When truth is replaced by silence ...

In October 1999, I stood in a ward of dying children in Baghdad with Denis Halliday, who the previous year had resigned as assistant secretary general of the United Nations. He said: "We are waging a war through the United Nations on the people of Iraq. We're targeting civilians. Worse, we're targeting children... What is this all about?" Halliday had been 34 years with the UN. As an international civil servant much respected in the field of "helping people, not harming them", as he put it, he had been sent to Iraq to implement the oil-for-food programme, which he subsequently denounced as a sham. "I am resigning," he wrote, "because the policy of economic sanctions is... destroying an entire society. Five thousand children are dying every month. I don't want to administer a programme that satisfies the definition of genocide." Halliday's successor, Hans von Sponeck, another assistant secretary general with more than 30 years' service, also resigned in protest. Jutta Burghardt, the head of the World Food Programme in Iraq, followed them, saying she could no longer tolerate what was being done to the Iraqi people.

Their collective action was unprecedented; yet it received only passing media attention. There was no serious inquiry by journalists into their grave charges against the British and American governments, which in effect ran the embargo. Von Sponeck's disclosure that the sanctions restricted Iraqis to living on little more than 100 dollars a year was not reported. "Deliberate strangulation", he called it. Neither was the fact that, up to July 2002, more than 5bn dollars worth of humanitarian supplies, which had been approved by the UN sanctions committee and paid for by Iraq, were blocked by George W Bush, with Tony Blair's backing. They included food products, medicines and medical equipment, as well as items vital for water and sanitation, agriculture and education. The cost in lives was staggering. Between 1991 and 1998, reported Unicef, 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of five died. "If you include adults," said Halliday, "the

figure is now almost certainly well over a million."

In 1996, in an interview on the American current affairs programme 60 Minutes, Madeleine Albright, then US ambassador to the UN, was asked: "We have heard that half a million children have died... is the price worth it?" Albright replied, "We think the price is worth it." The television network CBS has since refused to allow the videotape of that interview to be shown again, and the reporter will not discuss it. Halliday and von Sponeck have long been personae non gratae in most of the US and British media. What these whistle-blowers have revealed is far too unpalatable: not only was the embargo a great crime against humanity, it actually reinforced Saddam Hussein?s control. The reason why so many Iraqis feel bitter about the invasion and occupation is that they remember the Anglo-American embargo as a crippling, medieval siege that prevented them from overthrowing their dictatorship. This is almost never reported in Britain. Halliday appeared on BBC2's Newsnight soon after he resigned. I watched the presenter Jeremy Paxman allow Peter Hain, then a Foreign Office minister, to abuse him as an "apologist for Saddam". Hain's shameful performance was not surprising. On the eve of this year's Labour party conference, he dismissed Iraq as a "fringe issue".

Alan Rusbridger, the Guardian editor, wrote in the New Statesman recently that some journalists "consider it bad form to engage in public debate about anything to do with ethics or standards, never mind the fundamental purpose of journalism". It was a welcome departure from the usual clubbable stuff that passes for media comment but which rarely addresses "the fundamental purpose of journalism" – and especially not its collusive, lethal silences. "When truth is replaced by silence," the Soviet dissident Yevgeny Yevtushenko said, "the silence is a lie." He might have been referring to the silence over the devastating effects of the embargo. It is a silence that casts journalists as accessories, just as their silence contributed to an illegal and unprovoked invasion of a defenceless country. Yes, there was plenty of media noise prior to the invasion, but Blair's spun version dominated, and truth-tellers were sidelined. Scott Ritter was the UN's senior weapons inspector in Iraq. Ritter began his whistle-blowing more than five years ago when he said: "By 1998, [Iraq's] chemical weapons infrastructure had been completely dismantled or destroyed by Unscom... The biological weapons programme was gone, the major facilities eliminated... The long-range ballistic missile programme was completely eliminated. If I had to quantify Iraq's threat, I would say [it is] zero."

Ritter's truth was barely acknowledged. Like Halliday and von Sponeck, he was almost never mentioned on the television news, the principal source of most

people's information. The studied obfuscation of Hans Blix was far more acceptable as the "balancing voice". That Blix, like Kofi Annan, was playing his own political games with Washington was never questioned. Up to the fall of Baghdad, the misinformation and lies of Bush and Blair were channelled, amplified and legitimised by journalists, notably by the BBC, which defines its political coverage by the pronouncements, events and personalities of the "village" of Whitehall and Westminster. Andrew Gilligan broke this rule in his outstanding reporting from Baghdad and later his disclosure of Blair's most important deception. It is instructive that the most sustained attacks on him came from his fellow journalists.

In the crucial 18 months before Iraq was attacked, when Bush and Blair were secretly planning the invasion, famous, well-paid journalists became little more than channels, debriefers of the debriefers – what the French call fonctionnaires. The paramount role of real journalists is not to channel, but to challenge, not to fall silent, but to expose. There were honourable exceptions, notably Richard Norton-Taylor in the Guardian and the irrepressible Robert Fisk in the Independent. Two newspapers, the Mirror and the Independent, broke ranks. Apart from Gilligan and one or two others, broadcasters failed to reflect the public's own rising awareness of the truth. In commercial radio, a leading journalist who raised too many questions was instructed to "tone down the anti-war stuff because the advertisers won?t like it".

In the United States, in the so-called mainstream of what is constitutionally the freest press in the world, the line held, with the result that Bush's lies were believed by the majority of the population. American journalists are now apologising, but it is too late. The US military is out of control in Iraq, bombarding densely populated areas with impunity. How many Iraqi families like Kenneth Bigley's are grieving? We do not experience their anguish, or hear their appeals for mercy. According to a recent estimate, roughly 37,000 Iraqis have died in this grotesque folly. Charles Lewis, the former star CBS reporter who now runs the Centre for Public Integrity in Washington, DC, told me he was in no doubt that, had his colleagues done their job rather than acted as ciphers, the invasion would not have taken place. Such is the power of the modern media; it is a power we should reclaim from those subverting it.