

Media bosses admit pro-war bias in coverage of Iraq

Patrick Martin
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Two leading media bosses have admitted what has been increasingly evident throughout the month-long war in Iraq: the American broadcast media systematically distorted the news of the war and functioned as an electronic arm of the Pentagon and the Bush administration.

In separate speeches April 24 in London and San Francisco, BBC Director General Greg Dyke and Ted Turner, founder of CNN, discussed the performance of the media during the war.

Both sought to lay the blame for the super-patriotic tone of the war coverage largely on the media empire of billionaire Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corp. owns Fox News, the biggest US cable news network, as well as Britain's Sky News and nearly 200 daily newspapers worldwide. While there is no doubt that Murdoch was the most strident of the voices for war, the BBC, CNN and the rest of the broadcast and print media followed suit.

Dyke spoke at a conference at the University of London, singling out US television and radio coverage of the war, not the British media, especially Fox and Clear Channel Communications, the largest US radio group. "I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war," Dyke said. "If Iraq proved anything, it was that the BBC cannot afford to mix patriotism and journalism. This is happening in the United States and if it continues, will undermine the credibility of the US electronic news media."

He pointed to the open espousal of right-wing politics on Fox News, as well as the organization of pro-war rallies by talk-radio hosts working for Clear Channel Communications. (While Clear Channel encouraged its DJs to engage in political activity, the US media as a whole barred employees from participating in antiwar

rallies and one major newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, fired a tech columnist who joined a march against the war. [See "San Francisco newspaper fires antiwar reporter"].)

Dyke admitted that the conduct of the American television networks was detrimental to "the health of our democracy," adding that the trend has been noticeable "particularly since September 11, when many US networks wrapped themselves in the American flag and swapped impartiality for patriotism."

Turner's comments were characteristically more blunt. Speaking to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, a leading business forum, he described Rupert Murdoch as "a warmonger" who had "promoted" the war. Turner, himself a billionaire and the largest shareholder in the world's largest media company, AOL Time Warner, said the American media was far too concentrated: "There's really five companies that control 90 percent of what we read, see and hear. It's not healthy."

Despite the qualms of Dyke and Turner about the degrading of journalism into government propaganda, their own networks performed as lamentably as Murdoch's, even if their flag-waving support for the war was at a slightly lower volume.

While the BBC occasionally broadcast reports of the war that were at odds with the official story emanating from US CentCom, the Pentagon and 10 Downing Street, it was the worst among major broadcast outlets in covering the antiwar movement, according to a study by the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

The newspaper reviewed war coverage in five countries and found that the BBC provided the lowest proportion of coverage to dissenting views, 2 percent,

even lower than the 7 percent of coverage provided by the US-based ABC network. So hostile was the network's attitude to the massive antiwar protests that British demonstrators regularly denounced it, along with Murdoch's tabloid *Sun*, for its coverage.

According to a report in the *Guardian* newspaper, the BBC cautioned senior management, in a memo dated February 6, the week before the biggest protests, to "be careful" about broadcasting antiwar actions.

As for CNN, it sought unsuccessfully to close its ratings gap with Fox News by aping the chauvinist coverage of the Murdoch-owned cable network. CNN anchormen and embedded reporters regularly referred to US troops as "heroes" and "liberators," and joined with the rest of the American media in downplaying reports of Iraqi casualties, civilian and military.

CNN chief Eason Jordan, in an appearance on his own network's program on the media, "Reliable Sources", defended his use of military experts who had criticized US tactics and strategy during the initial stages of the invasion. The Pentagon had vetted all these retired generals in advance, he revealed.

"I went to the Pentagon myself several times before the war started and met with important people there and said, for instance, at CNN, 'Here are the generals we're thinking of retaining to advise us on the air and off about the war.' And we got a big thumbs-up on all of them. That was important."

In other words, CNN made sure that any comments about the progress or difficulties in the war would be within the bounds set by the US military. Needless to say, there were no expert commentators brought on board from the antiwar movement.

The kowtowing to American imperialism continues unabated in the postwar period. A case in point is the reaction of NBC to the speech made by one of its own news correspondents, Ashleigh Banfield, at Kansas State University April 24. Banfield blasted the US media coverage of the war for presenting "a grand and glorious picture" which covering up the real impact of US bombs, missiles and shelling. "These were horrors that were completely left out of this war," she said.

"It wasn't journalism," Banfield said, adding that the coverage would encourage Americans to support future wars, "because it looked to them like a courageous and terrific endeavor. You did not see where those bullets landed. You didn't see what happened when the

mortars landed. A puff of smoke is not what a mortar looks like when it explodes, believe me."

Banfield criticized MSNBC for hiring right-wing talk-show host Michael Savage, in an attempt to copy the Fox News formula of appealing to the most backward far-right audience. Savage recently denounced Banfield for her reports on the state of public opinion in the Arab countries, including the mass popular hostility to Israel and support for Palestinian suicide bombers.

The NBC correspondent also noted that the cable TV networks have recently shifted their coverage from conditions within postwar Iraq to sensational criminal cases in the United States, such as the Laci Peterson murder. Her network was about to close its bureau in Kabul, Afghanistan, she said.

NBC and MSNBC officials rejected Banfield's criticism as soon as it was made public, and within three days had extracted from her a statement of retraction. An NBC spokeswoman announced Monday that NBC President Neil Shapiro had spoken with Banfield, and that "both agreed that she didn't intend to demean the work of her colleagues, and she will choose her words more carefully in the future."

But MSNBC general manager Erik Sorenson essentially confirmed Banfield's charge that the network deliberately suppressed footage of Iraqi civilian and military casualties. "We were reluctant to run graphic images of any casualties, civilian or military," he told one press interviewer. "Antiwar activists have complained to MSNBC, 'You've made war seem like fun. You cleaned it up.' We saw and experienced a lot of the power and horror of these weapons. I didn't need to see the body literally chopped in half."

Such images, however, have been widely broadcast, not only in the Arab media, but throughout the world outside the United States, bringing the horrors of the American devastation of Iraq to a global audience.



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