

Did US military kill journalists?

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 16, 2005 — When Dan Rather was caught in a crossfire after the expose of a dodgy document used in a TV report, there was an undercurrent of sympathy based on the widespread feeling that the questioning of President's Bush's military service was basically true.

Sadly, it didn't seem to matter. The story flamed out along with much of Rather's reputation.

No media outlets had the guts to pursue it.

Now, we have a new case of demolition by media in the shattered career of CNN's Eason Jordan. His 'off the record' claim that journalists were killed by the US military in Iraq boomeranged into a character assassination and chorus of patriotic breast-beating.

Without anyone knowing precisely what he said – the transcript has not been made public – Fox News and its sisters in 'struggle; at the New York Post led the charge holding CNN responsible for the comments of its executive with shrill accusations of 'sliming our troops.' (They, of course, had no self-interest in discrediting the competition!)

After a BSunami (blog storm) of derision and pressure rocked the network, Jordan was the next to go, following in the tucked-tail footsteps of Peter Arnett and two top executives of BBC who stepped down when their critical journalism on the war was questioned. (Arnett and BBC Director Greg Dyke have subsequently been vindicated by the facts but no one seems to care.)

As my Mediachannel.org colleague, Tim Karr put it: "One thing his departure makes clear: hunting down journalists – not in Iraq, but on the net – has become the newest bloodsport." An editor of the World Association of Newspapers in Paris condemned the pile-on as a case of intolerance and McCarthyism. Even the Wall Street Journal criticized the baiting.

As for Jordan, it's widely assumed in the bubble of a parochial and compliant media that there was no basis for his concern. Most commentators seem in

denial, dismissing any suggestion of US complicity in media deaths as a preposterous invention.

In our unbrave media world no one defended a charge that seemed on the surface indefensible.

The operative phrase here is ‘on the surface.’ Because, once you delve more deeply under the surface into the swamp of the Pentagon’s insidious media management and information-dominance strategies, official contempt for independent journalism and non-embedded reporters is evident.

Corporate media outlets that cheered for the war can’t see that, of course, despite the many mea-culpas we have heard about flawed reporting and uncritical coverage by The New York Times, The Washington Post and three network news presidents. They’ve drunk the Kool Aid.

CNN buckled under withering attack showing clearly that you cannot even raise the possibility of US government abuses in Iraq without being demonized – unless, as in the case of Abu Ghraib, you have pictures.

It is well known that the US military was hostile to ‘unilateral’ reporting from Iraq and that journalists were warned, threatened, intimidated and, yes, killed by not-so-friendly fire. After two journalists died on April 8th 2003 at Baghdad’s Palestine Hotel after a tank shell was lobbed into a hotel known by the Pentagon as a media site, Reuters called for an independent investigation. The International Federation of Journalists angrily demanded a real probe.

Not only were they ignored but other media companies would not even join their call. I dissect the incident in my film WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception) with five footage sources, interviewing a Reuters reporter who survived and believes her non-embedded team was ‘targeted.’

On the same day, Al Jazeera bureau chief Tareq Ayoub was killed when a US plane rocketed Arab Media offices whose coordinates had been provided to the Pentagon. There has been no probe or apology. This list goes on.

Phillip Knightly, a top historian on war and media writes in scholar David Miller’s book, Tell Me Lies, about propaganda in Iraq, that “there will be no investigations. I believe that the occasional shots fired at media sites are not accidental and that war correspondents will now be targeted.”

As a former CNN producer and ‘Turner turnover,’ I find this incident chilling of debate and the real issue of how the US military spun media coverage of the war and why the networks went along. Many covering Iraq – not just Jordan – believe journalists were targeted.

The citizens-initiated World Tribunal on Iraq which met in Rome last weekend asks a question that can't be dismissed: "Are Mr. Jordan's claims accurate?" It joined "the calls by international media groups and the families of dead journalists for a full independent investigation by an international team of reporters who should be given the right to question members of the military."

Their conclusion is one our media should embrace: "We demand that media outlets stop impugning the integrity of journalists who raise these questions and that CNN examine the charges raised by its former head of news."