

# Seeing is Believing

How the U.S. government and American news networks spun the Iraq War

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# ABSTRACT

The American public was doubly deceived into compliance with the Iraq War – first by the government, then by the news media, which disseminated and amplified the Bush administration’s misleading rhetoric and accepted as fact the “evidence” of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq that was used as the main justification for going to war.

This paper first provides a background history of the role of American news media in armed conflict up until the Iraq War, starting with the Revolutionary War. The media was a powerful political actor ever since the beginning of United States history. With the evolution of technology, the news media has blossomed, and has subsequently become more difficult for the government to monitor. The relationship between journalists and the military has become increasingly strained, as Pentagon officials feared that the media would leak secrets to the enemy, or that it would undermine the war effort by portraying U.S. military actions in a negative light.

The freedom of the press is a fundamental element to a democracy. This right ensures that the press is free to criticize the government, allowing the people to more easily hold their government accountable for its actions. However, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, American news media failed to fulfill its duty. The skewed portrayal of the war that was presented by American news networks was the result of a culmination of factors, the most important of which being: the government’s policy of “information dominance”; the use of embedded reporters in Iraq; the Bush administration’s misleading rhetoric (especially regarding the presence of WMDs in Iraq), which was parroted by the media; the media’s obsession with and distortion of certain events and images that portrayed the war unrealistically; and the media’s omissions, both of dissenting voices that would have challenged the Bush administration’s case for war, and of events that occurred during the war that, if aired, would have given the viewer a more accurate picture of the war.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout American history, the press has played an important role in armed conflict. From the Revolutionary War to the Iraq War, journalists have been the eyes and ears of the public. Their methods of war coverage have evolved according to the ever-changing nature of war and the introduction of new technology. In modern times, the rapid advancement of technology has presented a new challenge to the Department of Defense. Information can be sent from the battlefield anywhere in the world, instantly. Thus, in order to ensure that no secret information (such as troop movements) falls into the hands of the enemy, it is necessary for there to be a certain level of censorship applied to the media coming out of war zones. This is the justification for censorship used by the United States government, and it is widely accepted by the American public; although Americans value free speech, they recognize that it has limits.

However, it appears that there are other, less widely-accepted motives to censor as well. The term “information dominance” has been used to refer to the military’s need to achieve “full-spectrum dominance,” which includes information. The military acknowledges that information, including news media, is an integral part of the war effort, and it must therefore be included in their strategy. Therefore, the Department of Defense has a degree of control over the information that comes out of war zones, and it has incentive not only to prevent certain information from leaving, but also to create propaganda to sway enemies, allies, and the American public alike. This explains the Department of Defense’s decision to embed journalists in Iraq. Since the journalists are embedded, the military has a degree of control over the flow of information.

Government meddling certainly affects the way the American public views the war. Unfortunately, the spinning does not end there. Once news networks receive the stories, which have already passed through the hands of officials, the American news networks do not generally report the stories in a neutral manner. By omitting negative war reports and emphasizing victories, American news networks control how their viewers perceive the war. Their general tone, as well as their focus on meaningful symbols gives their viewers false impressions of the actual atmosphere of the war.

What has happened in the Iraq War is a reality that can not be changed. But when that reality is doubly distorted – first by the government, and again by the news networks – Americans must come to realize that what they see on television is not an unbiased presentation of fact, but downright propaganda.

## **BACKGROUND**

In order to better understand the state of media coverage of the Iraq war today, it helps to look back on how we got here. American media has been influencing public opinion of wars since the very birth of the nation: “[d]uring the Revolutionary War, anti-British papers took an active role in supporting combat. They relayed crucial information of battles to an eager public, stirred up political passions, and helped unite the thirteen colonies into one nation.”<sup>1</sup> It was as clear to the emerging government then as it is to our government today that the press plays an important role in American politics. Francis Hopkins, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, “considered a supportive press crucial to military victory because ‘by influencing the minds of the multitude, [it] can perhaps do more towards gaining a point than the best rifle gun or sharpest

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<sup>1</sup> Sweeney, p.8

bayonet.”<sup>2</sup> It is partly because of this great amount of influence enjoyed by the press that the freedom of the press was established as such a fundamental right in the United States. “The press, exulting in its freedom to criticize the British government, helped win American freedom” by winning public support for the American nationalist cause, which is why, to reward this positive influence, “[t]he constitution of nearly every new state forbade limits on press freedom [...] Anti-Federalists insisted on insertion of a Bill of Rights, including a press guarantee, into the Constitution as the price of their support.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, freedom of the press has always been a fundamental principle to Americans.

Although the freedom of the press is, and always has been, a fundamental right in the United States, it has also always been much disputed, and it has not always been respected. In fact, it is perhaps because of the magnitude of the power of the press that the government often wants to repress it. In the American Revolution, for example, the power of the press worked to the advantage of the new government. But, since the press is an “independent” entity, it was all too easy for the government to imagine instances in which the press might use its power against the American government rather than for it. It was this fear that drove the government to issue the first order of censorship in the United States in Massachusetts in 1725, during one of many conflicts with the Native Americans. This Order-In-Council for May 13 read: “The printers of the newspapers of Boston be ordered upon their peril not to insert in their prints anything of the public affairs of this province relative to the war without the order of the government.”<sup>4</sup> From that point onward, until the Vietnam War, “freedom of the press” as we know it today did not exist. The climate of government control intensified during the 1797-1798 conflict

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<sup>2</sup> Sweeney, p.9

<sup>3</sup> Sweeney, p.10

<sup>4</sup> Sweeney, p.8

with France, with President John Adams' passing of the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts, a set of laws which "shut down proper debate during a time of national crisis by prosecuting dissidents for seditious libel."<sup>5</sup> In the Civil War, with the dramatic advancements made in telegraph communications which compounded the power of the press, "[i]t came as no surprise that military censorship expanded during the Civil War."<sup>6</sup> During World War I, "A combination of military censorship at the front and 'voluntary' censorship at home kept the news in line. Those who tested America's tolerance for free expression found themselves arrested and charged with crimes under sweeping federal laws."<sup>7</sup> In World War II, "[p]opular magazines, motion pictures, radio, and even the nascent television industry that reached a few thousand TV sets expanded the impact of news coverage of World War II far beyond the staged images and sanitized prose of World War I."<sup>8</sup> This provided countless opportunities for the press to undermine the government. However, even more so than during other periods of conflict, journalists employed self-censorship to feed the patriotic mindset of the public.

Ever since the press established its right to be free in America, it has manipulated its audiences. This is not to say that there have not been fair, accurate journalists. However, one of the drawbacks of a free press is that it is difficult to hold journalists accountable for what they write. For instance, in the Spanish American War, "[f]aking the news became a common way to attract readers. Before America entered the war against Spain, one of Hearst's reporters, Frederick W. Lawrence, invented news about a nonexistent army of 25,000 Cuban insurgents and some 'Amazon' warriors. In

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<sup>5</sup> Sweeney, p.13

<sup>6</sup> Sweeney, p.18

<sup>7</sup> Sweeney, p.36

<sup>8</sup> Sweeney, p.93

Lawrence's imaginative stories, the rebel army marched on two cities and burned both in a single night."<sup>9</sup> During the Civil War, "500 military war correspondents became unabashed propagandists for either the North or the South, sending reports by telegraph and turning the nation into obsessive newspaper readers. Instant war reporting had arrived."<sup>10</sup> In addition, "Civil War photographers manipulated and sometimes faked compositions for greater impact."<sup>11</sup> As we can see from examining war coverage of the past, the power of the free press has always worried the government during times of conflict.

The technology of news reporting has certainly evolved since the Civil War. "Colonial printers had no reporters. They gathered news through letters, official proclamations, and clippings from other papers – including those published in enemy-held territory."<sup>12</sup> The evolution of technology has given the press more resources with which to disseminate information, making the press more of a potential threat to government agendas. General Dwight Eisenhower recognized this potential for disruption in World War II, and he thus opted to keep news correspondents close, stating that "public opinion wins wars, and I have always considered as quasi-staff officers [the] correspondents accredited to my headquarters."<sup>13</sup> This attitude was certainly influenced by the fact that "In the 1940s, for the first time, Americans on the home front received information of a distant war in real time and experienced the emotional power of real combat photography."<sup>14</sup> This gave journalists the potential to drastically play upon the

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<sup>9</sup> Sweeney, p.26

<sup>10</sup> Carlson, p.xv

<sup>11</sup> Sweeney, p.22

<sup>12</sup> Sweeney, p.9

<sup>13</sup> Carlson, p.xi

<sup>14</sup> Carlson, p.xi

emotions of their audience in order to affect public opinion about the war. However, although state censorship was commonplace at this time, more often than not the journalists exercised self-censorship. “By the late 1990s, the explosive growth of the Internet, as well as cable and satellite television, influenced how information was disseminated. It had become technologically feasible to present battlefield news in real time. With satellite video phones, digital feed hardware, night vision goggles, and laptops, the media had a dazzling arsenal of audio-visual aids to describe events.”<sup>15</sup> With the advancement of technology, media has been able to play an increasingly active role in war commentary.

### *Vietnam*

The Vietnam War is often compared to the current Iraq War because it has been similarly disastrous. In both cases, the United States went into the war expecting it to result in a quick victory, when in reality the conflicts evolved into drawn-out, seemingly-un-winnable messes. It is thus interesting to compare media coverage of these two conflicts. At the beginning of the Vietnam War, journalists had almost unlimited access to the fighting, and “war correspondents provided in-depth accounts, a blend of the good, bad and the ugly.” However, this unlimited freedom to report from Vietnam ended as soon as correspondents began to report negatively on the war. “[A]fter the 1968 Tet Offensive, when CBS’s Walter Cronkite told the nation that the war was unwinnable, the Pentagon started blaming the press for standing in the way of victory, while the press accused the Pentagon of lying about the war.”<sup>16</sup> This shift in the correspondents’ tone after the Tet Offensive is notable because it would seem that reporters portrayed the war

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<sup>15</sup> Carlson, p.xii

<sup>16</sup> Carlson, p.xii

as it was, giving viewers at home a fairly accurate portrayal of the conflict. As far as the American government was concerned, this was acceptable, and even preferable to limited, more censored coverage. However, when events transpired that clearly indicated that the United States military was losing, the Pentagon no longer wanted the public to see.

### *Gulf War*

After American public opinion turned against the Vietnam War in full force in the form of mass protests, the Pentagon was more cautious about allowing journalists unlimited access to conflict zones. During the first Gulf War, journalists were allowed only very limited access to areas in which fighting occurred. They were confined to “journalists pools,” government-monitored areas that were usually far from the fighting. The government’s attitude towards the press can be summed up by a statement made by former-Secretary of State Dick Cheney, who said, “I do not look on the press as an asset. Frankly, I looked on it as problem to be managed.”<sup>17</sup> This attitude influenced the content of news coverage of the war. “[T]he Pentagon was determined to call the shots, maintaining tight control over the flow of information through censorship, pool reporting, and press conferences bleached of meaningful content. This arrangement led to the reporting of false or misleading information such as the highly exaggerated success rate of Patriot missiles shooting down Scuds.”<sup>18</sup> The government was vigilant in its monitoring of journalists during the Gulf War.

Looking back on American news coverage throughout history, a few key points are illuminated. First, news coverage in times of war has been a powerful ally to the

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<sup>17</sup> Carlson, p.xii

<sup>18</sup> Carlson, p.xii

government, as was exemplified by the press's dissemination of anti-British propaganda during the Revolutionary War. However, the press has also hindered the government's ability to effectively wage war, as it did during the Vietnam War. Thus, news coverage has the ability to influence the government's execution of wars. The important point to note is that the press is a powerful force in politics, and the government has learned through trial and error the importance of having the press on its side.

### **NEWS COVERAGE IN IRAQ**

Concerning the Iraq War, “[n]ever before in the annals of contemporary American foreign policy was so much evidence accumulated so quickly that the assumptions leading to a war were so questionable.”<sup>19</sup> Yet somehow, the news media failed to debunk the myths that the Bush administration concocted. This failure is both surprising and unfortunate, considering that

the press is the only institution that can reasonably be expected to make possible a robust debate over foreign policy, in general, and the war option, in particular, in a timely enough way to make a difference in the choices made by policy elites. At least in theory, news-gathering organizations have the resources, both human and material, and the philosophic mission to investigate claims to truth by the state about the need for war, and are unfettered by either external government controls or (again, in theory) the concerns of partisan politics that limit other institutions, particularly Congress.<sup>20</sup>

According to American Supreme Court Justice Lewis Black in the Pentagon Papers case, “[p]aramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps this is too idealistic of a view of the role of the news media in America. However, there has always existed in America a

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<sup>19</sup> Hokanen (William A. Dorman), p.12

<sup>20</sup> Hokanen (William A. Dorman), p.12

<sup>21</sup> Hebert, p.3

sentiment that the press keeps the government in check. Sometimes, the press has fulfilled this unspoken duty. Certainly, in Vietnam the press showed the American people things that the government did not want them to see, and thus counterbalanced the government's "official" version of how the war was being executed. However, in the Iraq War, or "Operation Iraqi Freedom" as the Bush administration so winningly coined it, news networks seemed to parrot the government's version of the conflict. The result has been a skewed portrayal of the war, to the point that Americans no longer know what to believe. "In the early autumn of 2002, shortly before Congress voted to authorize a U.S. war against Iraq, a CBS News poll found that 51 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Soon afterwards, the Pew Research Center reported that two-thirds of the U.S. public agreed that 'Saddam Hussein helped the terrorists in the September 11 attacks.'"<sup>22</sup> For a country that values the freedom of speech and the press as a fundamental right, the level of homogenization in Iraq War coverage in America has been astonishing. The most important factors that contributed to a skewed portrayal of the Iraq War were: the military's doctrine of "information dominance"; the embedding of journalists in the military; the Bush administration's misleading rhetoric, and the news networks' unquestioning acceptance and adoption of that rhetoric; the "dumbing down" of American news; the news networks' overemphasis on certain events in the war, and their framing of those events in a sensationalist manner; the focus of news networks on positive images and omission of negative events; and the treatment of the WMD issue.

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<sup>22</sup> Erlich, p.43

*Dissemination of the Bush administration's misleading rhetoric*

It is unfair to blame misperception of the Iraq War entirely on American news media. To be sure, the information was presented to them in such a fashion that it was sullied even before they touched it. This was especially evident in Bush's March 6, 2003 press conference; "[u]nable to make an intelligent and objective case for war against Iraq, Bush could only invoke fear and a moralistic rhetoric, attempting to present himself as a strong nationalist leader."<sup>23</sup> The rhetoric used by the Bush administration was consistently misleading. First of all, the conflict was renamed. This is no new phenomenon. In times of conflict, the government coins non-threatening names for the conflicts to market them to the public – Operation Desert Storm, Operation Just Cause (Panama, 1989), Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) – and these names are picked up and parroted by the media.<sup>24</sup> So, the Iraq War was dubbed "Operation Iraqi Freedom" by the Bush administration, and the news media picked it up and ran with it. Bush's speech's were laden with such carefully calculated vocabulary; "Bush's discourse also displayed Orwellian features of doublespeak, where war against Iraq is for peace, the occupation of Iraq is its liberation, destroying its food and water supplies enables 'humanitarian' action, and where murder of countless Iraqis and destruction of the country will produce 'freedom' and 'democracy'."<sup>25</sup> This "Orwellian doublespeak" was prominent in President Bush's announcement of the invasion of Iraq: "we will pass through this time of peril, and carry on *the work of peace*. We will defend our freedom. We will *bring*

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<sup>23</sup> Kellner, p.70

<sup>24</sup> Erlich, p.32-33

<sup>25</sup> Kellner, p.70

*freedom* to others. And we will prevail”(my emphasis).<sup>26</sup> The careful manipulation of words was used by the Bush administration to ease the minds of the public.

Another method that the Bush administration utilized when addressing the public or the media was the alluding to (but not outright stating of) connections between Iraq and the September 11 terrorist attacks. The first of many possible examples was displayed in President Bush’s televised speech announcing the invasion of Iraq:

The people of the United States, and our friends and allies, will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder. We will meet that threat now with our Army, Air Force, Navy, Coastguard, and Marines, so that we do not have to meet it later with armies of *firefighters, and police, and doctors, on the streets of our cities* (my emphasis).<sup>27</sup>

This is certainly a reference to the September 11 attacks, and although he did not outright say, “Iraq was involved in the September 11 attacks,” he might as well have done so. The implication is strong. A study by Gershkoff and Kushner concludes that, “while President Bush never publicly and explicitly connected Saddam Hussein and Iraq to 9/11, he used the ‘consistent technique of linking Iraq with the terms ‘terrorism’ and ‘al Qaeda’ [that] provided the context from which such a connection could be made’.”<sup>28</sup> This was despite the complete and utter lack of evidence to suggest that such a connection actually existed. By appealing to the anger and fear that Americans felt in regard to the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration was able to scare the public into compliance with the Iraq War. The media not only failed to dispute these claims; it also served as a medium with which the government disseminated its rhetoric to the public at large.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/03/19/sprj.iq.int.bush.transcript/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/03/19/sprj.iq.int.bush.transcript/>

<sup>28</sup> Hokanen (William A. Dorman), p.15

*Weapons of Mass Destruction: Parroting the government's version of the truth*

The claim that there were weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq was one of the main justifications that the Bush administration used to go to war. As we now know, no WMDs were ever found. This did not stop the Bush administration from using the alleged presence of WMDs in Iraq to scare the American people into compliance with the war. During his infamous speech to the UN on February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell started his speech with a bold statement: “What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.”<sup>29</sup> He went on to present faulty evidence that “proved” that there were WMDs in Iraq. He made also made the paradoxical statement that it was up to the Iraqis to prove that they were not hiding weapons; he said it was not the weapons inspectors’ duty to find such proof. Similarly, when asked what would happen if U.N. inspectors didn’t find any WMDs in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld said: “‘What it would prove would be that the inspection process had been successfully defeated by the Iraqis,’ Donald Rumsfeld replied. In effect, he was saying that the absence of incriminating evidence would be incriminating. ‘There’s no question but that the Iraqi regime is clever,’ Rumsfeld added, ‘they’ve spent a lot of time hiding things, dispersing things, tunneling underground.’”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, “[i]n August of 2002, Vice President Cheney was so eager to play the nuclear scare card that he said Iraq would acquire nuclear arms ‘fairly soon,’ contradicting CIA reports that Iraq could not do so for at least five more years.”<sup>31</sup> This inaccurate representation of the WMD situation in Iraq was unquestioningly repeated and disseminated by American news networks.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/02/05/sprj.irq.powell.transcript/>

<sup>30</sup> Erlich, p.97

<sup>31</sup> Erlich, p.52

One prime example of the ways that the press disseminated the lies of the Bush administration was the allegation by government officials that Saddam Hussein had kicked weapons inspectors out of Iraq, thus justifying an invasion:

Much of the coverage was in sync with lies told repeatedly by senior U.S. officials such as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who grew fond of claiming that Saddam Hussein had kicked out the U.N. weapons inspectors four years earlier. At a Pentagon news conference on September 3, 2002, with typical disregard for inconvenient facts, Rumsfeld said: “It is the Iraqis that ended the inspections; that we all know. We protested when the Iraqis threw the inspectors out... Would it be nice if they had not thrown the inspectors out? Yes, that would have been preferable.”<sup>32</sup>

This lie has been repeated over and over by the American news networks. In reality, Richard Butler, head of Unscm, withdrew weapons inspectors in December 1998, just before Operation Desert Fox. In 2002, when U.N. inspectors were in Iraq looking for WMDs, the U.S. used this as an opportunity to sneak CIA spies into the country. When this was discovered by Iraqi officials, they were outraged, and refused the U.N. inspectors access. However, if you had been watching the news in the United States around that time, you would have a different idea of what happened; “when referring to the espionage, news accounts transformed facts into mere allegations.”<sup>33</sup> With careful wording, the press was able to portray the Iraqis’ discovery of American espionage as an unfounded paranoia. Here are several examples of the coverage:

In the *New York Times* on August 3, Barbara Crossette reported that the Unscm team was disbanded “after Mr. Hussein accused the old commission of being an American spy operation and refused to deal with it.”

On the November 18 broadcast of *All Things Considered*, correspondent Vicky O’Hara said: “The last U.N. weapons inspection effort in Iraq fell apart amid accusations by Baghdad that inspectors were spying for the United States.” The next day, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that four

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<sup>32</sup> Erlich, p.29

<sup>33</sup> Erlich, p.29

years earlier “Baghdad charged that there were spies on the team, and the United States complained that Iraq was using the accusation as an excuse to obstruct the inspectors.”

A single short sentence in a *USA Today* news story by John Diamond, which ran August 8, 2002, was doubly deceptive: “Iraq expelled U.N. weapons inspectors four years ago and accused them of being spies.”

While the second part of the sentence is highly misleading, the first part is flat-out false. Several months later, *USA Today* was still refusing to print a retraction or correction.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that no debate occurred over the alleged presence of WMDs of Iraq. Indeed, especially within the intelligence community, a rigorous debate occurred that challenged the evidence referenced by the Bush administration of WMDs in Iraq. But these debates did not reach the press in time to make a difference. “With a popular president promoting war, Democrats in Congress were reluctant to criticize him. This deprived reporters of opposition voices to quote, and of hearings to cover.” This lack of critical voices was due not only to a lack of people willing to speak up, but also due in part to the demands of readers and viewers. “Many readers, meanwhile, were intolerant of articles critical of the President. Whenever *The Washington Post* ran such pieces, reporter Dana Priest recalls, ‘We got tons of hate mail and threats, calling our patriotism into question.’”<sup>35</sup> It is therefore important to note that the political climate at the beginning of the Iraq War was not friendly for dissenters, and this contributed to the tone and content of news coverage.

### *Information Dominance*

As was stated in the August 1996 US Army Field Manual, 100-6, the government operates under the assumption that “[i]nformation is the currency of victory.”<sup>36</sup> This is part of the concept of “full spectrum dominance,” a concept by the Pentagon that the US

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<sup>34</sup> Erlich, p.31

<sup>35</sup> Massing, p.7

<sup>36</sup> Kamalipour (Danny Schechter), p.29

military must be able to “operate in all domains – space, sea, land, air, and information.”<sup>37</sup> This means that the dissemination of information is taken very seriously, since information is seen as a powerful tool, or even weapon. This mindset has meant that information is monitored very closely. Information operations, or IO, is part of the military’s psychological operations, or PSYOP; “[w]hat this means is that people whose job traditionally has been to talk to the media and divulge truthfully what they are able to tell, now work hand-in-glove with those whose job it is to support battlefield operations with information, not all of which may be truthful.”<sup>38</sup> The Iraq War was seen as a war for public opinion as much as anything else. Therefore, the information that needed to be controlled was not just sensitive information such as troop movements, the censorship of which hardly needs justifying; but also information that could sway public opinion and turn people against the war. “As the army’s chief of public affairs, Major General Charles McClain, commented soon after the Gulf War ended: ‘The perception of an operation can be as important to success as the execution of that operation.’”<sup>39</sup> As it has done in past wars, the American government has tried to control public perception of the Iraq War as a part of its strategy to win.

The military strove for information dominance opting to “deny, degrade, destroy” any conflicting information. The Pentagon claims that “[t]he ‘unfriendly’ information must be destroyed, wherever it comes from,” whether the source of that information is an ally or an enemy. A telling example of this strategy in action was an “attack on an Al-Jazeera office in Kabul in 2001, which the Pentagon justified by claiming al Qaeda activity in the Al-Jazeera office. As it turned out, this referred to broadcast interviews

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<sup>37</sup> Miller, p.7

<sup>38</sup> Kamalipour (Danny Schechter), p.29

<sup>39</sup> Erlich, p.33

conducted by Al-Jazeera with Taliban officials.”<sup>40</sup> This kind of activity is justified by the following claim by the military, taken from a 1997 paper by Jim Winters and John Griffin, of the U.S. Space and Information Operations Directorate: “When dominance occurs, nothing done, makes any difference. We have sufficient knowledge to stop anything we don’t want to occur, or do anything we want to do.”<sup>41</sup> The military’s strategy was not limited to destroying conflicting information; it also created new sources of information. For example, “[t]he ‘reconstruction’ of Iraqi media began on April 10, with the first broadcast of ‘Towards Freedom,’ a joint U.S.-U.K. television project broadcast on the same frequency as the former Iraqi state television service. The service included U.S. programming supplied by ABC, CBS, FOX, and PBS networks.”<sup>42</sup> The military’s view of information as both “a weapon and a target”<sup>43</sup>, as stated on page one of the Air Force’s doctrine on Information Operations, is revealing, and helps to explain why information surrounding the Iraq War was monitored so carefully.

### *Embedding*

Reporters have “embedded” with the military since World War II; it is not a new concept. However, after having being largely kept out of conflict zones during the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the press did not dare hope for much access to war zones in the upcoming invasion of Iraq. However, on October 30, 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced at a Pentagon meeting of media outlets that, since the Taliban and Al-Qaeda had so effectively manipulated the Afghani public with their propaganda

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, p.11

<sup>41</sup> Miller, p.8

<sup>42</sup> Miller, p.12

<sup>43</sup> Rid, p.38

during the American invasion of Afghanistan, the United States needed to be ready to counter this threat in Iraq. According to him,

The best way to combat that was to have accurate, professional journalists on the ground to see the truth of what was going on. He said he already had intelligence from Iraq that they were arranging to mislead the press. “Having people who are honest and professional see these things and be aware of that is useful. So I consider it not just the right thing to do but also a helpful thing.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus, from the beginning of the Iraq War, “[e]mbedded reporters ate, lived, traveled, and slept with the troops. They choked on the same sandstorm grit, and carried the same mandatory gas mask and chem suits. They dined on the same MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), and bounced along the same rutted desert tracks. They faced they same enemy fire.”<sup>45</sup> The reason for the decision by the Pentagon to allow reporters to embed in Iraq is simple. “Seen in the context of information dominance, embedding is a clear means of building up and protecting ‘friendly’ information.”<sup>46</sup> This is logical, for “[h]ow critical can the press be when these troops are also, as ABC News’ John Donovan put it, ‘my protectors’?”<sup>47</sup> The media, in effect, was partially integrated into the military, and as a result, their coverage of the war tended to be biased in a pro-military way.

Although embedded journalists were able to witness firsthand the battles that occurred right in front of them, “their every posting and broadcast was censored by the U.S. military, [so] it was the independent, ‘unilateral’ journalists who provided the most accurate account [...] Thus, on the whole, the embedded journalists were largely propagandists who often outdid the Pentagon and the Bush administration in spinning the

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<sup>44</sup> Carlson, p.xiii

<sup>45</sup> Carlson, p.xi

<sup>46</sup> Miller, p.10

<sup>47</sup> Carlson, p.xvi

message of the moment.”<sup>48</sup> One must not forget that the main objective of the embedding program in Iraq was to *counter Saddam Hussein’s propaganda*. This has been openly stated by top-ranking officials. In order to counter propaganda, the Pentagon needed *favorable* coverage of American forces in the invasion of Iraq. Their way of achieving this was through the embedded reporters program.

Of course, embedding has proven to be beneficial as well as problematic for the Pentagon. Embedded reporters see all that occurs within their limited spheres, and this includes stories that the government would rather the public did not know about. This was exemplified during the U.S. military’s treacherous journey from Kuwait to Baghdad. This march occurred in the midst of a cumbersome sandstorm, which made miscalculations more likely than usual. Iraqi civilians were killed in deadly mishaps involving U.S. and British bombings, and then American and British forces faced unexpected resistance from the Iraqis. The story might have gone largely unnoticed, had it not been for the presence of reporters on the scene.

The intensity and immediacy of the spectacle was multiplied by ‘embedded reporters’ who were accompanying the U.S. and British forces who beamed back live pictures, first of the triumphant blitzkrieg through Iraq and then of the invading forces stalling and becoming subject to perilous counterattack.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that, despite their integration into their military units, imbedded reporters were there to report what they saw, whether it be a military victory or a massive failure on the part of their units. This has led many to argue that the imbedding program in Iraq has not, in fact, given a skewed portrayal of the war. After all, under the imbedding program, the reporters are allowed to see far more than ever before, and from

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<sup>48</sup> Kellner, p.73

<sup>49</sup> Kellner, p.71

the safety of their military units. The objective of the program is not just to control the flow of information in Iraq, but also to protect journalists from harm.

The military has been surprisingly lenient in allowing journalists to report nearly anything they wish. While the plan to embed reporters in Iraq was part of the military's PSYOPS strategy, the actual content of the reports was not really controlled, apart from the censoring of sensitive information such as troop movements. According to Brad Klapper, a correspondent for the Associated Press who was stationed (but not imbedded) in Iraq, his stories were never directly censored by the military. None of his stories were ever changed or blocked from being published. He said that, although it was difficult for a reporter to get around in Iraq without being escorted by the military, he did not see this as a serious problem, because he felt much safer than he would have without this protection. He did get the sense that he was purposefully kept away from certain areas that the military did not want to be reported on. He also reported that, when a journalist's version of an event differed from the military's official version, bickering between the Public Relations officer and the reporter often ensued, and that, although this had never happened to him personally, he knew of instances in which fellow reporters were intimidated into taking the official view rather than their own. All in all, he felt that American journalists were more likely to strike a balance between their view and the official view, while other journalists did not hesitate to report exactly what they saw.<sup>50</sup> According to this account, journalists in Iraq are not often directly censored by the military, but they are pressured to adopt the official version of events.

Thus, although embedding does not often involve direct censorship of journalists' stories by the military, they are limited by the mere fact that they are embedded within a

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<sup>50</sup> Brad Klapper, interview, 01 April 2009

military unit. This means that, “[w]ith 24-hour coverage, Americans are seeing more wartime video than ever before, but less of the big picture than any other war.”<sup>51</sup>

Embedded journalists are safer than they would be without military protection, and their proximity to the military allows them to have a close look at the action. However, they are told where to go and what they can report on, and this limits their coverage to a very narrow scope. There is also the question of objectivity. Because embedded reporters become a part of the military units that they are reporting on, they can not be as neutral as they would be if they were reporting from the outside looking in. By placing reporters in military units, the Pentagon usually has no need to censor embedded reporters; the reality of their situation tends to spin their coverage in a pro-military way.

#### *Selective News Coverage*

Some of what American news networks broadcasted was outright false. However, this was not always the case. Indeed, in order to understand the one-sided portrayal of the Iraq War, it is equally important to examine what the news *did not* broadcast. Many have noted the lack of debate in the media about the entry of U.S. forces into Iraq at the very beginning of the war. The reason for this lack of debate is sad but simple; “[i]n contrast to state censorship, which is usually easy to recognize, self-censorship among journalists is rarely out in the open [...] In the highly competitive media environment, you don’t need to be a rocket scientist, or even a social scientist, to know that dissent does not boost careers. This is especially true during times of war.”<sup>52</sup> This omission of viewpoints contrary to the government is a common occurrence during times of war, especially during the initial phase of the conflict. Unfortunately, this is the

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<sup>51</sup> Schechter, p.35

<sup>52</sup> Erlich, p.22

time at which open public debate is the most necessary – when there is still time for public opinion to turn against government action and prevent the government from allowing armed conflict to occur. Therefore, the most significant failure of American news networks may not have been what they said, but what they did not say. “As the PIPA and other studies suggest, the most noteworthy way in which the press contributed to tilting the prewar debate in favor of the Bush administration was to leave unchallenged the key assumptions and assertions of the proponents of war with Iraq,” a lesson that was learned the hard way during the first Gulf War. “Unlike the first Bush administration, which wasted a period of valuable time casting about for a reason powerful enough to convince the public of the need for war with Iraq [...], officials this time around chanted the same mantra from the moment the drums of war began to beat in August 2002.”<sup>53</sup> The absence of a forum for debate about the invasion of Iraq, which could have been provided by American news networks, made it easier for the Bush administration to convince the American people that their way was the only way.

While there certainly was quite a lot of news coverage on the Iraq War, “[t]elevision’s intense wall-to-wall coverage was offset by its dizzy ephemerality. Complexity and substance were sacrificed [...] Television championed those feel-good scenes that reminded viewers of other popular wars: an American flag hoisted, happy Iraqi children waving to soldiers, an evil tyrant’s statue being toppled.”<sup>54</sup> As we know, these happy scenes were not terribly common in Iraq from the time of the U.S. invasion. But, because news networks capitalized on them, they became common images for the

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<sup>53</sup> Hokanen (William A. Dorman), p.14

<sup>54</sup> Carlson, p.xvii

viewer. “As any advertising executive knows, the essence of propaganda is repetition.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, even though the Bush administration was not directly in control of America’s “independent” news networks, most news networks could be counted on to disseminate the “official” version of the Iraq War, rather than providing a forum for debate as they could have. Instead, American news networks blatantly ignored critical voices during the beginning of the Iraq War. A study conducted by FAIR, a media watchdog group, covered stories aired on ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News and NewsHour with Jim Lehrer; the time frame was a week before Colin Powell’s Feb. 5 presentation at the UN, up until one week after. The study found that “[m]ore than two-thirds (267 out of 393) of the guests featured were from the United States. Of the U.S. guests, a striking 75 percent (199) were either current or former government or military officials.” The coverage was homogenous in opinion as well – “[o]nly one of the official U.S. sources – Sen. Edward Kennedy (D.Mass) – expressed skepticism or opposition to the war.”<sup>56</sup> By limiting their sources and guests to government officials and retired generals, American news networks did not provide a forum for debate; they endorsed the Bush administrations’ war by blocking out critical voices and overwhelming the airwaves with pro-military propaganda.

One of the ways that the media has distorted the reality in Iraq has been the sensationalization of certain images, which gives the viewer false impressions of the reality of the war. These images are repeated to the extent that they block out other stories related to the war, which, if broadcast, might give viewers a more balanced view of what is happening. The coverage of the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in

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<sup>55</sup> Erlich, p.26

<sup>56</sup> Schechter, p.71

Baghdad and the story about the rescuing of Private Lynch are just two instances in which the press focused an obscene amount of coverage on events that were, for the most part, publicity stunts.

The amount of attention that was given to the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square on April 9, 2003 in Baghdad was astounding. Also astounding was the way in which it was covered. An excerpt from a transcript of a CNN broadcast effectively illustrates the way news networks were talking about the event. Bill Hemmer on CNN, at 9:45 a.m., proclaimed: “You think about seminal moments in a nation’s history...indelible moments like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that’s what we’re seeing right now: Regular Iraqis with their opportunity and their chance to take their own axe to take down Saddam Hussein.”<sup>57</sup> The reference to the fall of the Berlin Wall is notable, because it gives the viewer a false context from which to view the Iraq War. It puts the event in the context of the Cold War; “[t]he combination of economic and ideological competition for power between the United States and the Soviet Union, taken together with a fear of nuclear weapons, had transforming power on American politics and institutions [...]. Since September 11, 2001, the war on terror has [...] driven a return to cold war norms.”<sup>58</sup> Another broadcast, this one by the Fox News Network, sensationalized the story even more:

FNC, David Asman:

8:52 a.m.: You are seeing history in the making right now.

9:30 a.m.: My goosebumps have never been higher than they are right now.

10:12 a.m.: This is one of those moments in history that we are privileged to be reporting on.

Brit Hume, seconds later: This transcends anything I’ve ever seen.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Aday, p.321

<sup>58</sup> Hokanen (William A. Dorman), p.19

<sup>59</sup> Aday, p.321

This story was played over and over by these and numerous other networks. “On FNC, the image of the statue falling was replayed an average of 6.83 times every half hour between 11:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., or about once every 4.4 minutes on average. On CNN, the shot ran an average of 4 times every half hour, or once every 7 ½ minutes.”<sup>60</sup>. The toppling of the statue in Firdos square would seem to be the most important event in the entirety of the Iraq War to anyone watching it on an American news network.

This repetition of the image of the statue falling gave viewers the false impression that the war was completely over; “[t]he saturation coverage of the statue falling crowded out other potential stories and alternative frames. Most notably, despite the fact that fighting continued throughout Baghdad during that day, not to mention across the country, little of this was shown to viewers [...] FNC showed a map of Baghdad revealing six armed engagements in the city that day, but no visuals were provided then or later.”<sup>61</sup> The replacement of coverage of the conflict with the coverage of the statue gave the impression that the war was over, when in fact there was still fighting going on. Also, the way in which the event was shot gave the impression that it was a much bigger deal than it actually was, which “illustrated how a particular vantage point could lead to false conclusions [...] TV coverage gave the impression of a large crowd, joyful at Iraq’s liberation. Still-camera pictures taken from a distance, however, revealed the square nearly empty – containing no more than 200 people, most of them international journalists.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, by over-emphasizing and misrepresenting the fall of the statue

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<sup>60</sup> Aday, p.322

<sup>61</sup> Aday, p.324

<sup>62</sup> Sweeney, p.205

in Firdos Square, American news networks gave Americans the impression that the war was over, when in reality the war was far from done.

Another event that the media took advantage of was the rescue of Private Lynch. This drama was an example of the way that “the Pentagon constructed mythologies to be replicated by the television networks.” The rescue was “staged like a spectacle on reality television. Soldiers stormed the hospital, found Lynch, and claimed a dramatic rescue under fire from Iraqis.”<sup>63</sup> The story became a favorite of American news networks, who could not have portrayed a cheesier, more epic “maiden in distress” rescue if they had hired Disney animators to add in an evil witch and a knight in shining armor. The reality of the rescue turned out to be far from the simple, sappy story broadcast by news networks. “In fact, several media institutions interviewed the doctors in the hospital, who claimed that Iraqi troops had left the hospital two days before; that the hospital staff had tried to take Jessica to the Americans but that they fired on them; and that in the ‘rescue’ the U.S. troops shot through the doors, terrorized doctors and patients, and created a dangerous scene that could have resulted in deaths, simply to get some dramatic rescue footage for television audiences .”<sup>64</sup> The way the news portrayed the rescue was not a neutral presentation of fact, but a sensationalized, myth-like war story. The press’s account of the rescue was not much better than that of television news networks:

The *Post*’s initial story about the Iraqis’ capture of Jessica Lynch, a teenage private first class, read like the plot of a made-for-television movie, guaranteed to raise morale. The *Post* said Lynch ‘was fighting to the death’ even after sustaining multiple gunshot wounds. In fact, Lynch suffered all of her wounds during the crash of her Humvee and had not been stabbed or shot. The army later said her injuries caused

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<sup>63</sup> Kellner, p.73

<sup>64</sup> Kellner, p.73

unconsciousness, making it impossible for her to have fought to avoid capture.<sup>65</sup>

The “Saving Private Lynch” story and the “Firdos Square Statue” are just two examples of how the media gives the public a skewed perspective on how the war is progressing.

American news coverage of the Iraq War was much different from international news coverage and news coverage from Arab sources. “Just as American television shied away from explicit coverage, the Arab world concentrated on civilian casualties.”<sup>66</sup> It is not surprising that the invading country would want to play down civilian casualties, while the country that is being invaded would want to highlight this.

Al-Jazeera and other Arab networks, as well as some European networks, talked of an “invasion” and of an illegal U.S. and British assault on Iraq. While Donald Rumsfeld bragged that the bombings were the most precise in history and were aimed at military and not civilian targets, Arab and various global broadcasting networks focused on civilian casualties and presented painful spectacles of Iraqis’ suffering.<sup>67</sup>

However, American news coverage was unrealistic, not simply compared to Arab networks, but to the news networks of the majority of the international community. “On the whole, U.S. broadcasting networks tended to present a sanitized view of the war while Arab, Canadian, British, and other European broadcasters presented copious images of civilian casualties and the horrors of war.”<sup>68</sup> It has been argued that American news networks are simply more considerate of what they air, out of respect for families concerned about what their children see on television. However, it seems that American news networks are not averse to showing all disturbing images; rather, they do not like to show scenes that might give the impression that Americans are losing the war: “When

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<sup>65</sup> Sweeney, p.203

<sup>66</sup> Carlson, p.xvii

<sup>67</sup> Kellner, p.71

<sup>68</sup> Kellner, p.74

Arab television trotted out a group of dazed, banged-up U.S. Army POWs, American television refused to air much of this disturbing and humiliating footage, citing self-censorship factors such as privacy, respect for the prisoners' families, and outright revulsion." This justification for self-censorship on the part of the American news networks would be legitimate if it was practiced consistently. After all, the feelings of prisoners' families *ought* to be considered, and too much depressing coverage of this sort on the news would be disturbing to the public. "Yet during the first few days of the war, American viewers witnessed a parade of emaciated, surrendering Iraqi army conscripts, their bony wrists held fast behind their backs with white plastic bands."<sup>69</sup> Thus, it seems that disturbing images are perfectly acceptable to news networks, as long as the victims portrayed are Iraqi and not American. American news networks were careful to show the public a version of the Iraq War in which the Americans were unquestionably the victors.

### *Foxification*

In fact, at the beginning of the war, American news networks seemed more violent than necessary, not less. Fox News, specifically, has been criticized for this. "The very brutality of FOX war pornography graphically displayed the horrors of war and the militarist, gloating, and barbaric discourse that accompanied the slaughter of Iraqis, and the graphic destruction of the country showed the new barbarism that characterized the Bush era."<sup>70</sup> Somehow, Fox News and other American networks managed to portray violence, while still presenting a sterilized version of the war. As Ashleigh Banfield of MSNBC pointed out, "We didn't see what happened when Marines fired M-16s. We didn't see what happened after mortars landed, only a puff of smoke [...] So was this

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<sup>69</sup> Carlson, p.xvii

<sup>70</sup> Kellner, p.74

journalism? Or was this coverage?”<sup>71</sup> *Detroit News* reporter John Bebow referred to American news networks as “fear channels”: “If you’re watching the fear channels, it’s easy to imagine that the war zone must be this hellish place filled with an unbelievable amount of gunfire, and that there’s terror on every corner – it’s just not like that.”<sup>72</sup> A study by the Project on Excellence in Journalism “found that half the stories from embedded journalists showed combat action but not a single story depicted people being hit by weapons.”<sup>73</sup> By sensationalizing the violence of the war and leaving out any coverage of Iraqi casualties or American hardships, American news networks gave a sanitized and misleading portrayal of the war.

American news coverage is notoriously “dumbed down” compared to news coverage from other countries, and compared to international broadcasts. Colum Murphy, President of the Geneva School of Diplomacy, recounted his experiences being interviewed by CNN. On each occasion, he said, CNN conducted two separate interviews: one for the international community, and the other – a shorter and more simplistic version of the first – for the American audience. It seems that it is no accident that news broadcasts in the United States are far “dumber” than international news broadcasts. They are intentionally produced that way. He also spoke of American news as being “Hollywood-ified,” compared to other news sources. In his opinion, American news anchors are performers; they are the focus of the news broadcast. Contrastingly, international news anchors, and news anchors from other countries, tend to act more as messengers whose purpose is to deliver information rather than to perform. He compared

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<sup>71</sup> Schechter, p.43

<sup>72</sup> Carlson, p.2

<sup>73</sup> Schechter, p.34

BBC news anchors to waiters at a restaurant, who do not cook but simply deliver.<sup>74</sup>

American news coverage, compared to international coverage, glorifies the military and ignores the situation of Iraqi civilians. “In short, there were two very different wars to watch: one almost entirely military in nature (the American version) and another portrayed in unrelentingly human terms (the global version).”<sup>75</sup> When examining the differences between American and international news coverage of the Iraq War, it becomes apparent that the American version leaves much to be desired.

What can account for this difference in format? Are Americans simply stupider and more bloodthirsty than their international counterparts? Surely this is not the case. However, the difference between international and American news broadcasts is striking. This pattern of increasingly simplified and ridiculous news coverage on American television has been referred to as “Foxification” because Fox News was the first news network to structure its broadcasts this way – or perhaps not the first, but the first to do so in such a blatant and extreme fashion. An extremely patriotic political mindset following the September 11 attacks partly explains this. However, it also has to do with profits. Fox News was the most profitable of the American news networks, so the others copied its style in an effort to reach Fox’s level of viewership. This has resulted in a narrower range of viewpoints and styles of news presented. In addition, the number of owners of the American news networks has become increasingly smaller. “Rupert Murdoch, who served the administration well throughout the war, awaits his reward in the form of a lifting of FCC restrictions on the number of TV stations he will be allowed to own.” Also, Colin Powell’s son, Michael Powell, is the FCC Chairman of a regulatory

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<sup>74</sup> Colum Murphy, interview, 25 March 2009

<sup>75</sup> Schechter, p.23

commission, and he has said that he will “insure that there are news organizations big enough to cover future wars.”<sup>76</sup> In American news, what should be a “market of ideas” is instead turning into a monopoly, owned by puppets of the Bush administration.

### *Conclusion*

The American public was deceived by its government, which was aided in this endeavor by a complacent news media, into compliance with the Iraq War. This was accomplished through the establishment of information dominance by the military; the use of embedded journalists, who could not help but express pro-military bias in their reports; the media’s dissemination of the Bush administration’s misleading rhetoric; and the news media’s distortion of the war through the use of repetition and the omission of differing points of view. This manipulation of the public’s fear on the part of the Bush administration (for support in the war) and on the part of news networks (for ratings) is unacceptable. In his book, *PR: A Social History of Spin*, social historian Stuart Ewen asks: “Can there be a democracy when the tools of communication are neither democratically distributed nor democratically controlled? Can there be a democracy when the content of media is determined almost universally, by commercial considerations? Can there be a democracy in a society in which emotional appeals overwhelm reason, where the image is routinely employed to overwhelm thought?”<sup>77</sup> These are questions that we all must ask ourselves as we watch the news. With the cloud of fear that descended upon Americans following the September 11 attacks, we have allowed the “fear channels” to monopolize the airwaves. By failing to provide a forum for debate and a critical look at the actions of the government at a time when the United

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<sup>76</sup> Schechter, p.36

<sup>77</sup> Schechter, p.27

States needed it the most, American news networks failed their country. We must not allow this to happen again. By demanding more of our news, Americans can ensure that news networks are not allowed to stray from their most important purpose: holding the government accountable to its people.

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