

Setting the limits of invasion journalism

On 14 November, Bridget Ash wrote to the BBC's Today programme asking why the invasion of Iraq was described merely as "a conflict". She could not recall other bloody invasions reduced to "a conflict". She received this reply:

Dear Bridget

You may well disagree, but I think there's a big difference between the aggressive "invasions" of dictators like Hitler and Saddam and the "occupation", however badly planned and executed, of a country for positive ends, as in the Coalition effort in Iraq.

Yours faithfully,

Roger Hermiston, Assistant Editor, Today

In demonstrating how censorship works in free societies and the double standard that props up the facade of "objectivity" and "impartiality", Roger Hermiston's polite profanity offers a valuable exhibit. An invasion is not an invasion if "we" do it, regardless of the lies that justified it and the contempt shown for international law. An occupation is not an occupation if "we" run it, no matter that the means to our "positive ends" require the violent deaths of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, and an unnecessary sectarian tragedy. Those who euphemise these crimes are those Arthur Miller had in mind when he wrote: "The thought that the state... is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied." Miller might have been less charitable had he referred directly to those whose job it was to keep the record straight.

The ubiquity of Hermiston's view was illuminated the day before Bridget Ash wrote her letter. Buried at the bottom of page seven in the Guardian's media

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section was a report on an unprecedented study by the universities of Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds on the reporting leading up to and during the invasion of Iraq. This concluded that more than 80 per cent of the media unerringly followed “the government line” and less than 12 per cent challenged it. This unusual, and revealing, research is in the tradition of Daniel Hallin at the University of California, whose pioneering work on the reporting of Vietnam, *The Uncensored War*, saw off the myth that the supposedly liberal American media had undermined the war effort.

This myth became the justification for the modern era of government “spin” and the “embedding” (control) of journalists. Devised by the Pentagon, it was enthusiastically adopted by the Blair government. What Hallin showed – and was pretty clear at the time in Vietnam, I must say – was that while “liberal” media organisations such as the New York Times and CBS Television were critical of the war’s tactics and “mistakes”, even exposing a few of its atrocities, they rarely challenged its positive motives – precisely Roger Hermiston’s position on Iraq.

Language was, and is, crucial. The equivalent of the BBC’s sanitised language in Iraq today is little different from America’s “noble cause” in Vietnam, which was followed by the “tragedy” of America’s “quagmire” – when the real tragedy was suffered by the Vietnamese. The word “invasion” was effectively banned. What has changed? Well, “collateral damage”, the obscene euphemism invented in Vietnam for the killing of civilians, no longer requires quotation marks in a Guardian editorial.

What is refreshing about the new British study is its understanding of the corporate media’s belief in and protection of the benign reputation of western governments and their “positive motives” in Iraq, regardless of the demonstrable truth. Piers Robinson from the University of Manchester, who led the research team, says that the “humanitarian rationale” became the main justification for the invasion of Iraq and was echoed by journalists. “This is the new ideological imperative shaping the limits of the media,” he says. “And the Blair government has been very effective at promoting it among liberal internationalists in the media.” It was the 1999 Kosovo campaign, promoted by Blair and duly echoed as a “humanitarian intervention”, that set the limits for modern invasion journalism.

The Kosovo adventure has long been exposed as a fraud that ridicules warnings of a “new genocide like the Holocaust”, though little of this has been reported. It as if our long trail of blood is forever invisible, intellectually and morally. Certainly, it is time those who run media colleges began to alert future journalists to their insidious grooming.