

# "They who put out the people's eyes..."

As an Association committed to the advancement of Christian values in the practice of communication, WACC is concerned for the role of media in the current war and the impact its reporting has on both those under attack, as well as those whose nations are leading the attack. The following article by John Pilger serves as a challenge to those who would tell the story of this, and any conflict.



Here we are again: the same old footage of planes against the sunrise, the same military jargon used by reporters:

During the Falklands war in 1982, the BBC's Weekly Review Board met to discuss how the war should be presented to the public. The minutes show that senior executives decided that the news ought to be shaped to suit "the emotional sensibilities of the public" and that the weight of BBC coverage would be

concerned with government statements of policy. An "impartial style" was felt to be "an unnecessary irritation".

Argentina's acceptance, bar three minor amendments, of a Peruvian peace plan was ignored by the BBC. The Thatcher government was not interested; BBC news reflected this, along with the deception that Argentina was to blame for the plan's "failure". ITN, whose reporting was little different, claimed that "70 per cent [of the British public] want to launch an invasion". However, the same poll showed that 76 per cent of those questioned wanted the United Nations to occupy the Falklands while Britain and Argentina negotiated. This was never reported. Instead, the poll results were interpreted on the news as showing that British public opinion was "hardening".

Here we go again. Last Sunday, the Observer reported that "65 per cent [of the public] support the use of targeted 'surgical' air strikes against countries harbouring terrorists". The paper's poll did not say what "surgical" air strikes were. It did not say whether its pollsters had explained to people that, during the Gulf war, 70 per cent of the 88,500 tons of bombs dropped on Iraq and Kuwait missed their targets completely, causing tens of thousands of civilian deaths, or that in NATO's attack on Yugoslavia two years ago, the majority of targets were also missed. "Surgical strike" is a misleading term. So why did they use it?

The same poll, however, disclosed that 60 per cent of people opposed "massive air strikes". MOST BRITONS OPPOSE AIR STRIKES was the banner headline that the Observer failed to publish, yet, by any true journalistic standard, that was the headline story. Instead, the front page was given over to "the net tightening on Osama Bin Laden" and Britain's role as America's "most potent war partner". There was a breathless tone of "pressing ahead". The sources were British and American intelligence and the Ministry of Defence.

Journalism sourced to unnamed officials whose job in these circumstances is to manipulate the news has a history. Pick any one of "our" recent wars or slaughters and write down the "intelligence" and "diplomatic" lies that emerged later. The list is long.

Take George Bush Senior's attacks on Panama and Somalia just over ten years ago. Both were promoted as Wild West pursuits of bad guys, General Noriega in Panama and General Aidid in Somalia. "Sources" were quoted as saying that few civilians had been killed. In fact, more than 2,000 civilians were killed by American helicopter gunships in the shanties of Panama City and, according to a CIA estimate, between 7,000 and 10,000 were killed in Somalia in what the Pentagon called "Operation Restore Hope". This was not reported.

In 1998, President Clinton destroyed a harmless pharmaceutical factory in Sudan with cruise missiles. "Intelligence sources" were widely quoted in the American and British media as being "beyond doubt" that this was where Osama Bin Laden's organisation was making nerve gas. Clinton's attack killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent people.

There is said to be a UN report on how many were killed and which is suppressed under pressure from Washington. The sum of the dead from all these attacks is several times that of the number killed in America on 11 September.

Regardless of an admirable strain of dissent in the Guardian and Independent, the overriding impression given by television and the press is that of a familiar rush to war. There is the same old footage of ships and planes against the sunrise, the same old "experts", the same old Boy's Own maps, the same old instant "evidence", the same old military jargon used by reporters ("surgical strikes" and "assets" are favourites), the same old warm-up stories about SAS derring-do, the same old demonising of nations and cultures, the same old nonsense about anti-Americanism (now in the realm of self-parody, with criticism of American policy described as "racist") and the same old "approval rating" polls drawn from a public denied credible information from independent sources, not to mention the perspective that Washington is using the 11 September disaster to accelerate American control over much of humanity, with immediate dangers for all of us.

Surely, journalists must ask themselves: is it not possible to break away from the pack? And do the media courses turning out the next generation examine and analyse such institutional failure (honourable exceptions aside) to keep the record straight? Are media students warned that true journalists must be sceptical of all authority, and that their job is to push back screens and lift rocks, specially at a time like this? It seems that the mantra "giving the public what it wants", meaning giving the public no choice, has bred those who believe cynicism of the public, not their masters, ordains them as journalists. Long ago, John Milton put it succinctly: "They who put out the people's eyes, reproach them of their blindness."

Nothing justified the murder of innocent people in America, and nothing justifies the murder of innocent people anywhere else. That is the unassailable truth in this surreal time. Those who contribute to the current propaganda that says there is no other way but war might reflect that they, too, are likely to end up with blood on their hands.

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