

CNN tells reporters: No propaganda, except American

Patrick Martin
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In an extraordinary directive to its staff, Cable News Network has instructed reporters and anchormen to tailor their coverage of the US war against Afghanistan to downplay the toll of death and destruction caused by American bombing, for fear that such coverage will undermine popular support for the US military effort.

A memo from CNN Chairman Walter Isaacson to international correspondents for the network declares: "As we get good reports from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, we must redouble our efforts to make sure we do not seem to be simply reporting from their vantage or perspective. We must talk about how the Taliban are using civilian shields and how the Taliban have harbored the terrorists responsible for killing close to 5,000 innocent people."

"I want to make sure we're not used as a propaganda platform," Isaacson declared in an interview with the *Washington Post*, adding that it "seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan."

"We're entering a period in which there's a lot more reporting and video from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan," he said. "You want to make sure people understand that when they see civilian suffering there, it's in the context of a terrorist attack that caused enormous suffering in the United States."

In a second memo leaked to the *Post*, CNN's head of standards and practices, Rick Davis, expressed concern about reports on the bombing of Afghanistan filed by on-the-spot reporters. Davis noted that it "may be hard for the correspondent in these dangerous areas to make the points clearly" about the reasons for the US bombing. In other words, the CNN official feared that overseas correspondents might be intimidated by local opposition to the US military intervention and allow such sentiments to influence their reports.

To ensure that every CNN report always includes a justification of the war, Davis prescribed specific language for anchors to read after each account of civilian casualties and other bomb damage. He suggested three alternative formulations:

* "We must keep in mind, after seeing reports like this from Taliban-controlled areas, that these US military actions are in response to a terrorist attack that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the US."

* "We must keep in mind, after seeing reports like this, that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan continues to harbor terrorists who have praised the September 11 attacks that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the US."

* "The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it is trying to minimize civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11 attacks that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the US."

Davis concluded with an ultimatum to journalists concerned that

they may sound like parrots for the White House: "Even though it may start sounding rote, it is important that we make this point each time."

The Tailwind capitulation

A turning point in the transformation of CNN into a thinly disguised outlet for Pentagon propaganda was the 1998 controversy over the network's broadcast of an investigative report entitled "Valley of Death." The program dealt with allegations that the US military used chemical weapons in Laos in 1970 during the Vietnam War. Produced by April Oliver and Jack Smith, and narrated by Peter Arnett, it provided considerable evidence that Operation Tailwind, as the military called it, involved the use of sarin, a deadly nerve gas.

But coming amidst a series of US provocations against Iraq over allegations that Saddam Hussein's regime was developing weapons of mass destruction, the CNN program threatened to cut across a major objective of American foreign policy. A storm of protest was whipped up by far-right elements, including former military officers, and both former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell denounced the television report.

CNN's response was complete capitulation. Network founder Ted Turner, still the largest stockholder in the parent Time-Warner conglomerate, made abject apologies to the Pentagon. CNN repudiated the exposé, fired its two producers, and reprimanded Arnett who, to his shame, distanced himself from the program and claimed he was not responsible for its allegations.

Less than a year later Arnett himself was fired. The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist had been widely acclaimed for his on-the-spot reporting from Baghdad during the Gulf War. His dismissal, in the midst of the war on Yugoslavia, was followed by another demonstration of the ties between the network and the national security apparatus. CNN's chief correspondent in the former Yugoslavia, Christiane Amanpour, married State Department spokesman James Rubin, the Clinton administration's principal liaison with the Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas. Both continued in their jobs as full-time apologists for the war on Yugoslavia, one at the State Department podium, the other in front of a CNN camera in the Balkans.

“Human shields” and other lies

While CNN’s policy may be the most crudely expressed—or the only one recorded in a corporate memorandum that has become public knowledge—its stance is characteristic of the entire American media, which serves in the Afghanistan war as 24x7 propagandists for American imperialism.

Isaacson’s reference to “civilian shields” is typical of the cynical lies spread by the American government, with the obedient support of the media. This claim was first broached during the Persian Gulf War, when US officials routinely dismissed reports of horrific civilian casualties caused by the US bombing of Iraq, claiming that Saddam Hussein had ordered tanks, warplanes and entire chemical and biological weapons facilities to be moved into residential neighborhoods.

The most notorious US atrocity of that war was the destruction of a bomb shelter in the Al-Amariya neighborhood of Baghdad, in which hundreds of civilians were killed, the majority of them women and children. The Pentagon claimed that Al-Amariya was a top secret command-and-control center for the Iraqi military, and that the women and children had been deliberately planted there as “human shields.” Subsequent investigation revealed that these claims were spurious.

This did not stop the media from uncritically accepting similar statements about the US bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, when civilian casualties were invariably blamed on the government of Slobodan Milosevic. The same kind of lies are now circulated about Afghanistan, with reports that the Taliban regime is moving heavy weapons and military detachments into mosques and relief centers—in order to justify in advance the next American atrocity.

The myth of “human shields” is only one example of the torrent of lies that flows out of the White House, Pentagon and CIA, swallowed and regurgitated by the US media without a qualm.

White House political adviser Karl Rove and press spokesman Ari Fleischer were caught lying about why Bush took so long to return to the White House September 11 after the suicide hijackings hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These officials peddled the story that the White House had received a credible threat to Air Force One. It later emerged that there was no such threat, and the story had been concocted to provide a plausible explanation for Bush’s embarrassing conduct. Now the same administration issues alerts about terrorist threats for the entire United States without a single major media voice asking why, given the previous lies, these alerts should be believed.

The administration initially pledged to release conclusive evidence of Osama bin Laden’s role in the terrorist attacks—Colin Powell made the promise on national television—but reversed itself abruptly. The supposed evidence has never been produced. The American media raised no hue and cry, and continues to repeat the official claims that the guilt of bin Laden is incontrovertible.

White House, Pentagon shape coverage

With the onset of the bombing campaign, the effort by the White House and Pentagon to dictate terms of press coverage of the war was

stepped up. Bush’s national security adviser Condoleezza Rice called the five television networks asking them to limit coverage of statements by Osama bin Laden. Other officials suggested these statements might contain coded instructions to terrorists. The networks immediately issued a pledge of cooperation.

White House officials have responded to press criticism of the Bush administration’s handling of the anthrax attacks by seeking to rebuke reporters whose questions express skepticism about the government response. Campbell Brown, an NBC White House correspondent, said a top White House official telephoned her to complain of a hostile question to newly appointed Director of Homeland Security Tom Ridge. “To get an unsolicited phone call from a senior official at this White House is very unusual,” she told the *Washington Post*.

The top executive at ABC News, David Westin, was raked over the coals for remarks at a forum at the Columbia University journalism school where he was asked whether the Pentagon was a “legitimate military target.” Westin replied by distinguishing between his personal revulsion at the loss of life on September 11 and his responsibility as a journalist to describe the event accurately, including the motivation of those responsible for the attack, who may have regarded the Pentagon in that light.

The forum was broadcast by C-SPAN, and Westin’s comments were lambasted by Internet gossip Matt Drudge, the *New York Post*, and other voices of the right wing. Westin issued a public statement October 31, declaring, “I apologize for any harm that my misstatement may have caused.”

In the war zone itself, the Pentagon systematically violates its own ground rules for press coverage, which prescribe that the media should have access to all major units and locations. Only a handful of reporters are on the ground in Afghanistan, and these operate under the type of self-censorship revealed in the CNN memo. Reporters are barred from many US naval warships in the Indian Ocean as well as air bases in the Middle East and Central Asia.

While the usual justification for such practices is the safety of the troops, the Pentagon has never documented a single incident where press coverage compromised “operational security.” Seventeen news organizations were aware that the US was about to launch bombing raids on Afghanistan at least 24 hours before the attacks began October 7, but not a single one broke the story in advance.

Richard Reeves, a veteran liberal journalist, described the informal wartime muzzling of the press in a recent column titled, “Truth in the Packaging of War News.” He cited a 1982 Naval War College advisory on press treatment, which prescribed the following rules: “Sanitize the visual images of war, control media access to theaters, censor information that could upset readers and viewers, exclude journalists who would not write favorable stories.”

This was predictable for the military, Reeves wrote, but his main criticism was of the submissive response of the media. “My gripe is with my own business,” he explained. “The press, in general, prefers appearing authoritative in war coverage to admitting that we are being manipulated and lied to—and that we do not actually know what is going on, particularly in the early combat of any war.”



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