

News as Propaganda: U.S. Media Complicity in the Invasion of Iraq

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In this paper I draw on a definition of propaganda proposed by Black (2001) along with notions from Critical Linguistics (Fowler, 1979, 1991; Hodge and Kress, 1979, 1993) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1994, 1995) to illustrate the extent to which television news discourse during coverage of the Iraq invasion conformed to a view of news as propaganda. Following an historical review of propaganda, I discuss the framework within which such discourse is examined, then look at samples from both before and during the invasion. I conclude that ideologically-driven media discourse contributed both directly and indirectly to the Bush administration's ability to promote the invasion, to the American public's disregard of the invasion's historical and socio-political contexts, and hence to the different rates of support shown in the U.S. and most other nations.

1. Introduction

When U.S. media corporations agreed to abide by Pentagon guidelines during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, discussion of censorship focused largely on “embedded” reporters’ increased access to front lines and concerns over their independent status.

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Questions of whether reporters at the front were showing viewers “everything” there was to see or whether military authorities might attempt to inhibit the “free flow” of information served as a center of debate—but also as a distraction. With few exceptions, major media organizations failed to investigate official claims concerning the necessity for war or to examine motivations behind U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Although networks ceaselessly polled their viewers to gauge support for the invasion, there was little effort to place the invasion in its historical or socio-political contexts. So while viewer ratings indicated an increased audience for the news, they also became an informal measure of public ignorance concerning Iraq.

The astonishing conformity of commercial news media, and television news in particular—on which 69% of Americans relied for their understanding of the invasion (Rich, 4/12/03)—has encouraged media critics to examine the sources, methods, and ideologies of news discourse produced during that time. Opinion is clearly divided. What to many on the left seemed a marginalized and highly constricted media “show” was to mainstream producers, reporters, and most viewers a straightforward, uncensored, and professional portrayal of the news. If, according to mainstream critics, the relationship between reporter and military was a bit cozy, that was the trade-off for a “good” story.

I essentially argue in favor of the general argument proposed by many left media critics, which suggests that by uncritically accepting and in turn helping to define and popularize the above terms of debate—to the exclusion of most others—major U.S. commercial news media served as the principal engine of propaganda in legitimating the invasion of Iraq for the public. As illustrated in the different transcripts of news broadcasts analyzed, this was accomplished through an excessive reliance on voices of power and authority, the use of simplistic, abstract, and excessively belligerent language, and the almost total neglect of historical context.

(1) *Government censorship—a narrow view*

Those who direct and those who report on international military conflicts rarely enjoy an uncomplicated relationship. Until recent years, the idea of media companies questioning their own government's motives for war was a simple one: Those whose interests coincided with the government issued a call to arms; those whose interests might be damaged denounced the action. For practical reasons, most companies rarely adopted the latter position. Yet news producers began to conceive of themselves as defenders of the public's "right to know," philosophical questions concerning professionalism versus patriotism arose in matters where American interests abroad were involved. What defines a "good" American reporter when reporting on war? Can reporters be neutral? Should government duplicity, if discovered, be revealed, thus possibly strengthening an enemy's moral standing and weakening public support? If American soldiers engage in the types of atrocities which the U.S. government condemns its enemy of in order to justify a war, are American reporters obliged to report this?

Such questions have provoked curious debates among U.S. journalists. During a public television discussion on journalistic morals ("Under Orders, Under Fire," 1987), CBS journalist Mike Wallace was asked hypothetically if, in a situation where he was behind enemy lines with a film crew, his duty as an American to warn and possibly save soldiers from his own country outweighed his journalistic duty to capture an ambush on film. "No," Wallace replied flatly. "You don't have a higher duty. No. No. You're a reporter!" (Fallows, 1996.) Several military officers on the panel expressed disgust at what Wallace insisted was simply a dispassionate view of history. At what might be considered the other end of this spectrum, News Corp. owner Rupert Murdoch opined during NATO's bombing of Kosovo that, "We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty." During war, in Murdoch's opinion, the job of an American news reporter is to support the troops without

question.

These seemingly contradictory views—“accurately” recording history versus the reporter’s patriotic duty—became perversely intertwined during the Iraq invasion. Minutely detailing the events immediately before the camera lens or describing with precision U.S. military hardware became a modern badge of courage for many embedded and studio reporters. The pro-war slogan “Support the war by supporting our troops!” was afforded tacit approval in newsrooms as producers effectively aided government war efforts by “helping the viewing audience understand” the work and lives of the troops. There was, of course, the anti-war slogan “Support the troops; bring them home!” which might have been an alternative narrative theme of some broadcasts. Yet apart from interviews of concerned—but allegiant—military families, this theme was left largely unexplored. Though most news executives appeared less inhibited than Murdoch in their willingness to be seen as simple outlets for military press releases, the evidence on television screens throughout the Iraq invasion illustrated the media’s reluctance to break rank.

During the invasion a pattern of trust was established between news reporters and the military in which media organizations willingly accepted Pentagon terms allowing access to reporters who agreed to abide by certain restrictions. This pattern had come full circle from the time of World War II, when war reporters Ernie Pyle and Andy Rooney lived and worked alongside front-line troops. In the years of social conflict and military interventions which followed, battlefield access for the media increased to a point where, during the Vietnam War, the perception (if not the reality) was that media scrutiny helped lose the war. In the years after Vietnam, the military was determined not to allow reporters the type of access to operations which might damage their public image. The low point in media-military relations came during the 1991 Gulf War, when reporters were assigned to pools and severely restricted in their access to the “fighting.” Due in part to protests from media organizations, Pentagon standards were again

reevaluated and plans for “embedded” reporters to accompany troops were ready for the 2003 Iraq invasion.

(2) *Learning to trust the media*

What occasioned this apparent change of heart at the Pentagon? A reasonable answer might be that the change came less from the military than from the media itself. In the roughly 25 years since the end of the Vietnam War media concentration in the United States increased at an astounding pace. Extensive changes in U.S. communication codes have ensured that media companies once independently owned have now been absorbed into corporate structures. Ben Bagdikian (1982) reports that 50 corporations controlled half of the media industry in the United States in 1982. Five years later that number had been cut in half, and by the time of the Iraq invasion one could count the number of U.S. media corporations on one hand. Vertical integration of these new media conglomerates has insured that the same corporation producing a military-action star in Hollywood can also market his action figures in their shopping mall outlets, feature him in (often violent) video games, sign book contracts with him, feature him on sitcoms and in newspaper articles, and interview him on their morning news programs—all essentially on the same payroll.

The structural relationship between media companies and the military has changed as well. With the Pentagon as a principal engine of the U.S. economy, many U.S. corporations have contractual arrangements with the military organ of the government. This is clearly the case with General Electric (owner of NBC), Westinghouse (owner of CBS), Disney (owner of ABC), and AOL Time Warner (owner of CNN), all of whom have military deals in distribution of media products to U.S. bases worldwide, use of military infrastructure for film and television production, and easy access to military spokespeople for daily news programs. Disturbing the relationship with the Pentagon can directly affect the shareholder value of these companies.

Media companies have long worked within Pentagon and corporate sponsor guidelines restricting criticism of the military as a tit-for-tat for allowing film crews on board naval vessels or fighter planes. One of the largest corporate sponsors in the U.S. until recently had an editorial policy in place which read in part, "Members of the armed forces must not be cast as villains." (Parenti, 1992.) Conversely, when the U.S. army requested that CNN allow "pysops" (i.e. psychological operations: essentially a military term for propaganda techniques) observers to work in its corporate headquarters in Atlanta during 1999, executives asked that regular staff cooperate (de Vries, 2000). When the Pentagon requested that U.S. reporters attach themselves to invading U.S. troops for the attack on Iraq, rather than considering if this might compromise the independence of their reporters, most networks saw it instead as a business opportunity. Viewer ratings, producers reasoned, would soar with live action footage of a real war in progress. Evidence of their enthusiasm came from the 1991 Gulf War, when CNN made its name as winner of the ratings war with "live, 24-hour" war coverage. A little over a decade later, this "CNN effect" pushed both the newer cable networks and the more traditional national networks to follow suit in pumping up the emotion-charged coverage of the Iraq invasion.

Indeed, the Pentagon appeared to have few reasons to doubt the patriotic leanings of the U.S. broadcast media. Media corporations which had so faithfully portrayed American soldiers as the conveyors of democracy to the world in film and on television, because of corporate mergers during the 1980s and 1990s, were now in charge of relaying a similar image to the American public via their news sections. Movie images of attractive and efficient military officers were familiar to young network reporters whose celebrity rivaled many of the stars they frequently reported on. As had an earlier war generation, media audiences warmed to the romances and high school antics of young soldier-actors and suffered with them as they came under enemy attack on screen. When government sources hinted at hostilities in Iraq, corporate news sections

Table 1. Evening News Topics Over Time—All Networks

| | 1977 | 1987 | 1997 |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Hard News | 67.3% | 58.3% | 41.3% |
| Celebrity News | 2 | 3.3 | 7.7 |
| Crime/Law/Courts | 8 | 6.8 | 13 |
| Business/Economy | 5.5 | 11.1 | 7.4 |
| Science and Technology | 3.5 | 4.5 | 5.8 |
| Lifestyle Features | 13.5 | 16.2 | 24.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Committee for Concerned Journalists (Project for Excellence in Journalism).

borrowed themes, music, and technical military advisors from their parent organizations' successful fictional productions to heighten the impending drama—along with the ratings. Media audiences were now familiar with the principal actors and plots, and it was evident from the professional, Hollywood-style production of most news programs that the transfer from fictional to “factual” representations of war had been accomplished seamlessly.

Ironically, the broadcast media had for long showed little appetite for coverage of world news and U.S. foreign policy issues. Due to ratings pressure from cable news, national networks were focusing increasingly on sensational street crime (although actual crime rates had decreased), vacation destinations, and ways to decorate the home, issues which helped turn public attention away from more fundamental problems of corporate crime, business control over government, neglect of the environment, and systematic U.S. support of undemocratic foreign regimes. Stephen Hess, author of *International News & Foreign Correspondents*, notes that, “At the same time that American public opinion, largely formed by television, has more influence than ever on U.S. foreign policy, Americans seem increasingly ill-informed about international affairs.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 4/16/1997.) Table 1 illustrates the increasing media focus on celebrity, crime, and lifestyle issues over a 20-year period.

Although the violent events of September 11, 2001, and the

Table 2. Motives for Self-Censorship Among Journalists

| Avoidance of stories that audiences might find . . . | | | |
|--|-----|-------|-------|
| | All | Nat'l | Local |
| <i>Too complex</i> | % | % | % |
| Commonplace | 12 | 15 | 10 |
| Sometimes | 40 | 47 | 33 |
| Rarely | 33 | 28 | 37 |
| Never/Don't know | 15 | 10 | 20 |
| <i>Important but dull</i> | % | % | % |
| Commonplace | 27 | 30 | 25 |
| Sometimes | 50 | 54 | 46 |
| Rarely | 16 | 13 | 20 |
| Never/Don't know | 7 | 3 | 9 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Iraq invasion temporarily shifted the focus of news issues (celebrity news, for example, dropping to zero during the invasion), even these major events failed to alter real trends in hard news coverage. Background stories and investigative pieces were still largely avoided by most major broadcast media. Despite the actual importance of such news, many journalists, by their own admissions, shy away from stories they perceive as being either too complex or too dull for their audiences (see Table 2).

For purposes of corporate image and continued access to sources, media organizations believe they can ill afford to place themselves in blatant opposition to the efforts of the U.S. government, especially once a “war on terrorism” is underway. If corporate managers are unsure about the patriotic drift of their programming, there are market gurus to keep them on track. The “War Manual” of one typical consultant (McVay Media) advised its clients to “Get the following production pieces in the studio NOW: . . . Patriotic music that makes you cry, salute, get cold chills! Go for the emotion.” (*Washington Post*, 3/28/2003.)

(3) *The media invasion of Iraq*

Far from having to worry about inappropriate commentary or criticism from the media, one might argue that the Iraq invasion was essentially produced, written, and directed as a collaboration between the U.S. media, government and business elites, and the military. As the Bush administration began its plans for the invasion of Iraq, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw was invited to the White House to do a news special entitled “Inside the Real West Wing.” Brokaw at first bridled at accusations that the program was simple PR for the White House, yet he later told the *Washington Post* that the administration was “concerned about the public drifting away from the mission of the war” and that “this was an opportunity for them to kick-start it, to keep the country refocused” (Jackson et. al., 2002). Less surprising are Bush’s own opinions regarding the role of the journalist. In the same *Post* article, the president remarks that while he is keeping the country focused on the war against terrorism, “it’s also part of Mr. Brokaw’s job.”

During the subsequent invasion, reporters were assigned to the front lines and dutifully accompanied their military convoys. Criticism that access was being denied or that the military was somehow organizing propaganda could be dismissed as the musings of a misinformed or inappropriately hostile minority. According to most reports, access was, in fact, largely unimpeded, and reporters were allowed to film what they pleased and to say whatever they wished. The Project of Excellence in Journalism studied over 40 hours of news coverage from five major network and cable channels and revealed that the majority of reports filed from Iraq were “live and unedited.” Yet due to the restriction that reporters not divulge troop locations or battlefield tactics, it was found that 80% of the stories focused solely on the reporters themselves. Although reports were deemed to be largely factual, problems with context clearly arose. While praising the detail and “texture” of one such embedded report from Iraq, project director Tom Rosenstiel added, “But those are also its limits. Seeing

that tight shot, it's very difficult to have that broader perspective." (AP, 4/3/2003.)

2. Propaganda—A Broader Perspective

Ironically, it is this very issue of government control over media access which has directed attention away from what are (in the U.S. at least) more central questions concerning issues of censorship and propaganda. Few would argue that having reporters on the scene during an invasion is preferable to having them banned. Access for reporters during the war in Vietnam is what exposed the massacre of Vietnamese women and children by U.S. soldiers at My Lai. CBS journalist Morley Safer's filming of an American soldier setting fire to a thatched roof in a South Vietnamese village explained to U.S. television viewers the story of the war's brutality better than hundreds of words might have.

Yet what the reporters and camera crews during the recent invasion consistently missed in their close-cropped shots was more than simply a wider view of the Iraqi landscape. The constant 24-hour, live-action battle scenes, between interviews with retired generals, briefings by Pentagon public relations experts, and stories of the difficulties of desert life for young U.S. soldiers, left little room for any larger analysis of the actual historical context in which this invasion was being played out. Why, for example, were U.S. soldiers really in Iraq? How had Saddam Hussein come to power? How had he achieved his military strength? Compared to other Arab states, what kind of government did Iraq have? How did the average Iraqi live under Saddam? What was behind U.S. government claims that Iraq had refused to allow U.N. inspectors? Where were the supposed "weapons of mass destruction"? How were these different from U.S. bombs? Commenting on the lack of interpretive reporting during the Iraq invasion, Jack Fuller, president of Tribune Publishing Co., praised the technical quality of the reporting but added, "... it demonstrates that there is

a difference between seeing and understanding.” (*Newsday*, 4/2/2003.)

Fuller undoubtedly intended this statement as a simple criticism of journalists’ lack of investigative zeal and not, I believe, as a jibe at the inherent self-censorship at the heart of the corporate media industry. Let me therefore rephrase his statement to read, “There is a difference between passively accepting the pre-formed understanding of socially, politically, or financially powerful interests and an understanding gained by recognizing how those interests are involved in shaping one’s view of the world.” It is the first type of “passive acceptance” I will refer to as ideology or propaganda. “Old” propaganda, the more transparent, top-down, and overtly political form practiced mainly by governments lacking in technical and socio-psychological sophistication, has historically been the focus of much criticism by Western societies. But it is the newer, more “advanced” techniques of propaganda developed in modern capitalist societies that are of principal interest here.

To see how ideology functions, it is necessary to distinguish between these more conscious, directly political forms of propaganda used, say, in North Korea on the one hand and the subtle influences of everyday, popular culture in otherwise open societies on the other. Ellul (1965) refers to this latter type of passive social management as “sociological or integration propaganda,” noting that it is based on a “general climate, atmosphere that influences people imperceptibly without having the appearance of propaganda.” Through such media as film or television, Ellul would argue, people naturally adopt social norms and develop “a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society.” (Ellul, 1965.) The idea of “making people conform to society” may smack overly of brainwashing, yet one may reasonably argue that years of exposure to triumphal war films, television depictions of soldiers in familiar everyday contexts, and news characterizations of U.S. military

campaigns as “democratizing, freedom-seeking” and “just” have clearly helped to render U.S. military culture as natural a part of life as school, work, or church for many Americans. In ways that range from the social and political orientation of journalists to the direct use of military jargon by reporters in the field, the acceptance of military culture as a part of American society clearly exerted an influence on media representations of the invasion of Iraq. As Kress and Hodge (1993) point out, this influence is not always easy to see:

Propaganda typically operates with two broad strategies: manipulation of reality (lies, half-truths, exaggerations, omissions etc.), and manipulation of the orientation to reality. It is possible for propaganda to be fully successful without needing to resort to actual demonstrable lies (pg. 161)

Note that more purposeful attempts at manipulating news are not discounted. Key is the variability in reporters’ and viewers’ abilities to “see through” news manipulation as a means of judging propaganda’s success.

(1) The development of propaganda in the United States

Concerned individuals view the increasing media concentration and commercialism of American journalism as a threat to the country’s constitutional values. They also note that journalists practice many of the same skills valued by advertising agencies and government producers of “psyops” disinformation. All require competence in information gathering and processing, written or verbal abilities, graphic design, page layout, and other forms of sign manipulation. Many graduate from the same schools of “communications” increasingly funded by major PR firms and communications corporations. Although increasingly uncommon, some individuals still make the direct move from advertising to news copy, since the skills themselves are easily transferable and individuals in both fields share a largely overlapping vocabulary. The propaganda of a “psyops” officer may easily be the promotional campaign

of an ad man. The troubling question is, is it sometimes the lead story on the evening news?

Ian Hargreaves (2003) notes how the principal founders of the public relations industry were, in fact, all journalists. Ivy Lee, a reporter on Hearst's *New York Journal*, was hired by John D. Rockefeller as his public relations "counselor" after armed goons had massacred hundreds of men, women, and children during a Colorado miners strike. George Creel, who headed the enormously effective World War I Committee on Public Information, had been a radical muckracking newsman. And Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, and generally recognized as the founder of the modern public relations industry, was once a reporter and theatrical agent. John Hill, a one-time newsman turned public relations magnate, founded Hill and Knowlton, which later went on to organize a media campaign for the Kuwaiti monarchy in 1990, placing manufactured news stories in major U.S. papers. One of these was shown to be a hoax when the young, teary-eyed girl relating horror stories of Iraqi soldiers turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador.

Despite a common public instinct that such manufactured stories reveal a contempt for democratic processes, the concept of propaganda as promulgated by many modern theorists has not always been negative. In his book *Public Opinion*, famed journalist and democratic theorist Walter Lippman (1922) commented on the indispensability of propaganda for democracies. Black (2001) notes how George Catlin spoke of propaganda as the inculcation of certain views requiring "no strong sense of moral or political urgency." Although such beliefs were often influential among elite opinion makers, the more popular view has been that in relinquishing control over public information to authority, undermining historical continuity, and acceptance of disinformation, propaganda is inimical to democratic processes. Attempts to either understand or justify propaganda have resulted in a plethora of definitions, ranging from Smith's "Any conscious and open attempt to influence the beliefs of an individual or group, guided by a

predetermined end and characterized by the systematic use of irrational and often unethical techniques of persuasion” to Burnett’s “discourse in the service of ideology” (Black, 2001). In linking propaganda to ideology, this last definition is of particular relevance to the current discussion. Ideology is the unseen element in much discourse since, as Ellul (1965) notes, it is imbedded within our cultural assumptions.

3. A Propaganda Framework

The model of propaganda I use to characterize U.S. media coverage of the Iraq invasion is one suggested by Jay Black in an article “The Semantics and Ethics of Propaganda” (2001). Black’s model is itself influenced by the ideas of sociological-integration propaganda first elaborated by Jacques Ellul (1965). The outline lends itself to the current study for two related reasons: 1) It covers a range of socio-historical, institutional, and situational contexts common to Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis; 2) there is a component of language focus which makes it particularly relevant for use with textual analysis. The model overlaps in some important ways with other broader systemic ones, notably that of Herman and Chomsky (1988). Although Black’s model is based more in socio-psychology and semantics, both emphasize the prime importance of power and authority in influencing media output. (Herman and Chomsky, as a note, include the category of advertising influence as a “filter,” an issue which I touch on earlier in the discussion of journalism’s relationship to the public relations industry.)

Black suggests that propaganda may be revealed through what amounts to a distinction between “dogmatic/non-dogmatic” behaviors. In his view, a dogmatic individual—

... seeks psychological closure whether rational or not; appears to be driven by irrational inner forces; has an extreme reliance on authority figures; reflects a narrow time perspective; and displays

little sense of discrimination among fact/inference/value judgment.
(Black, pg. 133)

Understood in this way, a propagandistic media appeals to people's emotions rather than their intellect, fails to confront power, closes off avenues to investigation, and confuses fact with opinion—characteristics one would normally consider inconsistent with good journalism. Using these dogmatic traits as a starting point, Black sees propaganda as comprising the following six elements:

- 1. A heavy or undue reliance on authority figures and spokespersons, rather than empirical validation, to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions.
- 2. The utilization of unverified and perhaps unverifiable abstract nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and physical representations rather than empirical validation to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions.
- 3. A finalistic or fixed view of people, institutions, and situations divided into broad, all-inclusive categories of in-groups (friends) and outgroups (enemies), beliefs and disbeliefs, and situations to be accepted or rejected in toto.
- 4. A reduction of situations into simplistic and readily identifiable cause and effect relations, ignoring multiple causality of events.
- 5. A time perspective characterized by an overemphasis or underemphasis on the past, present, or future as disconnected periods rather than a demonstrated consciousness of time flow.
- 6. A greater emphasis on conflict than on cooperation among people, institutions, and situations.

(Black, pp. 133–134)

Previous discussions may suggest how some of these categories may apply to the types of discourse employed during the Iraq invasion. U.S. broadcast media, for example, made relatively little effort to distance themselves from government or military sources in preparing news reports. Journalists categorized

civilian Iraqi dead as “collateral damage” (as opposed to U.S. deaths by “friendly fire”), reporters consistently associated military efforts with their own through the use of pronouns such as “we, us, our,” adopted such military language as “coalition of the willing,” “surgical strikes,” and “decapitation,” and implied that the invasion had somehow just popped up with such phrases as “war has broken out.” Any of these instances taken alone might suggest a lack of professionalism, sloppiness, or simply poor judgment on the part of the media. As a whole, one cannot help but see them as an ideological pattern—at times unconscious and unintentional, at other times not, but always systematic and, in this case, pernicious in their ultimate outcome.

4. Building Consensus —News Discourse Before the Invasion

Although all of the cable and network stations engaged in a patriotic competition for viewers well before the invasion began, FOX TV can claim the dubious honor of being the most uninhibitedly pro-war network on the air. Largely due to its commentators’ unnuanced opinions and sneering deprecations of anyone mildly doubting the Bush administration’s motives, FOX jumped ahead in the cable news ratings in January 2002 (Rutenburg, 04/17/03). In contrast to most other networks, FOX invited a somewhat wider range of guests to its talk programs, including even some radical antiwar activists. Yet the contrast in dealing with guests from the left and from the right was evident when it came to deference to authority, the types of slanted questions posed, mocking as opposed to fawning interview styles, acceptance of unexamined evidence, and other discourse characteristics. These all point to a number of the elements in the propaganda framework we might note.

The following interview is typical, for example, of the reliance on authority figures—in this case Richard Perle, a

neoconservative spokesman long known for his connections to groups intent on overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

SNOW: Mr. Perle, it is often alleged that the president has not made the case. Do you agree or disagree?

RICHARD PERLE, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE: Well, I think there are some people for whom he will never make the case . . . I think . . . he has laid out, very clearly and very carefully, the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein and the urgent necessity to disarm him. And it isn't going to happen, in my view, by any means other than the use of force.

SNOW: In other words, we are going to have to go to war, and we are going to have to remove him, in your opinion.

(01-26-2003, Fox News Sunday, Tony Snow, Brit Hume)

Notice Snow's use of the verb "allege" to characterize as questionable certain opinions with which he does not agree. At no point during the interview does he apply the verb to any of Perle's actual allegations, which, for the most part have since been disproven (Hans, 3/4/03). The structure "it is alleged that" (with "it" as actor/subject) allows Snow to avoid the issue of agency/responsibility. Who made these allegations? Were they quacks or respected critics? This vagueness more easily permits Perle in his response to dismiss them simply as "some people for whom he will never make the case."

Snow asks for, and we may assume, expects, a black or white response ("Do you agree or disagree?"). This insistence that ideas fall into categories of right or wrong, for us or against us, with no allowance for partial agreement or subtle distinction also corresponds with the framework's notion of "situations to be accepted or rejected in toto." Perle's own opinions may be expected by those familiar with his membership in the American Enterprise Institute (a right-wing-funded think tank) and his help in establishing propaganda campaigns for wealthy Iraqis living in the U.S. Snow, a journalist we might hope would be suspicious of conflicts of interest among his sources, demonstrates no apparent skepticism. In fact, Snow

reformulates Perle's phrase "the use of force" into the more powerful, made-for-television, "In other words, we are going to have to go to war. . . ." Note also how the "consensual" use of "we" (Fowler, 1991) allows the speakers to subtly associate the interests of certain government, business, and military powers with those of the television viewer. Who is the "we" that is going to war?, one may ask. Later in the interview, Snow is not content to merely translate Perle's comments; he actively proposes answers for him:

PERLE: As for the French, Chirac has a longstanding predisposition to be friendly to Saddam Hussein, and the French government has commercial interests to protect in Iraq.

SNOW: Oil.

PERLE: Oil.

Here we see illustrated the fourth point in Black's framework—a reduction of situations into "simplistic and readily identifiable cause and effect relations." The French cannot possibly be opposing U.S. military action on moral grounds, the argument goes. There can be only one possible reason—oil. Considering historical Bush family interests, along with those of the majority of his cabinet officers, accusing others of oil as a motivation is either disingenuous or an attempt to shift the burden of guilt—this latter, one might reasonably suspect to be the goal of a trained public relations expert.

A second pre-invasion media sample involves *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz, host of a program for CNN entitled "Reliable Sources," during which he questions reporters about current journalistic practices. In a particularly revealing interview with CBS News reporter John Roberts, Kurtz asks whether or not the military's apparent openness to the media might be a means of building support for the troops. Roberts comments:

Well, certainly, Howard, a lot of people have said that the United States, President Bush in particular, has not yet made the case to go to war against Iraq. So it is in their best interest to try to rally

public support, and perhaps the media may play a role in their overall game plan. (CNN “Reliable Sources,” 3/ 9/2003)

This candid opinion from a network news reporter concerning the media’s apparent readiness to assist the Bush administration in selling the invasion to the American public is surprising enough. Roberts was seemingly unaware of the import of his suggestion, though the erstwhile media critic, Kurtz, offers no resistance. Roberts therefore continues:

When we were doing our military orientation . . . I was kind of wondering to myself, why are we here? Why is the military going out of its way to try to teach us about their methods and to try to ensure that we would be safe if we were to go into the battlefield with them? Why do they want us in the battlefield with them at all? And then, I think it was the second to last night we were there one of the senior officers said, “What better way to put the lie to some of Saddam Hussein’s statements than to have you there with us on the front lines?”

To which Kurtz replies ingenuously, “Really?” This seems an overly trusting attitude on the part of both reporter and media “critic” with which to approach an impending war. Applied to another, less open society, most Americans would likely regard such statements as staged propaganda. Coming as they do here from respected American journalists, they are accepted at face value. “Reliable Sources” is an ironically appropriate title for a program devoted to media criticism. At least one study has shown that far from representing a diversity of journalistic thought, the overwhelming majority of guests on this program are “media insiders who depend upon that system for their bread and butter” (Rendall, 2003).

In another “Behind the Scenes” story entitled “Packing for War,” CNN foreign correspondent Martin Savage shares with the television audience his amusement at the variety of unique equipment he will need as an “embedded” reporter in Iraq.

The Marines were kind enough to drop me an e-mail with a list of

what they think I might need when we eventually join them at the front. The real term is “embedding.” That’s when a journalist lives with the troops as they do the thing they do. The list makes interesting reading—a mixture of the “same-old” helmet, body armor, sleeping bag and the new: the NBC (nuclear-biological-chemical) suit; the Atropine injectors, etc. . . . My guess is we’ll be wearing the chem suits a lot. All you need underneath is a T-shirt and running shorts (“skivvies”). So the daily question at the closet door —“What am I going to wear today?”—has been pretty much answered. (CNN, Northern Kuwait, February 13, 2003)

This report was filed in mid-February, while U.N. negotiations were still underway, yet judging from the tone of the piece, the reporter was clearly convinced that war was imminent. The title itself, “Packing for War,” helps frame the report. If viewers didn’t already know that U.S. soldiers were preparing for a fight, here was a journalist telling them that he, at least, was ready to go. Perhaps to reassure viewers that behind all the military gear he is still a reporter, Savage demonstrates his journalistic distance with a touch of cynicism: “The Marines were kind enough to drop me an e-mail.” Yet his apparent belief in war’s inevitability is belied by the final words in the sentence “. . . when we eventually join them at the front.” Note the adverb “eventually,” which, one might imagine, left many viewers with the impression that there was little to do but wait and watch.

With these few words, Savage manages both to flaunt his journalistic integrity and to assure the audience that the war, indeed, is on. He glibly defines the word “embedding” as journalists living with the troops “as they do the thing they do.” Notice how Savage translates the technical terminology of warfare into the vernacular of the American television audience. In doing so, he mediates what might be a harsh, violent, or simply tedious discourse of military preparedness into one more familiar and pleasant to his viewers—that of travel or camping. Fairclough (1995) notes how this “conversationalizing” of public or technical language makes it more accessible and more acceptable to audiences. Conversationalization is

achieved in the above piece by blending technical military terms with more commonplace vocabulary. The reporter himself characterizes this as “a mixture of the ‘same-old’ helmet, body armor, sleeping bag and the new: the NBC (nuclear-biological-chemical) suit; the Atropine injectors, etc. . . .” With their use of animated graphics, floor maps of Iraq, and retired military spokesmen, many U.S. newsrooms became video classrooms helping to familiarize audiences with the weapons of war.

Fairclough (1995) notes more generally how language is used to represent certain events (e.g. wars as opposed to invasions), to build perceived identities (e.g. of soldiers as liberators vs invaders), or to establish relationships (e.g. between reporter and viewer.) This and subsequent programs during the actual invasion, which dealt with the military and the reporters it was charged with escorting, used language in a variety of ways to accomplish all of the above goals.

(1) Maintaining consensus—news discourse during the invasion

During the actual invasion “embedded” reporters relied in every aspect on where they would travel, what they would hear and see, and, despite claims to the contrary, what they were allowed to transmit. This point affects subsequent ideas in many subtle ways. Viewpoints, emphasis, contexts, and language all fall within certain limited, often self-imposed boundaries when producers have predetermined that sources outside government, military, and business elites are not relevant to the story at hand. This limited context affects how stories during the invasion were produced and ultimately what language would be used to “tell a news story.”

With fictional narratives, a narrator mediates between events as they supposedly take place and the intended audience. In media discourse, the narrator function is assumed by the reporter who chooses what angle to point the camera, who and what to focus on, how to frame a “live” news event, and what actual wording will be used to accompany the visuals. Every angle, every frame, every word represents a choice for,

but also against, other views. As reliance on certain sources grows, the narrower the range of choices becomes. Reliance upon voices of power and authority clearly limits one's choices. Embedded reporters in Iraq appear to have had difficulty in realizing their own heavy reliance upon authority and the ways this compromised their views. In one notable interview (again from CNN's "Reliable Sources"), media critic Kurtz asks reporter Walter Rodgers about his "bonds" with the troops. Rodgers responds:

"I don't find it overly incestuous, certainly no more incestuous than the White House press corps, or for that matter, the reporters who cover the Senate or a state legislature, and it hasn't caused me to pull any punches. When the 7th Cavalry accidentally killed two children about four or five days ago, we reported that, and what happened was, one of the Iraqi paramilitaries took refuge in the dark behind a building, and there was no light in the building. A 25 millimeter Bradley gun opened up, it knocked down a wall, two children were killed inside . . ."

(CNN, "Reliable Sources," March 30, 2003)

Rodgers is careful to qualify the seeming admission of being in bed with his military family (i.e. "incestuous" behavior) with the adverb "(not) overly." One may better appreciate CNN's selective interpretation of "incestuous" behavior by noting how CNN's own reporter Peter Arnett was fired on the basis of the one interview he granted Iraqi television. In these two cases, we might conclude that journalistic "objectivity" for CNN includes all government and military views—as long as they are on the "right" side. Rodgers acknowledges his transgression by attempting to mitigate and compare it to others he deems equally acceptable ("the White House press corps . . . reporters who cover the Senate"). He further denies that closeness to military authorities has resulted in his having to qualify reports ("pull any punches"). Chomsky (1988) notes how this defense is common among reporters who are so close to authority that they can, in fact, be trusted completely. It would appear that Rodgers does not need to "pull any punches" since he

would not likely throw any in the first place. As he himself notes with some obvious pride later in the interview, “They trust us totally.”

One further point of interest in this interview is Rodger’s claim that “the 7th Cavalry *accidentally* killed two children about four or five days ago” (my italics). Rodgers is relating to his audience an event that he apparently witnessed first hand. This in itself seems to leave little room for interpretation, and as noted earlier, most of the reports filed from Iraq were live and unedited. Nevertheless, Rodgers did have to choose how to word his report. Using the adverb “accidentally” to describe the killing of two children by U.S. forces may be interpreted differently. During a battle in which soldiers are attempting to kill other soldiers, it may seem, to a reporter, a simple matter of accuracy to record the death of civilians as somehow unrelated to the main thrust of the story and therefore “accidental.” In a broader sense, when issues of national sovereignty, justification for war, and international law are all still being debated, whether the deaths of civilians (or any others) killed during an invasion are “accidental” is less clear. An accident is generally understood as an occurrence the consequences of which are unexpected, perhaps unforeseeable. If, as in the case of a military invasion, one can reasonably predict civilian casualties, then referring to them as “accidental” may be a decision determined less by accuracy of reporting than by institutional, social, and situational pressures, as well as by a reporter’s political and social background.

With such language Rodgers constructs a “preferred reading” (Hall, 1994), by which his audience may better understand this particular incident as another familiar “unfortunate consequence of war.” He produces (and we might expect that his audience understands) this story within the context of what some media researchers (Roach, 1995) refer to as “news narratives”—broad themes built, for example, around contrasting images of expert U.S. soldiers valiantly rescuing helpless civilians, versus corrupt and dangerous Arab “gunmen” intent on destroying American institutions. Particular

news stories such as this one both draw upon and feed into such news narratives, helping to further consolidate and naturalize the images. The point is not that these particular soldiers happened to kill two children (although this might certainly be regarded as a crime) but to emphasize that through repeated use of certain language an accepted image or narrative is built up around the invasion, the U.S. military, and certain U.S. foreign policy goals.

At the same time, Rodgers employs specific language to establish identities for the U.S. and Iraqi fighting forces. Rodgers draw on the military's own terminology ("the 7th Cavalry") to describe the group which killed the children in the story. Since most military self-naming is intentionally heroic—meant to either inspire its own soldiers or strike fear in its opponents—it is often a ready-made public relations effort. Embedded reporters' unquestioning use of such terms suggests at the very least a lack of awareness as to their purposes. Rodgers refers to the Iraqi fighting forces as "paramilitaries," a semi-technical term suggesting a lack of professional soldierism. The choice of words puts these fighters on a level only slightly above common criminals and not, say, the determined but poorly equipped peasant soldiers described by the Arab network Al-Jazeera. Understood as paramilitaries, American television viewers were more inclined to picture them as unprofessional and therefore irresponsible as they "took refuge in the dark behind a building." One possible interpretation here is that "real" soldiers do not hide behind buildings, they present themselves out in the open to be properly fired upon. The fact that the Iraqi soldiers did not do so in this case helps viewers apportion the blame for the death of the two children.

Finally, notice Rodger's interesting choice of actors/subjects in the sentence, "A 25 millimeter Bradley gun opened up, it knocked down a wall, two children were killed inside . . ." American television audiences have become accustomed to the automated nature of modern warfare, and it would appear that in this case there are no U.S. soldiers actually pulling the

trigger, knocking down the wall, and killing the children. The mood of the sentence moves in steps, almost mechanically, from the active “gun opened up” to the passive “children were killed” without the issue of agency ever arising. Of course, focusing responsibility on specific individuals can be as misleading as attempting to erase and ignore responsibility altogether—witness military scapegoating of individuals to avoid the responsibility of purposefully training soldiers to kill.

Rodgers makes his personal linguistic choices in arriving at a particular representation of this incident. Still he accomplishes this from within specific sociological (wealthy, American), institutional (corporate pressure, news narratives), and situational (embedded reporter) contexts which help constrain those choices. In making these choices, he in turn helps define what is acceptable discourse for viewers and for other journalists that follow.

I end my analysis by commenting on Black’s final and—for a paper dealing with military invasion—perhaps most relevant category: “a greater emphasis on conflict than on cooperation among people, institutions, and situations.” The Project in Excellence in Journalism, in a study entitled “Framing the News: The Triggers, Frames, and Messages in Newspaper Coverage” (2003), notes how—

... the press shows a decided tendency to present the news through a combative lens. Three narrative frames—conflict, winners and losers and revealing wrongdoing—accounted for 30% of all stories, twice the number of straight news accounts.

While the study focuses primarily on the print media, television news has been found to emphasize such frames to an even greater extent. When international conflict involving the United States is a possibility, framing in the above terms becomes an almost automatic response in newsrooms. The following montage report (CNN Wolf Blitzer Reports, 3/25/03) illustrates how reporters use editing techniques to assemble video “discussions” among speakers who are not physically

together in either time or space. Although the report was aired during the invasion, many of the interwoven “soundbites” were taped earlier and in different locations. The reporter and editors have pieced together clips of the U.S. secretary of defense, the Iraqi deputy prime minister, and others to give viewers the feel of a lively, back-and-forth debate among several participants. In this segment the reporter employs a network media “analyst” (former CIA and NSA analyst Ken Pollack) to confirm the report’s conclusion of a threat posed by what he calls “weapons [Tariq Aziz’s] government insists it does not have”:

ENSOR: Experts say Saddam Hussein’s forces will likely try to hold out in Baghdad for as long as possible without using the weapons his government insists it does not have, hoping to build international pressure on the U.S. and Britain to back down.

KEN POLLACK, CNN ANALYST: In that sense, any use of chemical weapons would be counter-productive to Saddam, because it would only galvanize international opinion around the United States.

ENSOR: But if the coalition forces cannot be deterred that way, then says Ken Pollack, all bets may be off.

POLLACK: He will use chemical warfare to prevent the United States from taking Baghdad and to inflict as many casualties as he can on U.S. forces and hope that that will convince the United States to start for war.

ENSOR: But U.S. and allied forces are well equipped and trained against weapons.

Notice how Tariq Aziz’s denial is countered (and implicitly belittled) by Ensor’s juxtapositioning of the word “weapons.” Weapons, as the active complement in the adverbial clause “without using the weapons,” are posited as real. The logical assumption is that Saddam must first possess weapons in order to be able to make the choice not to use them. At the same time, these weapons are used as the displaced complement of the clause “his government insists it does not have (weapons).” In this syntactically complex sentence, viewers are faced with

what seems like a contradiction: The weapons are right there, yet the Iraqis are openly denying the fact. In this way, a subtle relationship of trust is established, one in which viewers are assumed to relate to the shared concerns of the reporter and analyst as Americans and to share their suspicions that Saddam possesses and is prepared to use his weapons essentially to blackmail the U.S. and Britain and force them “to back down.”

Pollack posits a real (though it has never been empirically confirmed) “use of chemical weapons” by Saddam. Ensor counters by suggesting that the “coalition forces” may not be deterred by such low tactics. (“Coalition forces,” one should note, is government-speak for the 150,000 American and 45,000 British troops—accompanied by 2,000 Australians, 200 Poles, 278 Romanians, and 70 Albanians.) The next exchange demonstrates a decreasing tentativeness marked by the change in verbal modality. In contrast to the more ambiguous (“... weapons *would* be counter-productive...”), Pollack now states unequivocally that Saddam “. . . *will* use chemical weapons . . .” (my italics). Saddam will do this, according to Pollack, “to inflict as many casualties as he can” and to “convince the United States to start for war.” Notice how uncertainty is effectively eliminated in this fashion. Audiences are assured of Saddam’s intent and perhaps strengthened in their resolve to support the invasion. Ensor ends the segment by ensuring his viewers that the U.S. and “allied forces” are “well-equipped and trained against weapons.” These are clearly fighting words which one may assume helped many viewers characterize the nature of the invasion during its first few weeks.

A final comment concerning the use of such combative vocabulary is appropriate. In an article entitled “Style and other fallouts from the war on Iraq” (April 2003), the media industry journal *Copy Talk* comments on problems with journalists directly quoting military spokespeople. Poynter Institute’s Keith Woods’ is quoted as saying, “The trouble comes when journalists adopt the language, take it out of quotation marks,

remove the modifiers that tell viewers and listeners that this is someone else's language." This is a point worth noting for both media producers and consumers alike. But as mentioned earlier, a central problem with understanding media coverage of the Iraq invasion was that, for many journalists, government and military language was not always perceived as someone else's. It was frequently their own and used without fear of censorship and with little thought of propaganda.

5. Conclusion

In an open letter to publishers, producers, and reporters written in early March, over two dozen independent editors, journalists, and authors, along with journalism school deans and professors, sharply criticized the U.S. media's deference to authority, the lack of diversity of views, and the commercial aspect of the Iraqi war coverage (Bagdikian, et al, 2003). These concerned journalists noted how both before and during the invasion U.S. media "limit(ed) themselves to details of tactics, weapons and military maneuvers," were excessively casual in "protesting government control of information," "maintaining an arms-length relationship with government," "questioning the official story," and "presenting a diversity of viewpoints." Their criticisms are echoed throughout Black's outline: the emphasis on conflict, heavy reliance on authority, finalistic or fixed views of people and situations, and the ignoring of multiple causality. The combined effect of such journalistic dereliction was a public misunderstanding of the historical context of the U.S. involvement in Middle East conflicts, an almost total lack of debate concerning the principal motivations and immediate causes for the invasion, and a marked difference in public sentiment toward the Iraq invasion in the United States and in most other nations. Propaganda, however described, appeared to have succeeded.

By integrating Ellul's social views of propaganda with elements of linguistic analysis, Black's propaganda outline aids in

a critical understanding of how two related elements of media propaganda interacted: 1) How corporate and government forces before and during the Iraq invasion purposefully managed media views which favored the Bush administration's efforts; 2) how prior to the invasion popular media representations created a general climate in which the U.S. military and U.S. foreign policy objectives were seen as virtuous in their own right. Critical analysis of media language—of media representations, identities, and relationships—is one means of understanding this interaction. The media's role in how the language of government officials is either accepted without question (and hence more easily authorized and “naturalized”) or challenged was neatly summed up by Matthew Rothschild in a recent issue of *The Progressive*. Rothschild notes Bush's use of the passive phrase “if war is forced upon us” and essentially pinpoints the issue of agency by insisting that “No one's forcing you, George!” Had mainstream reporters been more consistently active in such relatively simple linguistic deconstruction, the gap in public opinion dividing Americans and most of the world over Iraq would surely have been less noticeable. The reasons reporters failed in this regard relate to personal linguistic choices, but also to social and institutional constraints—the increasing concentration of corporate media ownership, its consistent deference to authority, its almost total lack of diversity in sourcing, its unrestrained commercial drive, and the way all of these have come to embody a system of media propaganda which, as Douglas Kellner notes in his study of the 1993 bombing of Iraq, have:

... failed in their democratic function of informing the public and in debating issues of policy importance, thus contributing to the crisis of democracy that will continue until the media serve, rather than block, the interests of democratic discussion and debate.

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