

White House dictates war coverage to a pliant media

Office of Global Communications oversees press censorship

Henry Michaels
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Over recent days, photographs and footage of captured and killed United States soldiers have been seen by millions of people around the world, but not published by the major American newspapers or broadcast by TV networks. The blackout imposed on the American public, at the direct behest of the Bush administration, has highlighted two fundamental developments.

The first is that while the Bush White House claims to be fighting for "liberty" and "democracy" in Iraq, it has created an extraordinary official apparatus to control and manage the media to an unprecedented degree. The second is that the corporate media is functioning in the most blatant manner as a propaganda tool of the White House and the Pentagon.

When the ABC network initially replayed Al Jazeera footage of the American POWs, asking US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to confirm the story, Rumsfeld and his aides immediately objected, declaring that the Geneva Convention made it illegal for prisoners of war to be "shown and pictured and humiliated."

Threateningly, Rumsfeld added, "needless to say, television networks that carry such pictures are, I would say, doing something that's unfortunate." The major US networks, including CNN, and even the public broadcasting network, quickly bowed to this pressure and suppressed the video.

The Pentagon then sent news organizations a memo requesting that they "not air or publish recognizable images or audio recordings that identify POWs." The memo made the same request for deceased soldiers, citing "respect for the families" and "the principles of the Geneva Conventions."

At a US Central Command media briefing in Qatar, Lieutenant General John Abizaid called the footage "disgusting" and denounced Al Jazeera. "I regard the showing of those pictures as absolutely unacceptable," he told journalists.

US network anchors and reporters soon echoed this position. "They are horrifying pictures, and we are not showing them on MSNBC," anchor John Siegenthaler said. "Why would Al Jazeera put them on television?... They are extremely, extremely disturbing images," said NBC anchor Matt Lauer.

"They are utterly, utterly gruesome," said Fox News reporter Greg Palkot.

While the major US media outlets readily agreed and complied with the Pentagon directives, one US-based web site, *YellowTimes.org*, was shut down by its Internet provider for showing the Al Jazeera photographs. (See: Antiwar website shut down)

By contrast, non-US media outlets ridiculed the Pentagon's claims to be suddenly concerned about the Geneva Conventions, noting that the US is illegally holding more than 600 prisoners from Afghanistan in Cuba, denying them any rights as POWs.

The Bush administration's "newfound affection for the Geneva Convention is remarkable," observed an editorial in the Riyadh-based daily *Arab News*. "The US does not believe that the prisoners now being held at Guantanamo Bay are prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. Pictures of the men there, shackled and living in cages, were distributed by the Bush administration to the world's media."

Editorials around the world also noted that the US media had, on a daily basis, featured detailed images of Iraqi POWs. On the same day as Rumsfeld's directive, the *Washington Post* carried a front page picture of an Iraqi prisoner being blindfolded as he was led away by US soldiers.

In fact, before the capture of the US POWs, American networks and newspapers consistently ran graphic pictures of surrendering, captured, dead or dying Iraqi soldiers. This was invariably accompanied by US statements that large numbers of Iraqi troops were unwilling to fight for Saddam Hussein, a theme endlessly reiterated by Rumsfeld and the Pentagon.

The censorship and self-censorship on the captured US POWs is far from an isolated occurrence. While all networks ran the dramatic footage of the "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad, there is scant coverage in the US of the casualties or wounded in the attacks, despite ample on-the-spot footage from the Iraqi news agency and Al Jazeera and public statements from the International Red Cross giving figures for the wounded in Baghdad and Basra hospitals.

The divergence between the US and other Western media, on

the one hand, and the coverage throughout the Middle East and elsewhere is stark. One photograph widely published internationally showed the head of a child, aged about 12, that had been split apart in the US-led assault on Basra.

Another newspaper picture showed two dead Iraqi soldiers, slumped in their trench, the back of their heads blown off. One of them is holding a white flag of surrender. Other pictures came from northern Iraq, where American missiles killed Kurdish villagers, supposedly while targeting the Islamist Ansar al-Islam organization. None of these images have been shown by the mainstream US media.

Part of the reason for the completely distorted US coverage lies in the Bush administration's establishment of an Orwellian Office of Global Communications (OGC), operating out of the White House, which seeks to manipulate what the public sees, reads and hears about the war 24 hours a day.

Advised by Karen Hughes, a longtime Bush confidante, senior officials in the White House, Pentagon, State Department and National Security Council work around-the-clock, in coordination with British Prime Minister Tony Blair's media office.

These officials work with Rumsfeld and Bush to manufacture and then feed the media thematic story lines each day, providing constant access to senior administration figures to reinforce the message. The operation starts at dawn when White House spokesman Ari Fleischer briefs the television networks and the wire services before the morning news programs. Then at 9:45 a.m. he gives White House reporters an outline of what the daily message will be.

Later, in the words of its web site, the OGC leads a daily conference call of administration leaders to coordinate "communications planning" and "ensure rapid response to allegations and rumors in the war on terror." To hammer out its messages for media "bites", the OGC produces the *Global Messenger*, a one-page fact sheet sent world-wide to US officials to disseminate key points and daily activities.

According to the January 21 press release announcing the OGC's creation: "Created by Executive Order of the President, this new office within the White House coordinates strategic communications with global audiences, integrating the President's themes into new and ongoing programs. This new office assists the President in communicating his message to the world—dignity, security and liberty for all people, everywhere."

The truth of the OGC's origins and functions is somewhat different. Before January, it operated out of the White House for six months without any formal authorization, seeking to stifle mounting public criticism, notably in the Middle East, of the ongoing civilian death toll and poverty in US-occupied Afghanistan.

In February 2002, the Pentagon shut down a previous propaganda office meant to influence global opinion, particularly about designated enemies such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The office's purposes had been exposed by the leak

of an internal memo proposing to use the Internet and other media to spread false information.

Of course, the OGC insists that its mission is to provide only "truthful information." This claim can best be judged by recalling some of the "messages" that have flowed from OGC over the past week. Two nights ago, all the US networks featured reports from "Pentagon sources" that a suspected chemicals weapons plant had been discovered in southern Iraq—a story that was later admitted to be unsubstantiated.

The next night, the same treatment was afforded to claims that the Iraqi regime had drawn a "red line" around Baghdad and was planning to use chemicals weapons if it were crossed.

Despite several television appearances by Saddam Hussein, Rumsfeld has deliberately kept alive rumours that the Iraqi leader is either missing, injured or dead. These comments have been dutifully reported daily. Rumsfeld and the OGC have also dropped hints about unofficial contacts between US intelligence, US Special Forces and elements of the Iraqi military.

These psychological warfare operations (psy-ops, to use the Pentagon jargon), coupled with the dropping of 25 million leaflets in Iraq, the decapitation attempt on Hussein's life and the bombing of his symbols of power, are all integral to the US military campaign.

Not since Joseph Goebbels served as Hitler's Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda from 1933 to 1944 has the world witnessed such far-reaching media orchestration.

This propaganda operation has begun to backfire, however, amid signs of widespread Iraqi hostility to the invading forces. Recent days have seen new OGC messages: that the war could last longer and be tougher than expected.



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