EMBEDDED: WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION

HOW THE MEDIA FAILED TO COVER THE WAR ON IRAQ

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NEWS DISSECTOR / MEDIACHANNEL.ORG

ColdType

EMBEDDED

BOOKS BY DANNY SCHECHTER

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WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION

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DEDICATION

To all who fought and the many who died to penetrate the "fog" of war in search of truths hidden in the sands of Iraq, the files of government agencies and the studios of media companies.

And to my colleagues at Globalvision and Mediachannel.org for giving me a platform for these dissections. And to Tony Sutton of ColdType.net for believing that others should have access to them.

And, as in all my earlier books, to my daughter Sarah Debs Schechter who knew that there was something horribly flawed in what she was seeing, hearing and reading about this "war."

Hopefully, this work will help her understand why and how.

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PROLOGUE TO A POST LOG

IT is safe to predict that the debate over the rationale for and effects of the 2003 war on Iraq will fester for decades to come. Why did the United States act as it did? Did Saddam Hussein's Iraq ever really represent a threat to world security? Was Baghdad seriously violating United Nations restrictions on weapons of mass destruction? Did these weapons still exist when the war began? Did Washington's pre-emptive invasion, at a cost of $917,744, 361.55, according to Pentagon accountants, free Iraq's long-suffering people?

Other questions: what was the full and final costs in lives, military and civilian, limbs, and destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, economy and cultural treasures? Did that country's people really welcome the "liberation" promised to them in some 31,800,000 leaflets dropped on their country along with an unknown amount of deadly ordnance. (Newsweek estimated that all of this paper could have been put to more practical use in the form of 120,454 rolls of toilet paper.)

The war had its official statisticians just as sporting events do. They counted everything, including the 423,988 members of U.S. military units deployed (as opposed to less than 10 percent of that number in other forces, just 42,987 "foreign" troops rustled up into what was clumsily labeled a "coalition of the willing."

What was unaccounted for, at least by the invaders and rarely shown in western media, were the civilian casualties. As a matter of policy, the United States refused to release any figures or even estimates. The United Nations was tracking the problem. At the end of May, their agencies were guestimating that the toll may surpass ten thousand, a stunningly large number, considering all of the assurances given that every effort would be made to limit damage to the society and its long suffering civilian population.

According to Ian Bruce in the Glasgow Herald: "The toll will exceed the 3500 civilians killed in the 1991 Gulf war and the 1800 to 2000 innocent Afghans known to have perished during the 2001 invasion to oust the Taliban and wipe out al Qaeda's training camps." Haidar Taie, who runs the Red Crescent's tracing department in Baghdad, said: "We just don't know for certain. But thousands are dead, thousands more injured or missing. It will take time to reach a definitive count. It was certainly a disaster for civilians caught in the fighting."

"The War For Iraqi Freedom," as the Pentagon and at least two networks branded it, went on for 720 hours. It was well documented by the Pentagon, which transmitted 3,200 hours of video and took 42,000 pictures, most of which the public did not, and may never, view.

What we did see, and read about the Iraq War is the subject of this book fashioned in the heat of the conflict. If journalism is a matter of course considered the first draft of history, this is one of the first book-length attempts to focus on the coverage and its many flaws, written before our

memories fade. It focuses on the different versions of the Iraq war that were transmitted on television and in the press, the versions that shaped impressions and public opinion.

This book is about more visible WMDs than the ones discussed in the media. It is about the media itself viewed as a weapon system: Weapons of Mass Deception. Those weapons drove a media war, a war that many now believe perverted freedom of the press in the name of serving it. Many used patriotism as a promotional tool, pandering to fears and nationalist sentiment.

There was warfare within the media, too, as media companies battled each other for scoops, exclusives, branding and positioning. They fought for market share, "mindshare" and ad-spend share. Within the trenches of the industry, and sometimes within the companies themselves, journalists and program producers wrestled with their colleagues and counterparts for guests and a competitive advantage. They worked with the military discipline of soldiers, only they were paid for their overtime. (When I worked at ABC, staffers were called "the troops.")

Yet, even as they competed against their counterparts, they also collaborated with each other, often drawing on the same footage, carrying the same stories, echoing the same administration claims and following the Pentagon's lead. Often they cloned each other's looks, formulas, formatting and "enhancement" techniques. They often looked and sounded more alike than they thought. Their sameness trumped their differences.

All news organizations rehearsed their coverage, pre-produced graphics and features, and "deployed" the latest techno toys. This media war brought out some of the best in journalism and too much of the worst. It showed the news business' vast technological capacity to bring us live coverage from the battlefield, but also demonstrated its power to sanitize that coverage and spin it propagandistically. It shamelessly recycled stories, repeating key themes, updating updates, all while promoting its own coverage.

This media war promoted the war it covered. It mobilized approval among opinion-making elites in Washington, London and other world capitals. First, it constructed the political environment, contributing to the sense of inevitability about the need for war and then fostered approval for it. Critical voices quickly vanished as fighting got underway.

The media war targeted the larger public, too, and in the United States at least, built what was reported as a consensus for the war and a national acceptance of its official goals and effects. The war coverage sold the war even as it claimed to be just reporting it. Media outlets called attention to their news gathering techniques, but never to their effects. During the first Gulf War, communications scholars found that people who relied exclusively on television for their news and information tended to know the least about the issues. I am sure similar studies will produce similar findings about this war. Most Americans lacked much knowledge about the issue before the war. Only 13 percent of America's teenagers could even find Iraq on a map. So much for the educational job done by the media and the schools.

Not everyone who watched the build-up to the war or the war itself bought into its terms

or was persuaded by its storyline. The war and its coverage also turned off and tuned out tens of millions who took to the streets, rejecting the pro-war media frame, in the largest global protests in history. Relying on independent media, international newspapers and feisty web sites for their information, they criticized both the policy and the press. In the aftermath of the giant February 15 2003 protests, The New York Times commented that there were then two opposing global superpowers: the military might of the United States and world public opinion. As the war erupted, the critics were "disappeared" from the media view just as Saddam disposed of his critics. He used violence; our media used inattention.

Even as those protests were often badly and in some cases barely covered, they nevertheless spoke for millions who rejected the media war aimed at their minds and spirits. One can only hope that, as the claims and "evidence" used to stoke up the war are unmasked, the media role will also be seen for what it is.

As Paul Krugman commented on The Times Op-ed page. "Over the last two years we've become accustomed to the pattern. Each time the administration comes up with another whopper, partisan supporters (a group that includes a large segment of the news media) obediently insist that black is white and up is down.

"Meanwhile, the 'liberal' media report only that some people say that black is black and up is up. And some democratic politicians offer the administration invaluable cover by making excuses and playing down the extent of their lies."

Most of us were not on the battlefield. Our understanding of what happened, our perceptions, points of view and prejudices were forged and framed by our media choices. We need to see that as a problem that demands to be addressed. Just as we consider politicians lying to us a problem, media accountability and responsibility are as important as political responsibility ●

INTRODUCTION

BLOGGING THE WAR AWAY

Few of us escaped seeing the non-stop reports from Iraq, from journalists embedded and otherwise, reports from what have been described as the front lines of the fight for "Iraqi freedom." Throughout the American media world and beyond, there has been a hearty sense of a job well done, except of course, for regrets over those colleagues and soldiers who never made it home.

We all watched the war as if it was only a military conflict. It wasn't.

There was also a carefully planned, tightly controlled and brilliantly executed media war that was fought alongside it. For the most part, that other media war was not covered or fully explained even though it was right in front of us.

The media war was there in living color but many didn't realize it had a life of its own, influencing as well as transmitting the BIG STORY. It has to be viewed on more than one level. Not all the news was what it appeared to be. In fact, it all followed a scenario, and served a function forecast years earlier by Canadian media guru, the late Marshall McLuhan who predicted: "If there were no coverage . . . there'd be no war. Yes, the newsmen and the media men around the world are actually the fighters, not the soldiers any more." McLuhan spoke of the media environment and television as a medium that rarely calls attention to itself. He called it "pervasively invisible."

The war coverage inundated us for weeks, as if there was no other news in the world. It was blow-by-blow and wall-to-wall, with the focus on the U.S. military campaign as it rolled across the desert. We watched as "the coalition" fought its way into Baghdad, stronghold of strongman Saddam Hussein, capital of the regime whose overthrow had been demanded – and accomplished. We saw the images and heard first-person accounts from many of the journalists about their adventures, difficulties, scoops and disappointments.

War as propaganda

THE Baghdad-based reporters who worked under limitations imposed by the now defunct Iraqi Ministry of Information were not shy about telling us what they had to put up with. When that ministry and the TV station it managed were "taken out" in bombing attacks that may have flouted international laws, American newscasters cheered. Its propaganda function was crude and obvious.

There was also propaganda flowing from other regional media aimed at the "Arab Street" and that also was crude and distorted – and, from its perspective, also was effective. Many commentators accepted pro-Iraq propaganda. They expec - ted far more Iraqi resistance than materialized.

While outlets like Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV strived to offer professional reporting that in some instances out-scooped western networks, other commentary reflected longstanding cul-

tural biases, anti-Americanism, inflammatory antisemitism, with loads of violence and no attention paid to Saddam's human rights abuses or women's rights. Kurdish journalists, who lived through the impact of Saddam's ethnic cleansing of rebellious Kurds in the north, criticized Arab satellite stations for these serious shortcomings.

Many U.S. newscasts pointed to these flaws and biases in part to project their own work as being free of similar biases. "They" – the "other" – practiced propaganda common to backward societies. We of the developed world practiced world-class bias-free journalism, or so we wanted the world to believe.

Propaganda was pervasive

THE truth is that there were pervasive pro-Western propaganda techniques built into American media presentation formats. Many may be disguised; others obvious. They were also rarely commented upon or critiqued, except by war critics. Few journalists put their reporting skills to work to report fully on their own government's propaganda campaign and its interface with their own media products.

Washington's anti-Iraqi propaganda was multidimensional and a key component of the "coalition" war plan (Deceptive words like "coalition" were themselves part of it.) Aimed at the Iraqis was a well-crafted arsenal of psychological operations or Psy-Ops carried out by an IO (Information Operations) directorate that simultaneously targeted and destroyed the county's communication system and replaced it with its own. A second front – and perhaps a more important one – was the western public. Iraqis were targeted by bombs and information warfare while western audiences had a well executed propaganda campaign often posing as news directed their way.

Explains British-based propaganda expert Paul de Rooij, in several well-sourced assessments: "One generally doesn't think of psychological warfare as something waged against the home population; but this is perhaps the best way to appreciate the U.S. experience during the past few months. The objective of such a campaign was to stifle dissent, garner unquestioning support, and rally people around a common symbol. Americans, and to a lesser extent Europeans, have been subjected to a propaganda barrage in an effort to neutralize opposition to the war, and this fits directly into a psy-ops framework."

Suddenly all the networks had platoons of retired generals and pro-war military experts interpreting war news. U.S. TV quickly resembled Chilean TV after the coup. CNN's news chief Eason Jordan revealed that he had sought approval from the Pentagon for his network's key war advisors. One Canadian critic called the network, "the Pentagon's bitch." At war's end, critic Michael Moore demanded the "unilateral withdrawal of the Pentagon from America's TV studios."

War as a political campaign

PENTAGON media chief Tori Clarke, who worked with PR firms and political campaigns before bringing a corporate style, and politically oriented spin operation into the Pentagon, admitted that she was running her shop the way she used to run campaigns. This approach was coordinated throughout the administration with "messages of the day" and orchestrated appearances by the President and members of his cabinet. They were not just selling a message but "man-

aging the perceptions" of those who received them. Politically, they used "stagecraft," a term that once was used to refer to covert operations. On May 16th, 2003, The New York Times detailed how the Bush Administration relies on TV entertainment techniques to sell the President and his policies. Significantly, media people are directing the effort. Elisabeth Bumiller wrote:

"Officials of past Democratic and Republican administrations marvel at how the White House does not seem to miss an opportunity to showcase Mr. Bush in dramatic and perfectly lighted settings. It is all by design: the White House has stocked its communications operation with people from network television who have expertise in lighting, camera angles, and the importance of backdrops.

"TV news people have been tapped in this aspect of the media war. First among equals is Scott Sforza, a former ABC producer who was hired by the Bush campaign in Austin, Tex., and who now works for Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director. Mr. Sforza created the White House "message of the day" backdrops and helped design the $250,000 set at the United States Central Command forward headquarters in Doha, Qatar, during the Iraq war.

"Mr. Sforza works closely with Bob DeServi, a former NBC cameraman whom the Bush White House hired after seeing his work in the 2000 campaign. Mr. DeServi, whose title is associate director of communications for production, is considered a master at lighting. 'You want it, I'll heat it up and make a picture,' he said early this week. A third crucial player is Greg Jenkins, a former Fox News television producer in Washington," Bumiller revealed.

These smartly polished sales techniques worked and typified the way the war was sold – and covered. It all underscores once again that we no longer live in a traditional democracy but, rather, a media-ocracy, a land in which media drives politics and promotes the military.

New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, who has written about how media coverage shapes public opinion, makes another point about the way TV coverage distorts reality. "The administration's anti-terror campaign makes me think of the way television studios really look. The fancy set usually sits in the middle of a shabby room, full of cardboard and duct tape. Networks take great care with what viewers see on their TV screens; they spend as little as possible on anything off camera.

"And so it has been with the campaign against terrorism. Mr. Bush strikes heroic poses on TV, but his administration neglects anything that isn't photogenic," Krugman wrote.

No wonder we had newscasts in which images trumped information. Clearly, just as the Pentagon boasted of its war plan, there was another plan alongside it–a media marketing plan that was even more carefully guarded lest it fall into the wrong hands. News management always works best when those who are its target are unaware of its dynamics.

War as a TV show

THIS war was a TV show on a new scale with as many "events" as a televised Olympics. Media outlets were willing, even enthusiastic participants in presenting the made-for-television spectacle. It would be wrong and overly deterministic to conclude that these TV news operations were taken over, duped or manipulated by the kind of

crude force that prevails in some other countries between government agencies and the media. The Pentagon was not faxing instructions to the newsrooms, nor would they have to. Media companies had their own reasons for playing the role they did, as did the "yellow press" publisher William Randolph Hearst who used – and, many say, started – a war as a way to sell papers. He is reported to have said: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war" – at the beginning of the Spanish-American War.

Today the relationship between government and media is more symbiotic, even synergistic. Wars like the one in Iraq are staged to project American power to the world. The pictures advertise that power (and market weapons systems at the same time).

The news business is more than happy to oblige because war attracts viewers in large numbers. Journalists quickly become intoxicated by the ether of war and all the excitement and danger that awaits on the front line. For many reporters, war is where the action is. It is also a career builder. Covering war has always been a way for journalists to prove their bona fides, win bragging rights and, of course, move up the ladder in the corporate news world.

Some journalists are drawn to war as moths are drawn to flame and light. For them, war represents the highest form of professional calling and appeals to their sense of patriotism and pride. Many promote the mission of those they cover as their own, just as many beat reporters are often co-opted by the officials and the agencies on which they report. The seduction is subtle. Some may be bought as intelligence assets, but most would resent any suggestion that they have sold out – or sold in. Years ago, Humbert Wolfe penned a famous ditty about the way many journalists voluntarily and enthusiastically serve the interests of others, without distance or skepticism:

"You cannot hope to bribe or twist
Thank God! The British Journalist
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to."

Networks like war. It offers riveting programming "reality". They produce it as "militainment," to borrow a term from TIME Magazine. Its life and death drama brings in viewers and holds attention. The spectacle builds ratings and revenues. It also imbues news organizations with a sense of importance and self-importance. It allows executives to demonstrate how valuable they are to the national interest. Executives at MSNBC boasted of how their war coverage brought Americans together and "emphasized the positive, not the negative."

Positive coverage also helps networks gain more access to the powerful, satisfying their advertisers in an industry where three out of every four commercials are bought by the 50 most powerful companies. In 2003, pleasing the Bush Administration also promised an economic benefit, since while the war was being waged, media companies were lobbying for regulatory changes that would benefit their bottom lines. FCC Chairman Michael Powell, son of the Secretary of State who was serving the war policy, rationalized the need for more media consolidation on grounds that only big media companies could afford to cover future wars the way this one was being covered.

The embedded journalist

THIS book focuses on the campaign that involved co-opting and orchestrating the news media. The most visible center of this strategy was the effort to embed reporters whose work was subsidized by the Pentagon, overseen by "public affairs" specialists and linked to TV news networks dominated by military experts approved by the Pentagon. When the war was over, Rem Rieder, the editor of the American Journalism Review (AJR) gushed: "It is clear that the great embedding experiment was a home run as far as the news media and the American people are concerned." Military Commander Gen. Tommy Franks agreed and pledged that embedding would be used in future conflicts.

AJR writer Sherry Ricchiardi amplified the view most favored by the mainstream media organizations that participated in the embedding experiment: "… despite initial skepticism about how well the system would work, and some dead-on criticism of overly enthusiastic reporting in the war's early stages, the net result was a far more complete mosaic of the fighting – replete with heroism, tragedy and human error – than would have been possible without it." She quotes Sandy Johnson, The Associated Press' Washington bureau chief who directed coverage of the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

"Compared with the scant access allowed then," Johnson says, "This system has worked incredibly well.

"The naysayers," she adds, "will be eating their words."

Will we?

Most embedded reporters claimed that they were not really restrained but rather assisted in their work by Pentagon press flacks. This is probably true – and the reason the system worked so well. Manipulation is always more insidious as well when the manipulated do not fully recognize how they are being used in a carefully calibrated media spin operation. Many of the "embeds" acknowledged that they came to identify with and sometimes befriend the soldiers in the units they tagged along with, usually with the caveat that it was no different from covering any beat.

Former TV reporter Michael Burton offered a different view: "The idea originated with the Pentagon, where military and political strategists pitched the idea to editors last year as a compromise. The Pentagon strategists, already planning for the Iraqi war, wanted proud, positive, and patriotic coverage over the national airwaves. If the editors agreed to all their provisions for security reviews, flagging of sensitive information, limitations on filming dead bodies, and other restrictions, then journalists would be welcome. The editors not only went along – they accepted the ground rules without a fight.

"Now, the story of war is seen through the eyes of the American battalions, but without the real violence. American children see more images of violence on nightly television than they do in this war, because of the deliberate editing at home. Instead, they see a fascination with high tech weapons, battle tactics, and military strategy reporting," Burton says.

He claims this leads to bias, although he acknowledges that many of his former colleagues demur: "Some reporters disagree, saying that eating, sleeping and living with the U.S. troops does not make them biased (in spite of the

constant descriptions of "we" and "us" when reporters talk about the military units). They say they are revealing more human-interest stories in real-time. But, while embedded journalism provides more opportunity for human interest, it only does so from the American military's perspective."

Veteran New York Times war reporter Chris Hedges seems to agree with this view. He told Editor & Publisher magazine that he preferred print reporting to the TV coverage but said that both were deeply flawed. "Print is doing a better job than TV," he observes. "The broadcast media display all these retired generals and charts and graphs, it looks like a giant game of Risk [the board game]. I find it nauseating." But even the print embeds have little choice but to "look at Iraq totally through the eyes of the U.S. military," Hedges points out. "That's a very distorted and self-serving view."

The Project on Excellence in Journalism studied the early coverage and found that half the embedded journalists showed combat action but not a single story depicted people hit by weapons. There were no reporters embedded with Iraqi families. None stationed with humanitarian agencies or the anti-war groups that had brought more than 15 million people on the streets before the war in a historically unprecedented display of global public opinion. The cumulative impact of the embedded reporters' work prompted former Pentagon press chief Kenneth Bacon to tell The Wall Street Journal: "They couldn't hire actors to do as good a job as they have done for the military."

War as sport

THEY were actors in a news drama that had all the earmarks of a sporting event. In fact it seems to be designed as one. I found propaganda analyst Paul de Rooje's perspective on this aspect very insightful He writes: "Propaganda campaigns usually follow a theme … During the 1991 Gulf War, the theme was the "video game", which was evident due to the number of demolition video clips. This theme couldn't be reused because the video-game scenes raised some uncomfortable questions about this enterprise especially among opponents of the war. It was therefore necessary to conjure a new theme, and all indications are that this campaign followed a "sports show" metaphor. The main advantage of this approach is that Americans are very comfortable with the "sport show" – it is part of their daily diet, it is intelligible to them, and it gives them a passive "entertained" role. Casting propaganda in such a known, comfortable framework makes people adjust favorably to the message…

"…When one watches a sports game, there is no need to think about the "why" of anything; it is only an issue of 'supporting our team'. You are also only supposed to root for the 'good guys' team, and hate the 'Iraqi meanies'. Dissident voices are also drowned out – you are only supposed to cheer for the home team… The 'play-by-play' military analysts incorporated the sports analogy completely–with maps/diagrams, advice to players, and making the audience think about the marvelous strategy…"

How the war was shown

MANY of the cable news networks pictured Iraq

as if it was the property of, and indistinguishable from, one mad man. Accordingly, attention was focused endlessly on where Saddam was, was he alive or dead, etc. Few references were made to U.S. dealings with his government in the l980s or the covert role the CIA played in his rise to power.

Saddam was as demonized in 2003 as Osama bin Laden had been in 2001, with news being structured as a patriotically correct morality soap opera with disinterested good guys (us) battling the forces of evil (them/him) in a political conflict constructed by the White House along "you are either with us or against us" lines. Few explained that there had been an undeclared war in effect for more than a decade with Iraq (and Islamic fundamentalists) well before the hot war of 2003 was launched. That was a war fought with systematic bombing in the name of defending no-fly zones and a campaign of U.N.- imposed sanctions that may have caused as many as a million deaths. This context, in fact, most context was missing. The coverage recalled the title of a book on our media culture published some years ago, aptly entitled "The Context of No Context."

The imbalances of coverage

THERE were many stories in this war but most followed a story line that reduced the terms of coverage to two sides, the forces of light versus the forces of darkness. This is typical of all war propaganda. In this war it was presented on one side, the "good side," by endless CENTCOM military briefings, Pentagon press conferences, Ari Fleischer White House Q&As, administration domination of the Sunday TV talk shows and occasional Presidential utterances riddled with religious references. Counter posed on the other side, the "bad side," were the crude press conferences of Iraq's hapless minister of misinformation, a cartoon figure whom no one took seriously. The two armies were spoken of as if there was some parity between their capacities. There was endless focus on the anticipated chemical or biological weapons attacks that never came, and on the weapons of mass destruction – finding WMD was a major reason for the war – that have yet to be found (at this writing).

Omitted from the picture and the reportage were views that offered any persuasive counter-narrative. There were few interviews with ordinary Iraqis, or experts not affiliated with pro-administration think tanks. Or with military people, other than retired military officials who quibbled over tactics not policy. Or with peace activists, European journalists and, until late in the day, Arab journalists. We saw images from Al-Jazeera but rarely heard its analysis. This list of what was left out is endless. Footage was sanitized, "breaking news" was often inaccurate" and critical voices were omitted as Fox News played up martial music and MSNBC ran promos urging "God Bless America."

The role of Fox News, an unabashed 24-hour- a-day booster of the war, probably deserves a book of its own. Its aggressive coverage pandered to the audience, simplified the issues and attacked competing media outlets and correspondents who deviated in any way from the "script" they were promoting. Fox's apparent success in attracting viewers with its non-stop hawkish narrative led to a "Fox Effect" that caused many competitors to try to emulate its approach. MSNBC was accused of trying to "outfox Fox." Its coverage polarized the media war and bullied war critics.

War as staged spectacle

ONE of the most dramatic stories of the war was a dramatic rescue of U.S. POW Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital. It was covered for days as triumph for the U.S. military. A month after it occurred, The BBC took a second look. Its reporters found that the truth of what happened contradicted what seemed at the time like a Made for TV Movie (and yet may inspire one!).

Reported Ellis Henican in Newsday: "Her rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived." And John Kampfner, a British journalist who has taken a hard second look at the case for the BBC and the Guardian newspaper, concurs. His documentary, "Saving Private Jessica: Fact or Fiction?" aired in Britain on March l8."

Robert Scheer of the Los Angeles Times added: "Sadly, almost nothing fed to reporters about either Lynch's original capture by Iraqi forces or her 'rescue' by U.S. forces turns out to be true. Consider the April 3 Washington Post story on her capture headlined 'She Was Fighting to the Death,' which reported, based on unnamed military sources, that Lynch 'continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds,' adding that she was also stabbed when Iraqi forces closed in.

"It has since emerged that Lynch was neither shot nor stabbed, but rather suffered accident injuries when her vehicle overturned," Scheer wrote. "A medical checkup by U.S. doctors confirmed the account of the Iraqi doctors, who said they had carefully tended her injuries, a broken arm and thigh and a dislocated ankle, in contrast to U.S. media reports that doctors had ignored Lynch," he concluded. (Later, the claims in the piece would be challenged as distorted by Geoffrey Sherwood on Asia Times: "Kampfner's analysis was flawed on several levels. If CENTCOM went to great lengths to manipulate the war reporting, as Kampfner alleges, then it failed miserably." This debate is likely to continue.)

The war's other "most dramatic moment" was the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein. Many media critics like Ted Rall debunked this story thoroughly. "The stirring image of Saddam's statue being toppled on April 9th turns out to be fake, the product of a cheesy media op staged by the U.S. military for the benefit of cameramen staying across the street at Baghdad's Palestine Hotel. This shouldn't be a big surprise. Two of the most stirring photographs of World War II – the flag raising at Iwo Jima and General MacArthur's stroll through the Filipino surf – were just as phony."

Competing narratives

OUTSIDE the United States, there were competing narratives in the coverage of the war. Americans saw a different war than the one presented in the media in Europe and the Arab world. These differences raised "vexing questions" for media scholar Jacqueline E. Sharkey "about the responsibilities of the press in wartime, journalistic values such as objectivity, and the relationships among the press, the public and the government . . . During the war in Iraq, television news operations in Arab countries provided viewers throughout the world with an alternative view of the conflict, " she wrote in the AJR.

"Arabs and Muslims are getting a dramatically different narrative from their American counterparts," says Fawaz Gerges, who holds a chair in

Middle Eastern studies and international affairs at Sarah Lawrence College and is an ABC news consultant on the Middle East. The U.S. networks have focused "on the technologically advanced nature of the American military armada," he says. "The Arab and Muslim press tend to focus on the destruction and suffering visited on Iraq by this military armada."

The U.S. government has at times sought to silence Arab media outlets. In other instances, U.S. media outlets like Fox News denounced their news coverage, in one case, as "culturally Arab." The U.S. military bombed Baghdad's Arab media center during the war, claiming two lives. In mid May 2003, The Wall Street Journal reported from Mosul: "The U.S. Army issued orders for troops to seize this city's only television station, leading an officer here to raise questions about the Army's dedication to free speech in postwar Iraq, people familiar with the situation said. The officer refused the order and was relieved of duty. The directive came from the 101st Airborne Division's commander, Maj. Gen. David Petraeus, who has ultimate authority in Mosul and the rest of northwest Iraq, the people familiar with the matter said. He said it was aimed at blocking the station from continuing to broadcast the Arabic news channel al-Jazeera."

Media Writer Norman Solomon noted in a syndicated report carried on Al-Jazeera's website: "Widely watched in the Arab world, Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war on Iraq has been in sharp contrast to the coverage on American television. As Time Magazine observed: "On US TV it means press conferences with soldiers who have hand and foot injuries and interviews with POWs' families, but little blood. On Arab and Muslim TV it means dead bodies and mourning." Coverage in Europe also differed from that offered by U.S. media outlets. Writing from Spain, professor Herman Gyr noted, "It is often hard to believe they are covering the same events and the gap between American and global perceptions of this war will certainly have significant repercussions for some time to come."

"In the end, I think, the difference between the two views of the war (that of America & Israel versus that of the rest of the world) boils done to a single question: Were there alternatives? Americans were told by their media that there were no alternatives and that the only option was for Americans to get in there and get the job done (=war) and let the rest of the world be damned. The rest of the world was told by their media that there were numerous other options (diplomatic, economic, etc.) that would have involved less death and destruction In short, there were two very different wars to watch: one almost entirely military in nature (the American version) and another portrayed in unrelentingly human terms (the global version)," Gyr concluded?

What many Americans don't know is that some U.S. outlets offered competing narratives as well. CNN mounted two expensive news gathering operations. CNN America offered coverage for the "homeland" that was often a thinly disguised form of boosterism, while CNN International served the rest of the world, with a more nuanced picture.

Independent journalist Michael Massing who spent part of the war encamped at the CENTCOM media center in Doha, Qatar, explained this seeming conflict in The New York Review of Books:

"The difference was not accidental. Six months before the war began, I was told, executives at CNN headquarters in Atlanta met regularly to plan separate broadcasts for America and the world. Those executives knew that (Paula) Zahn's girl-next-door manner and Aaron Brown's spacey monologues would not go down well with the British, French, or Germans, much less the Egyptians or Turks, and so the network, at huge expense, fielded two parallel but separate teams to cover the war. And while there was plenty of overlap, especially in the reports from the field, and in the use of such knowledgeable journalists as Christiane Amanpour, the international edition was refreshingly free of the self-congratulatory talk of its domestic one. In one telling moment, Becky Anderson, listening to one of Walter Rodgers's excited reports about U.S. advances in the field, admonished him: "Let's not give the impression that there's been no resistance." Rodgers conceded that she was right.

"CNN International bore more resemblance to the BBC than to its own domestic edition, a difference that showed just how market-driven were the tone and content of the broadcasts. For the most part, U.S. news organizations gave Americans the war they thought Americans wanted to see.'"

Obviously I could not see all the coverage or compare and contrast it in any systematic way. What is clear and important to recognize is that there are different ways stories can be covered. Media diversity matters.

The outside view of a media insider

THIS book brings together an outsider's coverage of the war focused on covering the coverage. I was 'self-embedded' in my small office in New York's Times Square, the media capital of the world, as editor of the not for profit Mediachannel.org, a global media monitoring website with more than l000 affiliates worldwide. I focused on covering the coverage on a global basis every day, and disseminating my findings, ruminations and dissections (I am known as "the news dissector") in a daily weblog. Many of these weblogs run 3,000 to 4000 words a day, and often appear seven days a week, which speaks to my obsession, fixation and passion on this subject. Call it what you will.

In addition, I write regularly on media issues for the Globalvision News Network (www.gvnews.net) that has 350 media partners in l00 countries. I was able to access this unique international news source as well.

I also bring to this work nearly 30 years of experience inside the U.S. media system. There is a mission to my "madness," as well as a method. From years of covering conflicts on the radio in Boston and on TV at CNN, ABC News and Globalvision, the company I co-founded, I have come see how often inadequate is the "first draft of history," as daily journalism is called. How it excludes more than it includes. How it narrows issues while framing them. How it tends to mirror and reflect the worldview of decision-makers while pandering to the patriotism of the audience. And, most interesting, now that we have the web for daily comparative access to stories in different countries on the same subject, how ideology and cultural outlook shape what we report and choose not to report.

That made it possible for me to monitor and review, with the help of readers and other editors in our shop, coverage from around the

world. Clearly some of it brought biases as strong as our own, but also offered information, context and background missing in U.S. media accounts. Most of our news outlets, for example, covered a war IN Iraq; others spoke of the war ON Iraq.In the U.S., there was often no line between jingoism and journalism.

This is the essence of the analysis I offered, day after day, cobbled together from articles from the world press, independent sources, international agencies and my own observations of the U.S. cable coverage, network shows, BBC and CBC News. I relied on the coverage from around the world to offer far more diverse accounts of the facts on the ground as well as their interpretation.

I began each morning at 6:00 a.m., watching TV at home with a remote in my hand and a notebook by my side. Daily, I scanned CNN, BBC, MSNBC, Fox and whatever else was on. I read The New York Times, the New York Post and other dailies and weeklies, as well as news magazines and opinion journals. I clipped away in a frenzy.

I was in the office at 7:00 a.m. and was soon hopscotching between web sites and email over flowing with stories I missed. I would cut and paste, collate and collage and then start writing. I worked fast, and sometimes sloppily. I squeezed in as much as I could and thought relevant and a useful corrective to the main media frame. Fortunately, I had few distractions. No phones. No one bugging me. I posted at 9:00 a.m. with an editor to oversee the copy and correct my many typos. Within an hour, we tried to send the weblog out to the many Mediachannel readers who subscribed.

After work, I'd be radar-locked back on the tube, watching the late news, the talk shows and even comedy programs. I found that the Comedy Channel's Jon Stewart was often more on target than the news networks. I preferred Canada's newscasts to our own. Sometimes CSPAN featured talks or hearings worth paying attention to. When I couldn't take it anymore, I tuned out and dropped off to sleep and then did it again the next day. Sometimes I had trouble sleeping as the stupidity of the coverage recycled in my brain.

I guess I am one of those "feelers" who empathize with war's victims more than the soldiers whose deadly work was often sanitized. On the tube I kept hearing about the "degrading" of Iraq's military while witnessing the degrading of journalism itself.

Watching the media war took a personal toll on me. I was often bleary-eyed, wandering to work in empty streets, as the city woke up to new terror alerts and fear that the war had consequences that we were not ready for. What kept me going was the constant supply of items, extracts from news stories and comments from readers. As well as a lot of encouragement of a type that most journalists rarely get. Journalists tend to resent our readers and rarely interact with them, but they help me enormously.

Fortunately, the weblog gave me the space and the freedom to have a rather extended say. Could it have been shorter? Probably. Would it have been as comprehensive? No. Clearly the haste of the effort did not permit as much reflection as I would have liked. I am sure my work is flawed with unintended errors, some of my making, and some in the reports I quoted. Covering war is often as chaotic as war itself.

You will encounter duplication. The reason is simple. While I was blogging daily for Media Channel, I also produced weekly reports on war coverage for the Globalvision News Network and

occasional articles for Alternet, Znet and other outlets. So there is some repetition even though I tried to avoid overdoing it. I decided against rewriting everything for this book because I believe there is value in putting all of this material written at the time together in one place. I believe even those who saw the original reports will welcome a chance to reread this body of work, especially, now, before our memories fade or when we prefer to forget all the pseudo news that bombarded us. It is important to remember our minds were invaded along with Iraq. We were targeted, too. Taken together, it is my hope that the book may be a useful in encouraging more critical reporting when Washington starts to prepare for the next war, and the one after that.

I deluge. You decide.

Not alone

IT may all sound crazy, and admittedly idiosyncratic, but at least I know am not alone. Increasingly I hear comments like "disgusting" applied to the way the war news was being presented. At one point, I led the blog with comments by the head of the BBC, Greg Dyke, as reported in the Guardian:

"BBC director general Greg Dyke has delivered a stinging rebuke to the U.S. media over its "unquestioning" coverage of the war in Iraq and warned the government against allowing the U.K. media to become 'Americanized.'"

What bothers me about his remarks is the all-too-common view that "unquestioning coverage" is what all of American journalism has become. It has not. I hope we are demonstrating that this one-note war journalism charade (parade?) doesn't speak for all Americans.

I have collected excerpts from weblogs and longer pieces for this book. My hope is that it will encourage others to scrutinize the coverage and take responsibility for their media choices and for trying to improve our press. I hope it will contribute to the construction of a counter narrative that challenges all the half-truths we saw.

America's media is too important to be left in the hands of the few who own it, and the marketers who run it. Media responsibility has to become an issue, not just a complaint. Condemning governments for exaggerated claims about WMDs and an invented war rationale is not enough. Our media has to be held accountable for serving as their megaphone.

The future of our democracy depends on it.

Questions to ponder

IN this regard I, like so many others, am left with deeper questions than the ones I began with. There are no easy answers.

Some years ago, an old friend, social historian Stuart Ewen posed a few such questions in "PR: A Social History of Spin," on the power of public relations, showing how scientific and well advanced the engineering of consent has become. He asks:

"Can there be a democracy when the public is a fractionalized audience? When the public has no collective presence?

"Can there be a public when public agendas are routinely predetermined by "unseen engineers?

"Can there be a democracy when the tools of communication are neither democratically distributed nor democratically controlled?