

## 2. Looking behind the terror curtain: A developing world journalism perspective

### ABSTRACT

This article explores and challenges the hypocrisy and misrepresentations surrounding Western media reportage of the global ‘war on terror’. While the so-called Coalition of the Willing has introduced a rash of new anti-terror laws since 11 September 2001, many of the very freedoms which President Bush said the terrorists were out to destroy, have now been severely curtailed. This article is also a critique of the dangers of anti-terrorism laws for media seeking to report a complex truth about nationalist struggles.

*KALINGA SENEVIRATNE*

*Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore*

**I**N OCTOBER 1994, I was part of the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency’s team that covered the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. We were in the Egyptian capital for two weeks and during that time I noted a small story in the only English language newspaper there. It was just a two paragraph report picked up from one of the Western news agencies, which said Saddam Hussein was wooing Islamic fundamentalists because he had just banned the sale of alcohol and closed all night clubs in Baghdad.

Two weeks later, I was in Baghdad, at the now famous Palestine Hotel, after making a 20-hour road journey from Amman. I was on a 10-day assignment for IPS to report on the impact of the economic sanctions on the people of Iraq. After I was introduced to my Iraqi Information Ministry minder, I questioned him about this ban on alcohol and night clubs—not because I was planning to enjoy both—but because I was sceptical of Western media re-

porting of Iraq. The government official confirmed that it was indeed correct.

A few days later I found out the reason for this ban: because of economic sanctions there were no soft drinks available in the country. However, there was a local alcoholic brew, which was becoming very popular with teenagers. It was to stop teenagers becoming alcoholics that the government banned the sale of alcohol, not because Saddam's Baath Party was ditching socialism for Islamic fundamentalism. And the night clubs were banned, because Iraqi women, many of whom were working in professional jobs in Baghdad before the economic sanctions made them redundant, were now indulging in prostitution in these night clubs to make ends meet. The government did not want to encourage it, especially among middle class women.

How and why did the Western media interpret this as Saddam's conversation with Islamic fundamentalism? There were no Western journalists present in Baghdad when I went there. It is likely that they picked up the news item about this ban from an Iraqi radio broadcast, either in Beirut, Cairo, Cyprus or even London. They added *misconceptions, speculation, prejudice* and *ignorance* in to the equation, and came to the conclusion that this was a policy of wooing Islamic fundamentalists.

Almost a decade later, it is manufactured news values like this, which demonised Saddam that created the climate for Bush, Blair and Howard to lie to their own people with immunity, and invade Iraq—a country that has the world's second largest reserves of oil.

Now let me take you to Thailand. In 2003, 18 months after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, I arrived in Bangkok for the third time since these attacks, and each time I was called up by the customs and my bags were checked at Bangkok airport, even though I was taking the green 'nothing to declare' exit. Each time I noticed it was only the coloured people who were checked. When I left three days later, the immigration officer sent my passport along with a couple of other 'Indians' for an additional check, before we were allowed to leave the country.

Ever since my first visit to Thailand in 1980, I have been to Bangkok more than 30 times. It is only since 9/11 attacks that my bags have been checked. It was obvious to me that because of my colour they were categorising me as a potential Islamic terrorist. The irony is that I am a Buddhist, like most Thais, following the same Theravada tradition. For the last 20 years Thai Buddhist monks in Sydney have been performing all our family religious ceremonies, including the funeral service for my father in 2001.

After I returned to Singapore, from this 2003 trip, I was so offended by the Thai behaviour, that I fired a letter to the editor of *The Nation* newspaper in Bangkok, pointing out my cultural connections to the Thais, and acknowledging that while I understand Thai's fear of Islamic terrorism, there is no need to absorb the racism of the West's anti-terror campaign.

I also pointed out in the letter, that the Thai Prime Minister, in recent months had visited India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka trying to promote closer economic cooperation with the region. But, if the Thais treat South Asian professions this way, when they visit the country, it will only make the two regions drift apart not come closer together.

*The Nation* published my letter, and I have been to Bangkok about four times since then, and my bags have never been checked. Even once when I offered my bags to a customs officer for checking, he patted me on the shoulder and said: 'No need'.

Recently when I related this experience to a Thai friend of mine, who is an opposition Senator, he said that his Prime Minister has big plans to develop trade relations with India and other South Asian countries, as well as welcome increasing tourists from this region. So that when their offence was pointed out, the government may have taken remedial action.

But what is the lesson here for journalism?

### **'Parrot journalism'**

Working in the heart of Asia, what I have noticed in the last few years is that there is hardly any interaction among the Asian media. Thus, they learn about each other from news coming via Western sources, and transmitted through the Asian media outlets. Obviously they absorb the Western perspectives, their prejudices and stereotypes, and they reproduce this in their own media in their own language.

I call this 'parrot journalism'. Unfortunately, the predominant Confucian culture in many countries in East and South East Asian region, which prescribes respect for authority, has not helped to develop independent minded journalists. But things are slowly changing. In a keynote address to a regional media conference in Beijing in July 2005, Dr Shashi Tharoor, Under-Secretary General for Public Information of the United Nations, said:

What passes for global media in the West is really the media of the West, which raises some interesting questions. Is it despite, or because,

the world has grown smaller that a large part of today's intercultural conflicts are a result of perceived cultural humiliation? Does the media do the best job it can to give a voice and a face to the world's marginalised? Who makes the cut to get on the air, to earn screen time in this brave new world? Yes, there is the occasional Third World voice, but it speaks a First World language. (Tharoor, 2005).

These days if you watch television in a country like Singapore, you will find a lot of Indian financial experts on air. They are usually employees of multinational companies; not local, but expat staff, sometimes even speaking with heavy American or British accents. Do they present the voice of the Third World or even that of Asia? I don't think so. They usually represent the voice of global capital. The same applies to Asian presenters employed by satellite based news channels like CNN, CNBC and Bloomberg, which broadcast into Asian homes. Quoting Dr Tharoor again:

What passes from my world on TV screens in the West is often a western perception of my world. Are those speaking for their cultures in the globalised media authentic representatives of them?

I consider this a very important question that could get many complicated answers. The point is that the whole international media debate about global terrorism lacks this authentic Third World voice, while the Third World and its people are demonised as the cause of the problem. While terrorism is no doubt a serious threat to civilisation—whether from the First World or the Third World—it is not a new phenomena.

Let me take the example of Sri Lanka. Since the early 1980s, reporting by the Western media—basically the Anglo-Saxon media—has been fairly sympathetic to what the majority of people in Sri Lanka view as the terrorists—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or 'Tamil Tigers'.

Why is the Western media which is so hostile to 'Islamic terrorists' so sympathetic to Tamil Tiger terrorists? This is a question often asked by most Sri Lankans. Over the years, I have noted that the BBC, ABC Radio's 'Indian-Pacific' programme and SBS-TV have been fairly biased towards the LTTE point of view. Very rarely do they give air time to the views of Sinhalese nationalists, even though they are always quick to paint them as 'extremists', 'hawks' or 'anti-peace'.

## Hardliners and the hawks

In November 2005, when the Sri Lankans elected nationalist Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse as its President in a close election, the Western media immediately named him a ‘hardliner’ or a ‘hawk’ because he campaigned on a platform of an unitary state, which is opposed to the Tamil Tiger’s demand for an autonomous federal state. The BBC led the charge and others followed and when Rajapakse another nationalist politician, Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, as his Premier, this media went into overdrive. One classic example is an article by the AP newsagency which had the heading ‘Hardline Sri Lankan president to swear in hawkish prime minister’:

Sri Lanka’s newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse on Monday swore in a hardliner as prime minister, who in the past has pushed for crushing Tamil rebels to end Sri Lanka’s lingering civil war.

The ceremony marked the start of 72-year-old Ratnasiri Wickremanayaka’s third stint as prime minister.

As prime minister in 2000 and again in 2001, Wickremanayaka spurned compromise with Tamil Tiger rebel officials—pushing for a military solution.

Prior to his appointment, he served as deputy defence minister. He has also served as minister of public security and of Buddhist affairs ...

Rajapakse won the election with support from hardline Marxist party and a section of Sri Lanka’s influential Buddhist monks by promising not to share political power with the rebels and not to give any tsunami foreign aid to the rebels to administer... (*The Lanka Academic*, 2005).

Interestingly the byline indicates that it had been written by a Sinhalese journalist from Colombo, Shimali Senenayake. Either she has followed the ‘herd mentality’ or the editor at AP’s world desk in New York or Washington may have changed the heading, and even the first lead-in paragraph to the story, to give it this slant. This is a headline that may attract editors in the West to use the story, but at the same time it gives a misleading negative twist to the whole story. *The Island* (2005) newspaper said in an editorial:

It is too early to say whether Mahinda is a hawk or a dove. On the other hand, what the peace activists and the Western media should be concerned about is not so much whether Mahinda is a hawk or a dove, but

to make a dove of the LTTE leader. If they could do that today, peace will dawn on this land tomorrow—that's for sure.

Sri Lankans, especially Sinhalese, believe that Western media's sympathetic coverage of the Tamil Tigers, and the exposure given to their voices in the international media, has encouraged them to take a hardline attitude towards a peace agreement with the government. What the BBC does for the Tamil Tigers compares to what Al-Jazeera does for Al-Qaida. I don't think this is an exaggeration.

In the large Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the West, there are many committed activists of the LTTE who have cleverly cultivated the goodwill of the Western media by projecting themselves as victims of racial discrimination in their homeland. The Anglo-Saxon media, ever willing to paint ex-colonies of the British as hotbeds of ethnic and religious discrimination since they left these countries, have been very gullible. If you are not familiar with the colonial histories of these countries, you can easily fall prey to these lobbying campaigns.

Having closely observed the reporting of the Western media on Sri Lanka for the past 20 years, I would say that there is this principle of 'one size fits all' applied here to news values. For most journalists, this is yet another conflict in the Third World. They apply their religious and ethnic filters. You refer to a factbook and find statistics that over 90 percent of Sinhalese are Buddhists and a similar percentage of Tamils are Hindus. So from the very beginning a story on a terrorist attack in Sri Lanka was described as a conflict between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese.

If you are familiar with the history of the country and the religious beliefs of the two communities you will know that this cannot be a religious conflict. The two religions and their religious cultures are closely linked in Sri Lanka. As a child, before my exams, my grandmother took me first to the Buddhist temple for a *puja*—religious blessing—and after that she took me to the Hindu temple close by for another *puja* to get the blessings of the Hindu god Ganesh.

In Sri Lankan Buddhism, Hindu gods are considered to occupy a higher level of existence, where they would have the power to protect you. Even god Vishnu, the Sinhalese believe has been assigned by the Buddha to protect Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Thus, almost every Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka has a shrine for Hindu gods. Meanwhile, the Hindus believe that Buddha was a

reincarnation of Vishnu, and he was born in this world to relieve human beings from suffering.

There is a strong belief in Sri Lanka today that some ‘faith-based’ Western organisations and governments are using the Tamil Tigers to destabilise the region.

### **Christian evangelists and ‘unethical conversions’**

It would be an interesting investigative reporting exercise for an Australian journalist to inquire into the people in Australia who are promoting the concept of Tamil Eelam (homeland) and raising money for Tamil refugees. You will find many of them are Christian Tamils and Christian churches. If you investigate further, you will find that many of these churches are fundamentalist sects who use this money for so called ‘charitable’ work in north-eastern Sri Lanka. For most Hindus and Buddhists, what they are involved in is ‘unethical conversions’, exploiting the poverty of the people.

Two years ago, at the height of this unethical conversion debate in Sri Lanka, while on a visit to Colombo, I spoke to both Hindu and Buddhist organisations there, and found out that they were working in a joint-committee to draft an ‘anti-conversions’ bill to be presented to Parliament. I did a report on this for IPS news agency at that time, and this was the only international news agency to report about this cooperation between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese.

Currently, there are two anti-conversion bills tabled in Parliament. Most reports in the Western media about this issue of unethical conversions are based on the propaganda supplied by the Christian sects, which claim that Christians—who constitute about eight percent of the population and include both Sinhalese and Tamils—are being persecuted in the country and militant Buddhists are attacking their churches.

On the other hand, Buddhists and Hindus have been deeply angered by Christian evangelists who teach their converts to destroy Buddha statues as well as those of Hindu gods. Most of these evangelists come from the US, South Korea and also Australia.

Why is the Western media accepting the propaganda of these Christian sects without investigating the ground reality? I think it is because of cultural vicinity, or compatibility of the message. It is an issue of ‘them’ vs ‘us’. These are journalists who have been schooled in an education system where ‘us’—

the Christians—are seen as always civilised, liberal and educated, while ‘others’—the non-Christian—are seen as illogical, emotional, superstitious and perhaps prone to violence.

Do you ever hear of the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda described as ‘Christian terrorists’? No, not even in the BBC. For that matter did we ever hear of the IRA in Ireland described as ‘Catholic terrorists’ even when they were bombing London in the early 1980s?

It is important that in media education institutions in the West that such double standards are pointed out to future journalists. If the Western media reports these issues with better insights, it may be possible to avoid looming religious conflicts in Asian countries by putting pressure on these church groups ‘back home’ to stop what locals in Asian countries see as ‘unethical’ activities.

### **Economic injustices and Buddhist nationalism**

In Sri Lanka, we are currently witnessing the rise of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist movement. The presidential election of 2005 was one example of this. As I mentioned earlier, often the international media interprets this as Buddhist ‘extremism’; I have never seen a report which reflects the fact that this is a movement to empower Sinhalese Buddhists (Seneviratne, Sept, 2005).

One might perhaps say, that I am biased myself in such an interpretation, because I am a Sinhalese Buddhist. But, unless you are aware of the historical factors that have given rise to this movement, you will find it difficult to grasp the story and understand the historical context of it.

Refuting the ‘racist’ or ‘chauvinistic’ labels that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local and foreign media give them, members of this ‘patriotic’ movement argue that they are trying to save the country from the forces of globalisation, that they say is being imposed from the outside.

As one of the MPs of the Buddhist monk’s National Heritage Party (JHU), Venerable Aturaliya Ratana explained, this Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is very much a development movement:

Throughout the country, people are rising up to the injustices and if that is called Buddhist nationalism I don’t think that is correct. What is happening is that people have mobilised, using our language and cultural heritage, as the basis of the struggle. (Seneviratne, 2005, p. 38)



Leading up to both the 2005 presidential elections and the 2004 parliamentary elections, when the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist movement polled heavily, the Western media kept on predicting that they were extremists who could not garner a majority vote. Both times they were proved wrong.

The problem is that these foreign reporters or their local recruits, rarely make an attempt to go to the rural areas and speak to the people. To do that costs both money and time. Instead they speak to the English-speaking elites and the NGOs in Colombo, which have a vested interest in keeping the nationalists out of power.

Western media need to review the belief that so-called civil society or NGOs represent the people. Often they are English-speaking middle class elites. Often they themselves don't understand the aspirations of the rural people.

Another important issue here is how the Western media views human rights. It is usually seen from the Western perspective of individual rights, whereas in many Asian societies rights are seen more in terms of community or group rights. For a Western reporter, the grievances of minority community members score higher than that of a majority community member.

The reality in many Asian countries—Sri Lanka is a good example—is that because of the colonial experience, the majority community is at a disadvantage economically with respect to the minority communities. In Sri Lanka, about 90 percent of the poor are Sinhalese Buddhists.

The 2005 presidential election winner, Mahinda Rajapakse, campaigned on a platform to provide subsidies to rice farmers, midday meals to poor school children and to protect their water resources from privatisation. These are the issues that won him the elections—not any threat to go to war against Tamil Tigers. In fact, throughout the campaign he argued that he would go for a negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict.

If the Western media were to understand these issues in the proper context and report accordingly, it would also help countries like Australia, New Zealand and the European Community to fine tune their development aid policies as well as trade policies. Such reporting by the Western media would make a better contribution to world peace than chasing after terrorists—both real and imagined.

Now a comparison with what is happening in Iraq.

## **Tsunami and Fallujah—what is the difference?**

In November 2004, the world saw one of the most horrendous war crimes in modern history. But, most people have yet to know the real story about the attack on Fallujah in Iraq. Writing after the Asian tsunami last year, journalist Mike Whitney (2005) observed:

The American media has descended on the Asian tsunami with all the fervour of feral animals in a meat locker. The newspapers and TVs are plastered with bodies drifting out to sea, battered carcasses strewn along the beach and bloated babies lying in rows. Every aspect of the suffering is being scrutinised with microscopic intensity by the predatory lens of the media.

This is where the Western press really excels: in the celebratory atmosphere of human catastrophe. Their penchant for misery is only surpassed by their appetite for profits.

Where was this ‘free press’ in Iraq when the death toll was skyrocketing towards 100,000? So far, we’ve seen nothing of the devastation in Fallujah where more than 6000 were killed and where corpses were lined along the city’s streets for weeks on end.

Of course, CBS was there, embedded with the American troops, and it reported: ‘The US military’s ground and air assault of Fallujah has gone quicker than expected, with the entire city occupied after six days of fighting’ (CBS News/AP, 2004). The broadcaster went on to report that more than 1200 ‘insurgents’ had been killed with the loss of 38 of their own troops. CNN also reported that the ‘enemy is broken’, quoting a US general (CNN, 2004). The report said the US troops had killed ‘1000 to 2000 insurgents, again quoting a US marine.

While both these reports quoted extensively from US military sources, there was not a single quote (voice clip) from any locals. The BBC reported at the beginning of the onslaught that US strikes had destroyed a Fallujah hospital. It accepted without questioning the Pentagon description of this as a Saudi Islamic charity-funded hospital used as an insurgents’ hideout. Again there were no comments from any local sources, which are not connected to the Iraqi puppet regime.

Fallujah is a city of more than 300,000 people and the assault was preceded by eight weeks of aerial bombardment. US troops cut off the city’s water, power and food supplies, a practice condemned as a violation of the



BEN BOHANE

**A Muslim protest in Jakarta against American policies: The US and its 'axis of freedom' allies seem to have had second thoughts about human rights.**

Geneva Convention by a UN Special Rapporteur, who accused occupying forces of 'using hunger and deprivation of water as a weapon of war against the civilian population' (Marqusee, 2005).

US sources have claimed that some 6000 insurgents were taking shelter in the city, and in order to flush them out they destroyed the whole city. Fallujah's compensation commissioner has reported that 36,000 of the city's 50,000 houses have been destroyed, along with 8400 shops, 60 nurseries and schools, and 65 mosques and shrines.

Only the death toll for so-called 'insurgents' was given to journalists. What happened to the rest? How many more were killed? According to some reports two-thirds of the city's population have fled to refugee camps.

Should not the media be investigating where are they are now? What are they doing? Who are helping them now and how are they trying to rebuild their lives?

With the first anniversary of the tsunami, we had the Western media descending in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia to find out exactly these

things with respect to the tsunami victims. Isn't Falluja a man-made version of a tsunami?

### **Five years on—are the terrorists winning on points?**

Nine days after the 9/11 attacks in New York, President George W. Bush addressed a joint session of Congress and the American people, answering the question many Americans were asking: 'Why do they [the terrorists] hate us?'. He said: 'They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he was correct. But five years later, if we look back on what Bush loves to call the 'war on terror', and if we use the metaphor of a boxing match that is still in progress, I would say the terrorists are currently leading on points.

The US, along with their Anglo-Saxon allies—Britain and Australia, have introduced a rash of new anti-terror laws in the past couple of years. The very freedoms which President Bush said the terrorists were out to destroy, are being destroyed with legislation. These laws help to make the *ISA* (*Internal Security Act*) of Singapore and Malaysia, which have been criticised by the Americans and Australians prior to 2001 as 'instruments of human rights violations', look very liberal in comparison.

It was not that long ago when then US Vice-President Al Gore, addressing an APEC conference dinner in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, hailed Malaysia's 'Reformasi' movement which was campaigning to abolish the *ISA*, and then rudely walked out of the function room to the annoyance of the host (then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed). It seems, following the 9/11 horror, that the US and its 'axis of freedom' allies seem to have had second thoughts about human rights. The US *Patriot Act* and British and Australian anti-terror laws passed in 2005 have been criticised by human rights groups within their own countries for curtailing basic freedoms.

'Any change that affects our right to live in peace and to be free from arbitrary arrest and detention must be subjected to utmost scrutiny,' said Australia's Law Council president John North (2005) when the government tabled the anti-terror law in Parliament. He went on to say: 'They are arming our police and intelligence services with powers that history shows will likely lead to abuse and misuse.' Nobel Prize-winning author J. M Coetzee (Jaspan, 2005), a South African living in Australia, said upon reading the bill: 'I used

to think the people who created [South Africa's apartheid] laws that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know they were just pioneers ahead of time.'

As journalists, we need to ask raise these points and ask the questions rather than cheerlead the governments of Bush, Blair and Howard. But what is the media doing instead? Two reports by AP news agency were published back-to-back on Yahoo news on 2 October 2005 (Figures 1, 2). One story started by saying, 'terrorists targeted the Indonesian tropical resort of Bali', killing at least 25 people, while the other said 'about 1000 troops, backed by attack helicopters and warplanes, swept into a village near the Syrian border Saturday in an offensive aimed at rooting out Al-Qaeda militants'. And it also said 'US aircrafts firing missiles struck houses and cars, sending palls of smoke into the sky'. What is the difference between a suicide bomber blowing himself up in a restaurant and killing 25 people, and US aircraft dropping bombs on villages and killing perhaps more civilians? Are not both terrorist attacks? Or is it that these become terrorist attacks only when Westerners are killed?

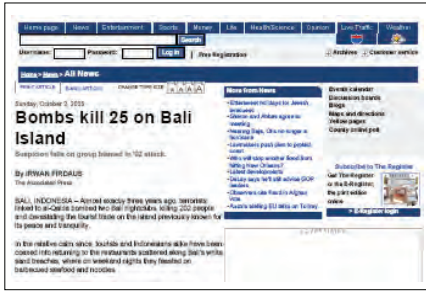


Figure 1: AP, 2 October 2005.



Figure 2: AP, 2 October 2005.

For many people of colour—it doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or even Christian (remember the Catholic Brazilian who was killed by the London police last year)—the global war on terror is increasingly becoming a war against them. I'm a Buddhist Australian citizen, yet, when I arrived at Brisbane airport from Singapore to deliver a keynote address to the JEA conference in the Gold Coast in December 2005, I was questioned at the airport by a security officer who suspected that I was travelling on a forged passport.

These things are happening because some of the multicultural policies in which contributed to attracting migrants from around the world and creating harmonious tolerant societies, are gradually coming unstuck, both due to abuse of the anti-terror laws by security agencies and a growing Christian fundamentalist movement which is as intolerant of non-believers as its Islamic counterparts.

In March 2005, the British government rushed through Parliament the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* after Britain's highest court ruled that the indefinite detention of foreign terrorism suspects breached human rights law. 'First we had indefinite detention, now we have curfews and tagging— but still without trial. The government refuses to acknowledge the basic truth: Punishment without trial is unacceptable, no matter what,' noted Ben Ward,<sup>1</sup> special counsel in Europe for Human Rights Watch (HRW), one of the world's leading human rights watchdogs.

Both the British and Australian laws make it legal to curtail freedom of speech and assembly on mere suspicion of being involved in a terrorist movement, by putting people under house arrest, by attaching electronic tracking devices to suspects, and by broadly controlling where a suspect can go and who they could meet. These measures could be in place for up to a year without any criminal charges having to be filed.

In July 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), which frequently criticises Third World dictatorships for human rights violations, issued a strongly worded critique of the US government's human rights record at home and abroad. The committee called on the US to immediately abolish all secret detention facilities. This would ensure that all detainees at Guantanamo Bay are provided a fair opportunity to challenge the lawlessness of their detention and to hold accountable all people—including contract employees and senior military officers—responsible for abuse and torture of detainees in Guantanamo, Afghanistan and Iraq. The committee also expressed its disapproval of post-9/11 round-ups and prolong of detention of immigrants, as well as racial profiling and excessive use of force by police officers.

With sweeping new anti-terror laws coming into force in Australia and Britain, asking such questions may make one liable to be detained without charge as a potential terrorist suspect.

## Conclusion

What can we do as journalists to ensure that the terrorists who are supposedly on a campaign to destroy liberal freedoms and values in the West do not ultimately win the battle? Journalism educators need to think harder about how to teach young journalists to avoid misconceptions, speculation, prejudice and ignorance, and to address the economic, social and cultural injustices that lie behind many conflicts in the world. To understand this they also need to learn about the history of European colonialism from the 16th century onwards.

When there was euphoria in the Western media immediately following the arrest of Saddam Hussein, I wrote a piece for *Today* newspaper in Singapore predicting that the resistance against the American occupation would intensify. That is exactly what has happened. I did not predict that because I had access to Al-Qaeda, but, because I understood colonialism and having visited Iraq I knew how proud and independent-minded the Iraqi people were.

It is true that the foreign forces are coming up against a well-organised terrorist outfit, but at the same time it is also an anti-colonial war. A war to stop Americans and the British robbing their oil. We don't read or hear much about how the occupiers have drafted a constitution and legislation which are being imposed on the occupied, which allows no legal avenues to challenge contracts being signed between US and British companies and the Iraqi puppet regime to hand over oil exploration and exports for 25-40 years (Mekay, 2005). This is what colonialism is about.

I think we need to make cultural studies and modern history core modules for those who are majoring in journalism so that spin doctors cannot mislead journalists easily.

A Chinese journalist, who used to work for Xinhua news agency and is today a journalism professor in Singapore, once told me that the role of the journalist at Xinhua was to assist the government to convey its policies to the people. We, who practise the Western media tradition, believe that our role is to be the watchdog of government to protect the citizenry against abuse of state power.

If we cannot report these anti-colonial wars in all their diversity (including how terrorists exploit these for their own fanatical purposes) and address anti-terror laws in Western countries, then the Western media is not any better than Xinhua. Perhaps the Chinese century may come to the West quicker than we envisaged.

**Notes**

- 1 See [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html)
- 2 See <http://hrw.org/English/docs/2006/07/14/global13768.html>

**References**

- Agence France-Presse (2005, August 23). Christian figure calls on US to murder Venezuelan president.
- Ahmed, E. (2005). A dangerous mix: religion and development aid, Women's Human Rights Net. [www.whr.net](http://www.whr.net).
- AP (2005, November 16). Chirac: Confront racism, *New Straits Times*, Malaysia.
- Barakat, M. (2005, October 2). US launches offensive in Iraqi village, Yahoo News, BBC News (2004, November 6). US strikes raze Fallujah hospital.
- BBC News (2005, October 28). Ugandan top rebel leader indicted.
- BBC News (2005, November 21). Hawk named as Sri Lanka premier.
- CBS News/AP (2004, November 14). US troops occupy Fallujah.
- CNN (2004, November 14). Marine general: 'Enemy is broken' in Fallujah.
- The Island* (2005, November 24). Editorial: Of hawks and a dove in the soup.
- Firdaus, I. (2005, October 2). Bali terror bombing kills 25, injures 100. Yahoo News.
- Gutman, R. (2005, July). Interview with author, Beijing.
- Marqusee, M. (2005, November 10). Fallujah: a name that will live in infamy, *The Guardian* (London)..
- Mekay, E. (2005, November 23). Iraq warned against 'straitjacket' oil deals, IPS wire.
- North, J. (2005, October 12). Media release.
- Senanayake, S. (2005, November 22). Hardline Sri Lankan president to swear in hawkish prime minister, Associated Press newswire, *Lanka Academic*, 6 (230), Colombo.
- Scarpello, F. (2005, November 23). Fatwa may tackle jihad, not root social problems. IPS wire, Jakarta.
- Seneviratne, K. (2005, September 22). Buddhist monks may sway Sri Lanka polls. IPS wire, Colombo.
- Seneviratne, K. (2005, August 24). Fatwas by clerics spur debate on Islam. IPS news wire, Jakarta.
- Seneviratne, K. (2003, December 22). A new era of colonialism. *Today*, Singapore.
- Seneviratne, K. (2003, October 31). Buddhists Hindus join to keep new churches at bay. IPS news wire, Colombo.
- Tharoor, S. (2005). Keynote address to the 14th annual conference of AMIC, July, Beijing.
- The Lanka Academic* (2005, November 21). Hardline Sri Lankan president to swear in hawkish prime minister.
- Today* (2005, August 25). Kill Chavez, says right-wing tele-evangelist. Wire agencies.
- UPS (2002, July 25). Christian rebels kill 42 in Uganda. UPI, Kampala.
- Whitney, M. (2005, January 13). Iraq vs tsunami: the duplicity of the media. Pacific Media Watch, Auckland, New Zealand.



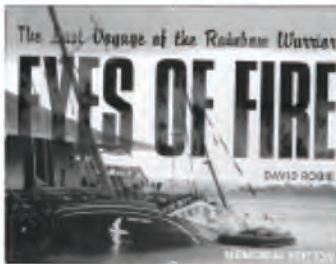
*Kalinga Seneviratne is a journalist, radio broadcaster, television documentary maker and a media analyst. He was born and raised in Sri Lanka, lived in Australia for more than 20 years and is currently a senior research associate with the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC). An earlier version of this article was presented as a plenary keynote address at the Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference at the Gold Coast, Australia, 29 November-2 December 2005.*

kalinga@amic.org.sg

## **Recent titles now available**



**DVD**  
**\$171.00**



**\$39.95**



**DVD**  
**\$299.00**



**South Pacific Books Ltd**

**Library Suppliers and Pacific Specialists**

**[www@southpacificbooks.co.nz](http://www@southpacificbooks.co.nz)**