

The networks, the war and the truth

NEW YORK, JANUARY 10, 2005 – As soon as Dan Rather publicly admitted that documents cited in a high-profile story on 60 Minutes could not be substantiated, rumors flew that he was a goner. After a “decent interval,” the controversial anchor announced his retirement as anchor of CBS Evening News. (He will continue to report for 60 Minutes’ Sunday and Wednesday editions). He took the fall.

TV journalism can be unforgiving to those who fabricate documents, stage news or make errors that embarrass the network overlords. But Rather’s crime was a mere misdemeanor compared with a felony later admitted by presidents of the Big Three news networks. In November, they told a Stanford University seminar that their operations uncritically conveyed deceptive information that convinced the public an invasion of Iraq was the only option. They admitted that they reported inaccurately about the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

“Simply stated,” confessed David Westin, president of ABC News, “we let the American people down.”

Sadly, their partial mea culpa was not repeated on their broadcasts. (C-SPAN covered it.)

Will they face any consequences for their actions? Unlikely. Has there been any outbreak of conscience in newsrooms or, more important, any commitment to cover Iraq in a less jingoistic manner? Not that I can see.

The news presidents did not offer any explanation as to why network coverage of Iraq marched in lockstep with the Bush administration or discuss if that approach will change regarding coverage of the hasty elections foisted on that nation.

Toronto Star columnist Antonia Zerbisias, a Canadian, has been closely following American television coverage. Her conclusion: It has barely changed,

even as the administration wants it to be even more “positive.”

“It is all but impossible to know what is happening on the ground in and around Fallujah. It’s a humanitarian disaster for sure,” Zerbisias wrote. “But who knows how many civilians have been affected by the bombardment, not to mention the lack of food, water and medical care? Even many who escaped the fighting are short of the necessities of life. The Americans are not counting the civilian dead. So there’s no way to know their number. That’s because, as Jon Stewart [host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central] noted last spring, the administration has been preventing many media from operating freely in Iraq.”

Zerbisias is not alone in believing that the Comedy Channel gets closer to the truth than our news channels.

Quoting Stewart: “There is some good news coming out of the hunt for WMDs, as coalition forces in Iraq have, in fact, uncovered and disarmed one of the most dangerous and destructive weapons known to man: the free press.”

Our news media has covered “intelligence failures” and “policy failures,” but it has yet to turn a probing eye on systemic “media failures”: its own role in the patriotically correct selling of war.

As a former CNN and ABC News producer, I have made a feature-length documentary investigating how and why our media blew it – and not just on WMDs. Oddly, the response from some critics is that the public already knows all this – even though it hasn’t been covered.