

American "free press" in action

US networks agree to serve as Pentagon propaganda tool in Iraq

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Having served unofficially as a propaganda arm of the White House and Pentagon before and during the war on Iraq, the major US media networks, with the exception of CNN, have agreed to make their function official. In the name of providing Iraq's people with a taste of a "free press," ABC, CBS, Fox and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) have decided to provide content for a Pentagon-controlled television service in Iraq.

The five-hour-a-day program, called "Toward Freedom," will consist primarily of repeats of ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, The PBS NewsHour With Jim Lehrer, NBC Nightly News and Fox News Special Report With Brit Hume. Confident that the content will serve the purposes of the US-led occupation of Iraq, the Pentagon has pledged to air the repeats unedited.

Interspersed with the network programs, Iraqi people with access to TV will also view the Pentagon briefings given by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, translated into Arabic. Some British content, one hour of the daily total, will be supplied by Britain's Foreign Office, which has outsourced production to a private London-based company called World Television.

The programs will be beamed throughout Iraq via Commando Solo, a fleet of specially equipped military C-130 cargo planes—the same planes that have conducted the Pentagon's psychological warfare operations on Iraqi television frequencies since the US-led invasion began. A government official said the network-supplied programming would not be "intermingled" with Air Force "psy ops" material.

The US government has used Commando Solo planes as part of its information wars since Vietnam, and deployed them last year in Afghanistan. But this is believed to be the first time American media organizations have officially joined the "psy-ops" effort, setting a precedent for future partnerships at home and abroad.

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair inaugurated the broadcasts with statements taped during their summit in Northern Ireland last week. In his message, aired in English with Arabic subtitles, Bush declared, "I assure every

citizen of Iraq: Your nation will soon be free." Blair said: "Our forces are friends and liberators of the Iraqi people, not your conquerors."

On the ground, troops have been distributing flyers to residents with the text of the messages by Bush and Blair. US and British forces have also begun publishing an Arabic-language newspaper, the *Times*, with a starting circulation of 10,000.

Under the banner of "freedom," the new propaganda service enjoys a monopoly in Iraq, thanks to the bombing and destruction of Iraqi TV and radio facilities. The US attacks on the Iraqi media are a violation of the Geneva Conventions, which forbid such attacks on civilian facilities, even if state-controlled, during war.

One US network, Time-Warner's CNN, has refused to join the broadcasting project. In a statement, a CNN spokesman said: "We didn't think that as an independent, global news organization it was appropriate to participate in a United States government video transmission."

Other networks, however, quickly overcame any reservations. CBS News President Andrew Heyward said he was "skeptical" on first hearing that the project would be funded by the government and operated by the Middle East Committee of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a State Department communications agency. He became convinced that "this is a good thing to do ... a patriotic thing to do" after conversations with "some of the most traditional-minded colleagues" at CBS News.

Defending the project, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer raised to a new level of absurdity Washington's claims to be "liberating" Iraq's population. "For decades, the Iraqi people have heard nothing but totalitarian propaganda that was designed to prop up the regime of Saddam Hussein," he said. "That will now change, and that is for the good of the Iraqi people."

Fleischer confirmed that the Pentagon and the British military would decide what airs in the nightly broadcasts. Asked if Iraqis would just see "Toward Freedom" as yet more propaganda, but from another source, Fleischer said: "If the

scenes that we're seeing on the streets carried through free media's cameras are any indication, the Iraqi people welcome a message from President Bush."

His response underscored the administration's gratitude for the US media's stage-managed and highly-selective coverage of events throughout the war, culminating in the pulling down of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square. [See "The stage-managed events in Baghdad's Firdos Square: image-making, lies and the 'liberation' of Iraq"] Fleischer's comments summed up the seamless transition that government and media officials anticipate in the functioning of the US networks. To go from having their media crews "embedded" with military units, eulogizing their killing activities, to glorifying the next phase—a colonial-style American occupation—is a natural progression for the media conglomerates.

Fleischer insisted that Pentagon control over broadcasting was a praiseworthy enterprise. "I think it's entirely appropriate, from the president's point of view, for DOD [Department of Defense] to be involved in this. It remains a dangerous country where DOD assets are needed to field these missions. DOD is very good ... at providing information for people who have a thirst for information."

Fleischer portrayed the campaign as a transitional effort designed to fill an information vacuum until Iraqi news media are up and running. But he added that the media campaign would run indefinitely. Any Iraqi media will remain under US oversight, as indicated by the fact that the US Agency for International Development has a team in Iraq to help administer the longer-term media policy.

The Pentagon will work with the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which supervises all the US government's international broadcasting, including Voice of America, Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language radio service, and Radio Farda, a new Persian station broadcast in Iran. Together, the services broadcast in 65 languages. Its Middle East Committee, inaugurated last year, operates under the direction of Radio Sawa news director Moaufac Harb and consultant Bill Headline, a former CBS News and CNN executive.

Chairing the Board of Governors is Norman Pattiz, chairman of radio distributor Westwood One. Pattiz said the Board's mission was "to promote democracy by being an example of a free press. What better way to fulfill that mission than to provide actual examples of America's free press?"

Not accidentally, prominent sections of this "free press" agitated for the illegal bombardment of Iraq's media, which created the monopoly now exercised by the Pentagon. Almost as soon as the war began, TV network correspondents and hosts demanded that Iraq's broadcasting facilities be targeted.

On March 24, Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly declared: "I think they should have taken out the television, the Iraqi television.... Why haven't they taken out the Iraqi television towers?" MSNBC correspondent David Shuster agreed: "A lot

of questions [remain] about why state-run television is allowed to continue broadcasting. After all, the coalition forces know where those broadcast towers are located."

After the facility was struck, reporters expressed satisfaction. On March 25, CNN's Aaron Brown recalled that "a lot of people wondered why Iraqi TV had been allowed to stay on the air, why the coalition allowed Iraqi TV to stay on the air as long as it did." *New York Times* reporter Michael Gordon appeared on CNN to endorse the attack: "And personally, I think the television, based on what I've seen of Iraqi television, with Saddam Hussein presenting propaganda to his people ... when we're trying to send the exact opposite message, was an appropriate target."

This support extended to US military attacks on other non-US media sources, not merely Iraq's state-controlled services. No US network called into question, let alone objected to, the deliberate April 8 bombing of the Baghdad offices of Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV, in which Al Jazeera reporter Tariq Ayoub was killed.

This "free press" provides a revealing example of what the US government and the mainstream media mean by the "liberation" of Iraq. The country's people and society have been shattered to remove all obstacles to US domination and the "free market" of corporate power.

One of the capitalist "models" on display, the US media, is dominated by a handful of media magnates and vast conglomerates. Far from serving "democracy," it constitutes a major part and critical instrument of the ruling plutocracy.

From cheerleading for war to the embedding of journalists, the conquest of Iraq has already become a milestone in the final debasement of the US media, with the networks openly enlisting in the establishment of US colonial-style rule. This voluntary and open integration by the media into the apparatus of the Pentagon must be taken as a sharp warning of the breakdown of democratic processes within the US itself. Can there be any doubt that the same media conglomerates will serve as direct accomplices in sweeping attacks on political dissent and the establishment of authoritarian forms of rule?



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