

A different picture



President Bush speaks with members of the media in Washington

► An American soldier walks into a mosque, aims at an injured civilian and shoots, killing the man instantly. This is television news report number one.

In the second report a military unit enters a mosque and patches up the wounded. Then a second unit arrives and speaks to the civilians. One man isn't responding and fearing the man's booby-trapped body will explode if he touches it, the soldier shoots the man in self-defence.

You don't have to be an expert in media studies to recognise the handiwork of networks with irreconcilable editorial positions in the presentation of this news item. The first was broadcast by Al-Jazeera Arabic, the second by the American Fox News Channel. How do we know which one is 'true'? And how should journalists go about their job of reporting in a situation such as Iraq?

CLAIRE DAVENPORT spoke to western and Iraqi journalists to gauge some of their views on how the media is reporting the Iraq war and occupation

The hidden hand of the military

A New York Times investigation in April raised serious questions about the objectivity of military analysts working for major television networks. The paper claimed that analysts have been caroused by top Pentagon officials since 2002 to generate favourable coverage of the administration's performance in Iraq. The revelations contained in the paper's front-page splash on 20 April ('Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand') have infuriated members of Congress, who are now demanding further information about the media-military axis. The Pentagon has ceased briefing military analysts altogether.

The report claims there is a powerful financial dynamic in the analysts' relationship with the US government, comprising ties to military contractors involved in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air. According to the paper, records and interviews revealed that analysts were wooed by senior military leaders in hundreds of private briefings, taken on tours of Iraq and given access to classified intelligence on the back of which they have pitched news stories to TV news networks. The report says internal Pentagon documents repeatedly refer to the military analysts as 'message force multipliers' or 'surrogates' who can be counted on to deliver administration 'themes and messages' to millions of Americans 'in the form of their own opinions'. Though

many analysts flatly deny the claims, some told the NYT they regretted participating in what in their view amounted to a sophisticated propaganda campaign 'dressed as independent military analysis'.

Kenneth Allard is among the critics. The former NBC military analyst and lecturer of information warfare at the National Defence University, told the NYT that nothing added up: 'Night and day, I felt we'd been hosed.' As conditions in Iraq deteriorated, Allard says he saw a widening gap between what analysts were told in private briefings and what subsequent inquiries and books later revealed.

Allard argues that some of the blame should be directed at the news networks, which were all too keen to sacrifice any commitment to detailed investigative reporting on the ground for a quick fix with an 'expert' talking head. He says it was that 'superficiality' that made him resign from NBC News last year.

'The fact is that military science has never been a graduation requirement in the testosterone-free zones of our journalism schools,' he wrote on the website familysecuritymatters.org. 'When 9/11 forced the networks to confront their long tradition of military illiteracy, they instinctively outsourced informed commentary to the Warheads [military analysts].'

Unfortunately, some networks rely very heavily on their 'Warhead' analysts. Fox presenter Bill O'Reilly declared on his show on 14 April: 'I can't base my opinion (about

the Iraq war) on anything [other than] what my military analysts, people paid by Fox News, say to me.' He went on to say that newspapers all have an agenda and 'only give you a snapshot of the war'.

The author of the NYT investigation, David Barstow, was reluctant to talk about his work, saying he was 'a bit old school' and it should speak for itself. I told him that, having spoken to journalists who believed the western media would have to wait ten to 15 years before it delved deeply into the behaviour of the government-military complex over Iraq, his investigation came as something of a surprise. He said he was pleased to learn he had beaten their expectations by a decade or so.

'This article would have come sooner, but it took us two years to wrestle 8,000 pages of documents out of the Defense Department that described its interactions with network military analysts,' Barstow said. 'We pushed as hard as we could, but the Defense Department refused to produce many categories of documents in response to our requests under the federal Freedom of Information Act.'

Some journalists say the NYT report is not news and that the military has always tried to control the flow of information. The British media commentator Roy Greenslade says it is hardly surprising that retired military personnel, which many of the

military analysts are, would spout pro-war views. 'Surely the average viewer or reader would take into account that fact and think accordingly?' Greenslade suggests.

'It was something I knew about in detail,' the Independent's Middle East correspondent, Patrick Cockburn, told Red Pepper. It was known to other journalists too – but not, apparently, to the networks that used the military analysts who had been fed their information by the Pentagon. Cockburn points out that the public tends to be unaware how dependent the television news networks and newspapers are for their stories on a very small number of sources – generally, the same wire services as each other – making them easy prey to anyone who can offer some sort of 'inside track'. Cockburn's new book, *Muqtada al Sadr and the Fall of Iraq*, in contrast, is wholly dependent on witness accounts.

Claims that American journalists never go beyond the Green Zone in Baghdad are not true, according to Cockburn. But his American colleagues in the region have become increasingly frustrated that their firsthand reports are contradicted by think tanks operating in Washington, drawing on people who, he says, are produced on television as if they were experts but in fact have no direct experience or understanding of what is actually happening on the ground.

Alternative voices on Iraq

For independent reporting on Iraq, offering alternative voices to the mainstream media Red Pepper recommends the following sources.

The **New York Times** has turned a consistent spotlight on the US government-military complex. The investigation reported in this article saw the paper take the Pentagon to a federal court to gain access to internal documents concerning its manipulation of the media, a process that is still ongoing. Reviewing the film *Meeting Resistance*, the NYT wrote: 'If nothing else, *Meeting Resistance* should dispel any lingering misconception that the Iraq insurgency is mainly the work of outside agitators.'

McClatchy Newspapers has been one of the most vocal Washington-based critics of the Iraq war. Its editors say the coverage of the war in the US shows a steady decline of 'basic accountability reporting'. The paper has a dedicated Iraq section, available at www.mcclatchy.com. Also check out the McClatchy Iraq blog for more stories and comment from journalists based in Iraq (<http://washingtonbureau.typepad.com/iraq>).

Though it carries its own biases, **Al Jazeera** reports most of the atrocities happening in Iraq that may not appear in other mainstream sources – meaning that its reports are an indicator of the current levels of violence. The Al Jazeera Channel is freely available on YouTube with programmes that provide an insight into the lives of ordinary Iraqis and how they have been affected by the war.

The independent news agency **Aswat al-Iraq**, Voices of Iraq, avoids wires whenever possible and features contributions from a network of

Satellite dishes are now commonplace on Iraqi rooftops



► Out of the embed

The Wife says nothing is more precious than Iraq, even her children. The Syrian, a young boy, his face obscured by a scarf, talks about how he tries to convince the clerics that he is ready to fight. The Teacher says a person who doesn't fight for himself or his country shouldn't be called a human being.

Steve Connors and Molly Bingham, from the UK and US respectively, are two photojournalists who returned to Iraq when the initial media interest over the invasion had died down in 2003 on a hunch that an insurgent mood was spreading over the country. As time went on, they believed that the version of the war being played out in western reports had no bearing on what they found on the ground. 'Forgive me, but that reporting,' Bingham says, complaining about reporters who go to Iraq to fill in the blanks of pre-written scripts. 'Frankly I would have been pleased to learn that my government was telling me the truth.'

Interestingly, the voices in Connors and Bingham's documentary film, *Meeting Resistance*, identified simply as the Wife or the Teacher, don't identify themselves as Shia or Sunni or Sadrist or Baathist but as Iraqis who simply want the occupation to end. Instead of being carted about by minders, Bingham and Connors spoke politics and smoked cigarettes

with local people from the Adhamiya neighbourhood, a suburb of Baghdad, where the film is based. Soon afterwards they were setting up interviews with members of the resistance.

This is a story that no major network will touch. Connors and Bingham finished filming in April 2004 when their sources grew afraid of reprisals. Since the project's inception in 2003 they have approached 'all major networks' with the film. Some television networks responded positively but none was willing to show it.

I met Bingham and Connors at the Frontline Club in London, a media club set up by 'maverick cameramen' (the club's founders' words), to talk about the reluctance of TV bosses to show the film. Bingham thinks that it's outside the 'comfort zone' of the US media. More than a hundred independent screenings in the US, Britain and Iraq have produced a consistent line of questioning from audiences trying to put the film into the context of the 'popular narrative' that the American military is in Iraq to drive out terrorists, end sectarian violence and restore security. Connors and Bingham argue that the mainstream media are complicit in perpetuating this skewed narrative.

'The military dictates the news agenda,' Connors says. The military says that it is fighting insurgents from foreign or fringe elements but local knowledge disputes these reports. The widespread opposition

to the US military that emerges from the film is in line with several opinion polls conducted by the BBC and World Public Opinion, which show that more than three-quarters of Iraqis believe the US military presence perpetuates violence. But without that local knowledge or alternative sources, Connors says, the American public has come to believe that the insurgency is composed of fringe elements that can be isolated and killed.

Bingham compares the treatment of Iraq to that of Vietnam – both boil down to a foreign occupation and the ensuing resistance. Connors quotes BBC reporter Martin Bell, who worked in Vietnam during the war there, as saying that the BBC got it totally wrong because it only listened to the American military. He mentions the celebrated veteran Vietnam reporter, the late David Halberstam, who made a point of ducking military briefings and writing about what he saw on the ground. The 23-year-old's reports drew calls from the Pentagon demanding his dismissal. But his editors at the *New York Times* stood by him.

As with Vietnam, Bingham believes it will take time for the American public to swallow this pill: 'I don't have any doubt that in 10 to 15 years *Meeting Resistance* will ultimately be shown on American television. It will be dug up and people who watch it will say if only they had known what the film says before.'



Molly Bingham and Steve Connors, directors of the film *Meeting Resistance*

Children playing next to graffiti in Iraq





Patriotic revellers wave the Iraqi flag

An Iraqi in exile

It's 1.30 in the morning and the instant messenger on my screen starts hopping frantically. It's Ahmed Mukhtar Al-Maliki, an Iraqi journalist who eventually left Iraq after threats on his life. He's upset and I ask him why.

'Militias sent me oral threat,' he starts. 'Saying I am collaborating with US against them. They say you are a traitor journalist and translating for them, leading to arrest, torture and killing of militiamen.'

Afraid to go back to his home in Jameela, a neighbourhood close to Sadr City in Baghdad, he is now forced to work several thousand miles from the source, as a sub-editor for the news agency Voices of Iraq, which is based in Newcastle. He is also forced to live in a country that, in his opinion, doesn't properly report the suffering endured by his friends back home. We spoke just after intense fighting on 29 April, when clashes between US soldiers and Shia militants killed at least 34 and injured 62.

'While media reports talked about four-hour fighting, it was not reported in detail. I talked with friends from this area. They said they are in hell. US fighters

and tanks bomb indiscriminately and randomly ... and militiamen are strangle holding over us ... we are caught between the two evils. Today, and every day, I am calling them to ask about what happened, especially those who are near the fighting area. Those charred bodies were from yesterday night's clashes. You can imagine that ambulances and any vehicle will be targeted. No injured will be moved at whatever cost or urgency.'

He says some of his friends want to return to the stability of Saddam's regime, that they are angry at the misrepresentation of facts in western media reports.

'Shiite Sadr slum preferred Saddam's regime stability to their current one!' he writes. 'I can understand because media only portrayed the situation as US and Iraqi security forces fighting Shiite militia backed by Iran, leaving more than 2.5 million suffering ... for nothing ... just because they want to simplify things and draw a Manichean picture of the fighting.'

This is one of many conversations I have with Ahmed about the situation in his neighbourhood. His is one of many Iraqi voices that the mainstream chooses to ignore. ■

Alternative voices on Iraq continued

correspondents throughout Iraq and from three independent Iraqi newspapers. It's a good source for three things: news from the Iraqi press, news on the affairs of the nascent Iraqi government and steady coverage of atrocities happening all over the country. The agency began publishing in Arabic on 21 November 2004 and now provides services in Arabic, Kurdish and English through its website www.aswataliraq.info.

The **Institute of War Reporting's** trained journalists syndicate most of their stories to the large number of small papers in the US that cannot afford their own foreign correspondents. The institute, a media development NGO, works with local journalists with varying degrees of experience to bring them up to an international standard, the idea being that journalists who are local to the area have a greater understanding of it and greater access to a variety of sources. According to recent figures, their reports have reached a readership of two million people. The institute-trained reporter Sahar al-Haideri, who was murdered for reporting on the rise of insurgents in her home town of Mosul, was last year's recipient of the Kurt Schork award. Founded by reporters who wanted to bring the issue of ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo to an international audience 17 years ago, the institute's Middle East programme director, Ammar Al Shahbandar, says the mainstream media in the west and Iraq is giving the public a misleading story. 'It's not about positive journalism,' he says, 'but about reporting reality – and negative news is only half the story.' See www.IWPR.net for more information ■