

Greasing up to power

A US comedian brings us closer to the truth than the BBC. Most of our journalists fail us

When starving people find food, they don't worry too much about the ingredients. Michael Moore's film is crude and sometimes patronising. He puts words into people's mouths. He finishes their sentences for them. At times he is funny and moving, at others clumsy and incoherent. But I was shaken by it, and I applauded at the end. For *Fahrenheit 9/11* asks the questions that should have been asked every day for the past four years. The success of his film testifies to the rest of the media's failure.

Tomorrow the Butler report will reopen the debate about who was to blame for the lies with which we went to war – the government or the intelligence agencies. One thing the news networks will not be discussing is the culpability of the news networks. After this inquiry, we will need another one, whose purpose is to discover why journalists help governments to lie to the people.

I don't need to discuss the failings of the US news networks. Fox and NBC have often boasted about their loyalty to Bush's government. Owned by rightwing businessmen, they could reasonably be described as components of the military-industrial complex. But the failures of the British media, in particular the BBC, require more explanation. Studies by the Cardiff School of Journalism and the Glasgow University Media Group suggest there is a serious and systematic bias among British broadcasters in favour of the government and its allies.

The Cardiff study, for example, shows that 86% of the broadcast news reports that

mentioned weapons of mass destruction during the invasion of Iraq “suggested Iraq had such weapons”, while “only 14% raised doubts about their existence or possible use”. The claim by British and US forces that Iraq had fired illegal Scud missiles into Kuwait was reported 27 times on British news programmes. It was questioned on just four occasions: once by Sky and three times by Channel 4 News. The BBC even managed to embellish the story: its correspondent Ben Brown suggested that the non-existent Scuds might have been loaded with chemical or biological warheads. Both the BBC (Ben Brown again) and ITN reported that British commanders had “confirmed” the phantom uprising in Basra on March 25. Though there was no evidence to support either position, there were twice as many reports claiming that the Iraqi people favoured the invasion as reports claiming that they opposed it. “Overall, considerably more time was given to the original [untrue] stories than to any subsequent retractions,” the researchers found.

The Glasgow study shows that BBC and ITN news reports are biased in favour of Israel and against the Palestinians. Almost three times as much coverage is given to each Israeli death as to each Palestinian death. Killings by Palestinians are routinely described as “atrocities” and “murders”, while Palestinians deliberately shot by Israeli soldiers have been reported as “caught in the crossfire”. In the period the researchers studied, Israeli spokespeople were given twice as much time to speak as Palestinians. Both BBC and ITN reports have described the West Bank as part of Israel. By failing to explain that the Palestinians are living under military occupation, following the illegal seizure of their land, correspondents routinely reduce the conflict to an inexplicable “cycle of violence”. Even this cycle is presented as being driven by the Palestinians: the Israelis are reported as “responding” or “retaliating” to Palestinian attacks; violence by the Palestinians is seldom explained as a response to attacks by Israelis. Both networks regularly claim that the US government is seeking peace in the region (ITN has described it as “even-handed”) while omitting to mention that it is supplying some \$3bn a year of military aid to Israel.

The BBC emerges very badly from these studies. The Cardiff report shows that it used US and British government sources more often than the other broadcasting networks, and used independent sources, such as the Red Cross, less often than the others. It gave the least coverage to Iraqi casualties, and was the least likely to report Iraqi unhappiness about the invasion. A separate study by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of news networks in five different countries showed that the BBC offered the least airtime of any broadcaster to opponents of the war: just 2% of its coverage. (Even ABC news in the United States gave them 7%). Channel 4 News, by contrast, does well: it seems to be the only British network that has sought to provide a balanced account

of these conflicts. Of course, this problem is not confined to the broadcasters, or, for that matter, the rightwing press. On Sunday the Guardian's sister paper, the Observer, asked: "Why was the prime minister's foreword [to the dodgy dossier] so unequivocal about the threat Saddam Hussein posed? Why was inconclusive evidence presented as fact?" The same questions should be asked of the Observer, which took the government's part in the invasion, and published a number of incorrect reports – which it has yet to retract – about weapons of mass destruction and the links between Saddam and al-Qaida.

So why does this happen? Why do broadcasters (and newspapers) that have a reputation for balance, impartiality and even liberal bias side with the powerful? There appear to be several reasons. One of them is that they assume – rightly or wrongly – that the audience doesn't want complexity. One BBC journalist told the Glasgow team that he had been instructed not to provide "explainers": what the editors wanted was "all bang-bang stuff". Analytical and investigative reporting has given way to breathless descriptions of troop movements and military technology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this leaves the audience without the faintest idea of what's happening: in one of the groups of viewers the researchers interviewed, the people who said that the occupied territories had been occupied by the Israelis were outnumbered by those who believed they had been occupied by the Palestinians. Another is that, as in all professions, you are rewarded for greasing up to power. The people who are favoured with special information are those who have ingratiated themselves with the government. This leads to the paradoxical result that some of our most famous and successful journalists are also the profession's most credulous sycophants.

While you are rewarded for flattery, you are punished for courage. The US, British and Israeli governments can make life very difficult for media organisations that upset them, as the BBC found during the Gilligan affair. The Palestinians and the people of Iraq have much less lobbying power. The media are terrified of upsetting the Israeli government, for fear of being branded anti-semitic. Powerful governments can call on the rightwing press for support. Rupert Murdoch, who has a commercial interest in the destruction of the BBC, is always happy to oblige.

When most of our journalists fail us, it's hardly surprising that the few who are brave enough to expose the lies of the powerful become heroes, even if their work is pretty coarse. When a scruffy comedian from Michigan can bring us closer to the truth than the BBC, it's time for a serious examination of why news has become the propaganda of the victor.

*George Monbiot's book *The Age of Consent: a Manifesto for a New World Order* is now published in paperback*