).

A contrasting view is that of Lt col Angus Taverner, who is highly optimistic to the embed program and the relationship between the military and the media, and claims that the military in fact exert no power over the media, but the only control comes from within news rooms' culture (Connelly 2005). In the light of this, when comparing news coverage by embedded and behind the lines reporters a certain pattern of elements differentiating the different types of reportage can be discerned, but also the sometimes simultaneously ambiguous messages projected by a newspaper. For instance, one story in the NY Times, filed by an embedded reporter, read: "G.I's and Marines see little Iraqi resistance," but another story, on the same day, read "16 die on copter; US and British forces suffer first losses in crash in Kuwait"- a story which was filed from Kuwait by an independent journalist (NY Times 21 March, 2003). Another example came two days later when it on one hand - by the embed - was established that Iraqi soldiers were surrendering and retreating, and on the other hand -by the independent journalist- was noted that there was 'no outward sign Saturday that either the government or military command or Mr. Hussein was wavering" (NY Times 23 March, 2003).

Characteristically, embedded stories had a less critical stance to the Allied troops and covered the superiority of their weaponry and its 'precise' targeting, described Iraqi soldiers surrendering, and the civilians greeting the soldiers in celebrating the collapse of the regime. This, whereas behind the lines journalists focused on other aspects of the war: Allied and civilian casualties, the people's anger and mistrust, and the ferocity of the Iraqi troops (Berenger 2004). The NY Times also favoured verbatim excerpts quoting administration officials, "Our goal is to defend the American people and to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and to liberate the Iraqi people"(NY Times 22 March, 2003, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld), and this was accompanied by pictures of US soldiers kneeling down, caring for the 'liberated' victims (Berenger 2004).

Returning to the NY Times' star reporter and professed expert on WMD Judith Miller, she maintained her firm pro-war stance as the war was underway, which suggestively can be explained by the fact that she was embedded, but also – as it later appeared – that her main source for head-line material was the key defector Achmed Chalabi. He was by the government deemed as a reliable, official source - or 'coached' and paid by the government, as suggested by others. In any case Chalabi and other defectors' statements were accepted as official facts without scrutiny, (Greenwald 2004) and this, according to Finnegan, in fact did more than any actions by Congress members to sway the people's opinion to go to war (Finnegan 2006). Miller states that the relationship of 'confidence' between governments and journalists was fully exploited during the Iraq war, which saw the 'leaking' of stories, confidential sources and the accounts of the dubious defectors perceived of as truths (Miller et. al 2003).

Judith Miller concluded that, 'A scientist who claims to have worked in Iraq's chemical weapons program for more than a decade…led Americans to a supply of material that proved to be the building blocks of illegal weapons…Finding and destroying illegal weapons was a major justification for the war. The [U.S. military] officials' account of the scientist's assertions and the discovery of the buried material, which they described as the most important discovery to date in the hunt for illegal weapons, supports the Bush administration's charges that Iraq continued to develop those weapons and lied to the United Nations about it"(The Age April 22, 2003).

In fact, the army had prevented Miller from interviewing the scientist, but she assured her readers that she had, 'from a distance' observed how a man 'clad in nondescript clothes and a baseball cap pointed to several spots in the sand where he said chemical precursors and other weapons material were buried'(NY Times 21 April, 2003).

And so the ideas of WMD were given currency by one of the world's most accredited newspapers, and the immediate repercussion was that it echoed around the world for other news organisations and corporate media giants to pick up on and recycle. In retrospect, Miller's reporting can be deemed as having major impact on the national debate on the issue, and the understanding of the invasion. Her work created outrage in March 2004 when her Chalabi affiliation surfaced, but it was too late. She had managed to put her mark on the war, and Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld had even referred to one of her stories in TV interviews, as partial evidence for going ahead with the invasion (The Sydney Morning Herald 23 March, 2004).

Other information contributing to spinning the situation was dubious intelligence 'evidence'- which itself was 'spun'. One out of many was the claim by Colin Powell, based on an official document, that Iraq had pursued uranium from Niger in order to construct weapons of mass destruction. The staggering revelation only came later, as it was established that the actual document was forged. Another instance was the reporting of the fall of Umm Qasr - on nine different occasions.

Laity cites a 'senior BBC news source' who declared at one point that 'we're getting more truth out of Baghdad than the Pentagon at the moment' (Connelly 2005, p.293).

A third stunt was the toppling of the Saddam statue in Firdos square, which was staged with the assistance of US troops and US equipment, displaying jubilant civilians in the forefront - only they were a modest number (Pilger 2005).

Although Pentagon critics and White House hawks were discontent with the CIA's failure to produce intelligence justifying the war, the intelligence services fervently replied that government officials had in fact spun their information. Then there were those who blamed the journalists for the misuse of intelligence and making up 'secret sources'. Connelly's conclusion is that everybody spins, which has the effect of whipping up tension between the key players (Connelly 2005), and Miller continues by explaining that the inability of the political elite to see through the falsehoods, inextricably entwined with the media apparatus, in the end made them prisoners of their own lies – in the literal meaning of the word - where they came to believe or at least accept them (Miller et.al 2003).

According to Moorcraft and Taylor, the axiom 'fog of war' is not sufficient in describing Iraq and what was more akin to a snowstorm of information, which often was contradictory and unverified (Moorcraft and Taylor 2008). Or as noted by Brian Appleyard: 'The embeds are certainly tightly controlled, but the effect of their reports bas been a massive loss of control or the military. The sheer volume of their reportage has swamped the media and wrong-footed the generals" (Sunday Times 30 March, 2003).

I have constructed a graph below, in an attempt to summarise the four main actors' - the government, the military, the intelligence services and the media – openly critical sentiments for each other and, as I argue, the reason for which the invasion could commence, but also crucially, proceed.
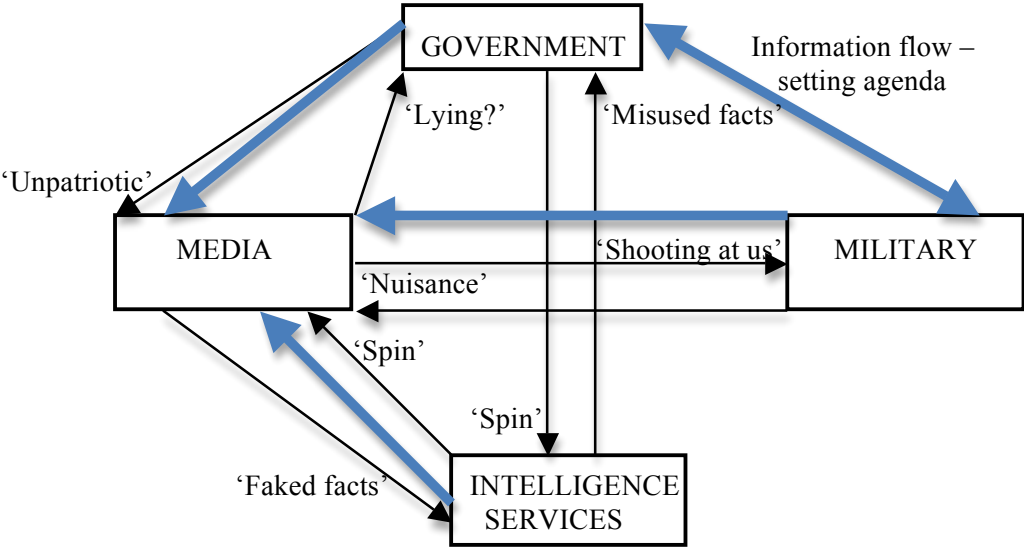
I. The animosity among the main actors is indicated by black arrows - the blue arrow highlights the flow of information

* * *
'Omission is the most powerful source of distortion'

(Davies 2008, p.37)

3. Reflections: Washington Post's obituary and churnalism

With the above assertion, Davies' concept of 'churnalism', suggestively, comes one step closer to explaining the systematic failure of the media to detect and expose the falsehoods disseminated by the governments, military information centres and defence agencies, which they blatantly reproduced. It is one of the most fundamental errors even the most respected newspapers make – that is to recycle material and submit stories without checking them thoroughly, often due to lack of time. And time and the imminent pressure of constant news updates, as it has been established, became one of the enemies of truth in the Iraq war (Davies 2008, p.37).

Howard Kurtz, media editor of the Washington Post, admitted in 2004 that between August 2002 and

March 19, 2003, the paper had ran in excess of 140 front-page stories based on the administration's rhetoric, in favour of the war (Finnegan 2006).

Karen DeYoung of Washington Post wrote in the Post on the 12 August that: 'We are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power. If the President stands up and says something, we report what the President said." Black on white was now an acknowledgment by an acclaimed journalist of an establish paper admitting how the trade was used for punditry. She explained the essence of the problem, as stories with opposing opinions often gets placed in an inverted news pyramid close to the end, and subsequently not on the front-page. Thus, explains DeYoung, they are easily overlooked when 'a lot of people don't read that far' (Washington Post 12 August, 2004). Solomon also comes to this conclusion, that although critical stories get published, they get 'buried inside the paper', notably in the Opinion columns (Solomon 2005).

In the same edition of the previous newspaper, which has been dubbed as the Post's post-mortem on its Iraq coverage, the paper's Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks confesses that, 'There was an attitude among editors: Look, we're going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff' (Washington Post 12 August, 2004).

Conclusion

In hindsight it appears that Clausewitz possessed an innate foresight into the future development of warfare, as indeed it would seem, in consonance with his anticipation, that truth really is the first casualty of war at the mercy of an unscrupulous enemy - *time.*

By using the NY Times as one example how even the most respected, opinion-leading publications became complicit and unquestioning of the morale for the war, and allowed false intelligence material to be amplified, it indicates how bad the situation actually was in the name of fair and balanced reporting.

The worn out paradigm that the media and the military have conflicting interests in the representation of war, is with this war not the case. Patriotism blurred the medias conception and ability to scrutinise the actual institution of war, as media did not want to undermine the national interest. Troubling is perhaps that many were readily willing to embed themselves, which resulted in an intentional – or unintentional - homeland stance, and thereby a projection of the agenda of generals and politicians onto the public. And so, the media became protagonists.

The furore over media representation of the Iraq war, and its build-up, is multi-tiered. In times of national crises, as history has taught us, the establishment will undoubtedly – if covertly- manage the media in generating a public consensus in sync with the administration's policies.

A great deal of dubious and erroneous material was allowed to enter the communication space, unquestioned on the basis of its official nature, and the question still remains: Who was responsible for

putting this and other unauthentic intelligence out there? And a more pressing question: Why did not journalists treat the intelligence agencies with the same reservation they normally hold for politicians? The justifications for waging a war against Iraq were categorically false, but served the purpose to encourage the media to come to conclusions about Iraq, where the prevalence of spin turned something hypothetical into something factual. Naturally, the media, as confessed by DeYoung, had to relay what the most powerful man on earth was saying – but they did so without scrutiny and analysis, failing to provide a context for the general populace. Conversely it could be argued that that is exactly what journalists are meant to do. They focused on what the government did, not what it arguably ought to have been doing, thus the media, suggestively, ought to have focused on the fact that an invasion could have been postponed until real evidence of a terrorist connection and possession of WMD was proven. And so a passive consent and the silencing of dissident voices paved the way for the war as the media managed to create the public demand for intervention, as expressed by the Bush administration.

As the war was underway, it stayed underway because of the successful imaging of a humanitarian, 'clean' war and the fact that there was so much coverage coming out of Iraq. This was, mostly due to its embedded nature, skewed and based on military information centre reports. Thus, the managing of the war image almost became more important than the actual waging of war. There was in fact a media frenzy or information, to the detriment of public understanding when in trading personal safety for press freedom the embedded reporters of the Iraq war has led war reporting on an undoubtedly dangerous route. In this day and age of sound byte culture and the nature of the 24-hour news cycle's demand of constant updates, fierce competition can render even the most accredited journalist as opportunist in the pursuit of 'scoops' and sensationalist headlines. Additionally, a fair estimate would be that in the first calamitous stages of the invasion, the media were a victim of pure churnalism. This is exemplified by the resonance Judith Miller's reportage had over the world, and she was even sourced by the Bush administration in legitimizing the invasion.

Another pressing fact is the notion people tend to hold, rightly perhaps, that as we put our trust in intermediaries to explain the world to us, if this war was wrong surely the media would tell us? They notably failed.

Press freedom is an indispensable asset to a democracy, perhaps even more crucially so in times of crises, as the choices made can have profound affect on the nation and its posterity.

Whichever is to blame, be it the forged intelligence, the government's spin or the media's exaggeration, it will most certainly prove a challenge for coming generations of journalists, historians and political theorists to fully comprehend what actually happened in those years.

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