

No news is slow news

When I began working as a journalist, there was something called “slow news”. We would refer to “slow news days” when “nothing happened” – apart from, that is, triumphs and tragedies in faraway places where most of humanity lived. These were rarely reported, or the tragedies were dismissed as acts of nature, regardless of evidence to the contrary. The news value of whole societies was measured by their relationship with “us” in the west and their degree of compliance with, or hostility to, our authority. If they didn't measure up, they were slow news.

Few of these assumptions have changed. To sustain them, millions of people remain in visible, and expendable. On 11 September 2001, while the world lamented the deaths of almost 3,000 people in the United States, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation reported that more than 36,000 children had died from the effects of extreme poverty. They were very slow news.

Let's take a few recent examples and compare each with the regular news as seen on the BBC and elsewhere. Keep in mind that Palestinians are chronically slow news and that Israelis are regular news.

Regular news: Charles Clarke, a spokesman for Tony Blair, “revives the battle of Downing Street” and calls Gordon Brown “stupid, stupid” and a “control freak”. He disapproves of the way Brown smiles. This is given saturation coverage.

Slow news: “A genocide is taking place in Gaza,” warns Ilan Pappé, one of Israel's leading historians. “This morning . . . another three citizens of Gaza were killed and a whole family wounded. This is the morning reap; before the end of the day many more will be massacred.”

Regular news: Blair visits the West Bank and Lebanon as a “peacemaker” and

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a “broker” between the Israeli prime minister and the “moderate” Palestinian president. Keeping a straight face, he warns against “grandstanding” and “apportioning blame”.

Slow news: When the Israeli army attacked the West Bank in 2002, flattening homes, killing civilians and trashing homes and museums, Blair was forewarned and gave “the green light”. He was also warned about the recent Israeli attack on Gaza and on Lebanon.

Regular news: Blair tells Iran to heed the UN Security Council on “not going forward with a nuclear programme”.

Slow news: The Israeli attack on Lebanon was part of a sequence of carefully planned military operations, of which the next is Iran. US forces are ready to destroy 10,000 targets. The US and Israel contemplate the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iran, even though Iran’s nuclear weapons programme is non-existent.

Regular news: “We have been making real progress in areas where the insurgency has been strongest,” says a US military spokesman in Iraq.

Slow news: The US military has lost all control over al-Anbar Province, west of Baghdad, including the towns of Fallujah and Ramadi, which are now in the hands of the resistance. This means the US has lost control of much of Iraq.

Regular news: “It is quite clear that real progress has been made [in Afghanistan],” says the Foreign Office.

Slow news: Nato pilots kill 13 Afghan civilians, including nine children, during an attack to “provide cover” for British troops based at Musa Kala in Helmand Province.

Regular news: Blair is Labour’s most successful prime minister, winning three landslide election victories in a row.

Slow news: In 1997, Tony Blair won fewer popular votes than John Major’s Tories in 1992. In 2001, Blair won fewer popular votes than Neil Kinnock’s Labour in 1992. In 2005, Blair won fewer popular votes than the Tories in 1997. The past two elections have produced the lowest turnouts since the franchise. Blair has the support of little over a fifth of the eligible British voting population.

Regular news: In the age of Blair “ideology has surrendered entirely to ‘values’

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. . . there are no sacred cows [and] no fossilised limits to the ground over which the mind might range in search of a better Britain”, wrote Hugo Young, the Guardian, 1997.

Slow news: “Nuremberg declared that aggressive war is the supreme international crime. They [Bush and Blair] should be tried along with Saddam Hussein,” says Benjamin Ferencz, chief prosecutor of Nazi crimes at Nuremberg