6 CNN war porn, 'shock and awe' and a set designed in Hollywood

ALASTAIR THOMPSON
Scoop *website editor*

> 'The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers.' — *Thomas Jefferson*

THE ROLE of the media in civil society is to inform and illuminate in the public interest, to provide the public with an informed basis upon which they can exercise their democratic rights. Nothing changes during wartime.

The philosopher Jeremy Bentham once remarked, 'As to the evil which results from a censorship, it is impossible to measure it, for it is impossible to tell where it ends.' During the Second Gulf War the media not only had to contend with censorship — much of which was self-imposed — but also with information warfare.

This information war was conducted on numerous fronts and began well before the bombs started to fall. Among the techniques used were direct attacks on journalists (i.e. killing them), and a huge variety of intentional misinformation strategies: lies, obstruction, legal threats and intimidation, linguistic sophistry, staged media events, planted information, forgery, and co-intelpro type slander/control file attacks on important commentators and war opposition figures.

And it is impossible indeed to determine the evil that has resulted from all this. All that can be said with certainty is that the vast majority of the general public remain hugely uninformed, not only about what happened during the war, but about why the war was waged in the first place and about what has happened since. And in this respect the media has failed to perform its role. Because the public in New Zealand, as well as in the US, UK and Australia, remain largely uninformed about what happened in Iraq, they are ill-equipped to hold their governments to account.

In principle the counter-propaganda role ought to have been played by the mainstream media. TV3 promises to its viewers to always, 'ask all the questions', CNN promises viewers will be the 'first to know'. Neither organisations, however, tried very hard to ask any of the difficult questions posed by this war. Newspaper reporters did little better with a few notable exceptions, such as Robert Fisk of *The Independent.*

In New Zealand, a notable exception to the general rule was Radio New

Zealand, which at least went to the trouble of interviewing foreign commentators directly, rather than picking up pre-packaged content. Also worthy of a bouquet was the *New Zealand Listener*'s editor, Finlay Macdonald and writer Gordon Campbell in particular.

On a more positive note, we observed the emergence of a remarkably effective new media force — the independent internet media — of which *Scoop* is a part. The internet medium is populated by an army of independent writers, editors and reporters. While they are working completely without formal co-ordination, and mostly without payment, they have done an absolutely remarkable job of providing timely and potent counter-propaganda, and continue to do so.

In *Scoop's* experience, within hours of any significant piece of misinformation appearing, a well researched and referenced column appeared to counter and challenge the orthodox view.

The war before the war

In February 2002, *The New York Times* reported that the US Defense Department had established an organisation called the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) shortly after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Among the methodologies that the OSI said it would use was 'planting of false stories in foreign media' in order to manage perceptions of the War on Terror. In late February, the OSI was formally dissolved under the orders of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. However, the formal existence of an organisation committed to lying to the public is arguably not necessary for lies to be told, and the role that we now know the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans played in the war seems to have been remarkably similar to that intended for the OSI.

White House Chief-of-Staff Andrew Card formally introduced the countdown to war in the first week of September 2002. 'From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August,' he told *The New York Times*. And thus began the war against Iraq. This war reached its nadir on 15 February 2003 when an estimated 11-15 million people marched against the planned war in Iraq in close to 1000 cities — the biggest demonstration in human history.

At a lead-up demonstration on January 18, though nearly one million marched around the world and more than 200,000 in Washington DC, the Associated Press estimated the DC crowd at just 30,000. During an earlier, also impressively large, October 26 march in Washington, with at least 100,000 in attendance, *NPR's* Nancy Marshall remarked: 'It was not as large as the

organisers of the protest had predicted. They had said there would be 100,000 people here. I'd say there are fewer than 10,000.' Later, under protest, both *NPR* and *The New York Times* — two alleged bastions of liberal left-leaning media in the US — were forced to correct their reports.

In the war against the war on Iraq the White House chose a blunt approach. Repeat a single simple idea often enough, and you will drum it into the minds of your audience, even if it is completely untrue. By the time war broke out nearly 50 per cent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11. Even more considered that they were under threat of an imminent terrorist nuclear strike.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's war spin was a great deal more sophisticated. At Downing St message discipline focused around a series of dossiers. The first of these dossiers was based largely on a plagiarised undergraduate thesis. The second based one of its most significant conclusions — that Iraq was lying about its attempts to purchase uranium from Niger — on a set of forgeries. Importantly, both these facts were known before the war began but given no emphasis by the mainstream media outlets.

The war itself

At 1pm on March 18 NZT (March 17 primetime in the US) Bush delivered his 48 hour ultimatum to Saddam: Get out or face an invasion. But even in this final phase of the countdown, George was still being disingenuous. Ari Fleischer explained the real position the following day: 'The President also made plain to the American people that if Saddam were to leave, the American forces, coalition forces would still enter Iraq'.

Bush's 'get out of town' ultimatum came from the same lexicon that produced Shock and Awe, and the Most Wanted deck of playing cards. The media strategy in the war proper was to turn the war into something the audience — Andrew Card's market who need to be sold the war — were familiar with, pure Hollywood drama.

So Sheriff Bush issued his ultimatum to the villain of the peace, and set the tone of what was to come. A war made for the small screen, minutely stage managed, and in which every shot was approved by the Pentagon's script editors.

'CNN war-porn' set the tone for what followed. Reports in newspapers evoked a sense of moment with purple and gushing patriotic prose, satellite crossovers on live TV superficially took the viewer to war, albeit with no actual

information about what was going on. The media played the role they were asked to play – cheerleaders. They asked few questions and received no answers.

Instead, we watched grainy pictures of tanks streaming across the desert, the Seventh Cavalry — a name evoking Injun hunting parties of yore. We read reports about scuds that were not actually scuds. We heard numerous reports about the taking of Um Qasr, the discovery of WMDs and the surrounding of Basra, nearly all of which turned out to be false.

We waited patiently for the top billing act, Shock and Awe. And we got used to briefings from generals delivered at a press center off a set designed in

Three information warfare technique examples

SCOTT RITTER — A CO-INTELPRO PRO HIT?

SCOTT RITTER is a former UNSCOM Chief Arms Inspector. He is (or was) the leading anti-war arms expert on the US network TV circuit. His documentary, *In Shifting Sands*, is a compelling indictment of US policy. Just before the war began, a relatively obscure New York newspaper reported that he *may* have been arrested, in June 2001, as the result of an internet sex sting, in which an undercover cop posing as a 16-year-old girl lured him into 'sex chat'over the internet. That is, as hundreds of thousands protested in the streets, this staunch Republican and solid family man who became one of the War Party's most formidable enemies was suddenly 'exposed' — using supposedly sealed court records — as an 'alleged' child molester. He disappeared from TV screens immediately.

THE STATUE TOPPLING — PURE THEATRE?

THE 'defining moment', the 'tipping point' in the war. Network television in the US lingered live at the scene for two hours waiting breathlessly for the triumphant moment. The following day it was heralded all around the world with huge front page photos showing an American flag from the 9/11 rubble placed over Saddam's nose. Banner headlines proclaimed the fall of Saddam and Baghdad. The event was reported everywhere as if it was a spontaneous crowd reaction, and that the marines involved in the toppling had just helped out the crowd. Donald Rumsfeld likened it to the fall of the Berlin Wall. John

Hollywood. The generals' answers were always the same: 'The US is doing its absolute best to avoid civilian casualties. .. No I can not confirm any reports of any actual bombing mistakes... No I cannot confirm any reports of Iraqi resistance or casualties.' Suspicions of Iraqi malpractice were hinted at whenever anything bad happened. WMDs were discovered in every barn. Later, by the time reporters emerged with pieces of identifiable wreckage and photographs confirming US Air Force involvement in the killing of civilians, or that the suspected WMDs were actually just insect repellant, the attention of the media had moved on to the next explosion.

Some aspects of the media's failures were understandable. It paid in spades

Lee Anderson in the *New Yorker* described it thus: 'By the time we got back to the hotel, the marines had arrived. A man who was standing in a crowd gathered at the side of the road called out to ask us if we were Americans, and when we said yes, the whole group began cheering and applauding us, clapping their hands as if they were at a performance in a theatre. Not long afterward, in the traffic circle in front of the hotel, a statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down by soldiers in an armoured personnel carrier.'

JUDITH MILLER AND THE WMD FAIRY — A PLANTED STORY?

AN ARTICLE appeared in *The New York Times* on April 21 by Judith Miller, a journalist who once sold a book about how bad Saddam was in bulk to the Kuwaiti Government. Miller's report, published in *The New Zealand Herald* (and hundreds if not thousands of other newspapers worldwide) studiously avoided claiming the existence of any actual WMD evidence, and contained enough disclaimers to make you wonder why it had been published it all. Yet it still managed to make enough wiggle room for President Bush to claim two days later: 'Iraqis with first-hand knowledge of these programmes, including several top officials who have come forward recently — some voluntarily — *(laughter)* — others not — *(laughter)* — are beginning to cooperate, are beginning to let us know what the facts were on the ground. ... it's going to take time to find them. But we know he had them. And whether he destroyed them, moved them, or hid them, we're going to find out the truth.'

for reporters in Iraq to be accredited and embedded — and to consent to US Government censorship.

On March 10 — before the war began — Kate Adie, a senior BBC war correspondent, told Irish national radio broadcaster Tom McGurk. ' I was told by a senior officer in the Pentagon, that if uplinks —that is the television signals out of ... Baghdad, for example— were detected by any planes ... electronic media... mediums, of the military above Baghdad ... they'd be fired down on. Even if they were journalists ...'

On April 10, after the most egregious examples of journalist targeting, FAIR issued an advisory, IS KILLING PART OF PENTAGON PRESS POLICY? This said:

> On April 8 ... US military forces launched what appeared to be deliberate attacks on independent journalists covering the war, killing three and injuring four others. In one incident, a US tank fired an explosive shell at the Palestine Hotel, where most non-embedded international reporters in Baghdad are based. Earlier in the day, the US launched separate but near-simultaneous attacks on the Baghdad offices of al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV. Both outlets had informed the Pentagon of their exact locations.

Alastair Thompson is editor of the independent New Zealand website Scoop. *This is an abridged version of his public address entitled 'The role of media in the Second Gulf War' at St Andrew's On The Terrace, Wellington, on 29 April 2003. Links to online media sources for this article can be found at the full address:* www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0304/S00223.htm