

War coverage's big lie – censoring the horror

By Rory O'Connor

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There's been a lot of talk in the media lately about lying. Best-sellers from both the Bill O'Reilly right and the Al Franken left denounce "Lying Liars" and announce "No Spin Zones."

Other books either decry (Bernie Goldberg) or deny (Eric Alterman) supposed bias in the media. And most media criticism of the attack on Iraq has centered on contentions that President Bush and top advisers like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld played fast and loose with the truth in their stated reasons for the run up to war – from weapons of mass destruction that cannot be found to spurious stories of connections between Saddam and Osama and Iraq and Al Qaeda.

So this week's Discovery Times cable television special "Wars, Lies and Videotape" seemed especially timely. The film was part of a 'Reporters at War' series of specials about the history of war reporting and "journalists' battles for truth, access and survival in war zones."

Although this episode focused on the media and the war in Iraq, it also examined what it was like historically as reporters moved from the front page to the front line, from World War II to the present.

As a British-produced series narrated by the sepulchral Jeremy Isaacs, the series suffers from a certain lack of immediacy, and some of the 'stars' of British journalism are largely unknown to most American audiences. Yet there were enough prominent American journalists to hold our attention – including Walter Cronkite, Morley Safer, David Halberstam, and Peter Jennings – and much of what they say is illuminating.

What role should patriotism play in war reporting? "The brash answer" Cronkite gives is also the simplest: "None." He also boldly brands the Pentagon's media manipulation during the first Gulf War as "ridiculous, almost unconstitutional."

CNN's Bernard Shaw describes the same conflict as a "Total Information War." And what happened to CBS correspondent Bob Simon when he and his team were captured and held by Iraqi soldiers for forty days? "They beat the shit out of us!" Simon says.

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Ultimately, however, the truth (as one British reporter, Michael Nicolson, bluntly states in “War, Lies and Videotape,”) is that “Real war has never been shown on television – and never will.”

Why? Other ‘reporters at war,’ such as the BBC’s Kate Adie, who explain, “One of the last great taboos on television is death.” Adie’s reaction is echoed by her BBC colleague Martin Bell, who notes, “What you don’t see is the maiming of killing of civilians. Instead we show you the highly spectacular, as in some grand video game. So you get the impression that war is a cost-free way of settling differences. This is terribly dangerous and fundamentally untrue.”

Print journalist Robert Fisk amplifies. “The bosses say that we don’t want to respect the dead – we kill them! What we want to do is to stop people from seeing these images – because if they saw them they would never, ever again support war. And we want a population that will – when we want! – support wars.”

The BBC’s acclaimed veteran correspondent John Simpson perhaps put it best, however, when he said that not showing those images “is almost a war crime – because it does make sending people to war an acceptable thing to do.”

And that may be the biggest lie of all.

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