

Financialization, Emotionalization, and Other Ugly Concepts

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In the last ten years, the US media have gone from being controlled by fifty competing companies to five (Schechter 2003). Many of these institutions are corporate conglomerates for whom the traditions of journalism are almost incidental to profit making. News divisions have been fetishized as individual profit centres rather than their previous function as loss-leaders that helped to give television networks a character that 'endorsed' other genres (Smith, 2003). In search of 'efficiencies', owners have closed investigative sections and foreign bureaux (Chester, 2002: 106), other than in Israel (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2002). ABC News once maintained seventeen offices overseas; now it has seven (Higham, 2001). In 2001, CBS had one journalist covering all of Asia, and seven others for the rest of the world. The BBC boasts over fifty foreign bureaux.

Numerous academic studies have found that principal US networks do not pay attention to other countries other than as dysfunctional or as threatening to the United States (Golan and Wanta, 2003). TV coverage of governmental, military, and international affairs dropped from 70% of network news in 1977 to 60% in 1987 and 40% in 1997 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2002). The 'big three' (CBS, NBC, and ABC) devoted 45% of their newscasts to foreign news in the 1970s ("Did 9/11?", 2002). In 1988, each network dedicated about 2000 minutes to international news. A decade later, the figure had halved, with about 9% of the average newscast covering anything 'foreign' ("Battle Stations", 2001). In 2000, just three stories from beyond the US (apart from the Olympics) made it into the networks' twenty most-covered items, and all were directly concerned with domestic issues: the Miami-Cuba custody dispute over Elian Gonzales, the second Intifada, and the bombing of the USS Cole off Yemen. *Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) issued a list of ten humanitarian disasters, such as the famine in Angola, civil wars in Somalia, Liberia, and Sudan, and expansion of the conflict in Colombia, that barely rated a mention on these programs (Lobe, 2003). Nicolas de Torrente, director of the US branch of MSF, put it this way: "Silence is the best ally of violence, impunity and contempt ... these enormous catastrophes don't seem to exist for most Americans" (quoted in Rotzer, 2003).

Did this change with the shocks of 2001? Fox News executive Roger Ailes describes its new method of covering global stories in this helpful way: "We basically sent hit teams overseas from out of here", while Leslie Moonves of CBS explains that entertainment now dominates news: "As you get further away from September 11th, that will revert back to normal" (quoted in "Battle Stations", 2001). And sure enough, the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) revealed that TV news coverage of national and international issues fell by 33% from October

2001 to March 2002, as celebrity and lifestyle issues took over from discussion of the various parts of the world that the United States directly and indirectly rules and controls. And a third of local TV news directors surveyed in 2000 indicated that they were under pressure not to portray key station advertisers negatively, or to do so positively.

How did this extraordinary state of affairs come to pass in a media environment of hugely wealthy and massively differentiated media audiences, and equally gigantic and diverse niche programming? The answer is available to us in the seemingly arid, almost archaeological world of political economy. For at times of crisis most of all, one must return to structures for explanations – return to conditions of possibility. Enough culturalist reductionism; time for some grubby talk. This deracination derives from ownership and content deregulation and the subsequently dominant influences on US current-affairs TV: financialization and emotionalization. These tendencies typify the consumer-culture, genre-driven nature of television in a deregulated era.

Finance, Feelings, and Entertainment

The neo-liberal agenda was the only point of the Clinton administration's policies that was uncritically accepted and even applauded by the mainstream media. Contemporary coverage of the market is beloved of the conglomerates. Its specialized vocabulary is accepted; a community of interest and commitment to fictive capital are assumed; and the deep affiliation and regular participation of viewers in stock prices are watchwords of a neo-liberal discourse. So in 2000, finance was the principal topic on ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly news programs, and it was second only to terrorism in 2002 (Lobe, 2003). News stories are evaluated in terms of their monetary significance to viewers. Neoclassical economic theory is deemed palatable in a way that theory usually isn't, other than the weather. Business advisors dominate discussion on dedicated finance cable stations like CNBC and Bloomberg, and are granted something akin to the status of seers when they appear on cable news channels like MSNBC and CNN or the networks. The focus is on stock markets in Asia, Europe, and New York; reports on company earnings, profits, and stocks; and portfolio management. Economic and labour news has become corporate news, and politics is measured in terms of its reception by business (Alterman, 2003: 118-38). The heroization of business executives by fawning journalists was part of a doubling of time dedicated by TV news to the market across the 1990s. Along the way, labour fell into irrelevancy, other than as so-called 'X-Factor inefficiency', while promoting stocks where one had a personal financial interest became *de rigueur* for anchors and pundits (Alterman, 2003: 123-24, 127, 133). There is a sense of markets stalking everyday security and politics, ready to punish all anxieties, uncertainties, or collective political action to restrain capital. The veneration, surveillance, and reportage of the markets is ever-ready to point to infractions of this anthropomorphized, yet oddly subject-free, sphere as a means of constructing moral panic around the conduct of whoever raises its ire. That's the financialization side – knowing and furthering the discourse of money and its methods of representing everyday life, substituting for politics and history.

Then there is emotionalization. Valourized by some as an expansion of the public sphere to include issues hitherto excluded from view, such as sexual politics revealed on

television talk shows, I'd rather see emotionalization as the tendency to substitute analysis of US politics and economics with stress-on feelings – in the case of Iraq, the feelings of serving military and their families, viewers, media mavens, politicians, and state-of-the-nation pundits. The latter in particular produced a shortage of knowledge and a surfeit of opinion, a surplus of bluster filling in for an absence of skill. It can be no accident that Fox News Channel, which employs few journalists and staffs just four foreign bureaux, has the most pundits on its payroll of any US network – over fifty in 2003 (Tugend 2003). Margaret Carlson, a correspondent for *Time* and one of CNN's pundits, explained the key qualifications for her television work in these damning words: "The less you know about something, the better off you are ... sound learned without confusing the matter with too much knowledge" (quoted in Alterman, 2003: 32).

Of course, powerful emotions are engaged by war, and there is value in addressing them and letting out the pain. But as per financialization, this exclusivity helped to shore up a mendacious administration and a teetering economy in the name of raw, apolitical, emotional truth. The point is to work through inchoate feelings to generate an apparatus that makes sense of them – especially given that so many in the audience will simply not share particular forms of identification, knowledge, or ignorance.

The search for positive stories by *Yanqui* journalists once their heroes were not greeted with universal acclaim upon invading Iraq reached its regrettable, Pollyanna-ish acme with the case of Jessica Lynch, an enlisted woman who was injured and captured during the war. While she was in an unguarded Iraqi hospital receiving treatment, US forces violently entered this site of healing, modestly videotaping their heroic mission for instant release. Numerous stories were immediately concocted to make emotions run still higher – she had fought off her attackers in the desert; she had been knifed; the US military had conquered serious opposition to lift her out – all fabrications, none subject to first-hand knowledge or back-up sources, all reported unproblematically by CNN, Fox, NBC, ABC, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, and all just as instantaneously regarded as dubious, if not spurious, by media from other countries, including the BBC. US journalists who questioned the story were derided as unpatriotic on Fox (Eviatar, 2003) even though the soldier herself subsequently testified that her story had been propagandized by the Pentagon. Of course, how people felt mattered most, not military reality. After all, the mission of the US media is to provide therapy at times of national risk, and not maintain too many foreign bureaux. In the next section, we shall see the result of this ad hoc emotionalism.

US Television and the Iraq Invasion

Seventy percent of the US public obtained 'information' about the 2003 invasion of Iraq from television rather than newspapers (Fitzgerald, 2003; Sharkey, 2003) and whilst all media increased their audiences during the crisis, the largest growth was achieved by cable (Lavine and Readership Institute, 2003). Studies of the two major cable news channels, Fox and CNN, reveal that despite the former's claim that it is less liberal, each delivers a pro-Bush position on foreign policy as if they were organs of the Pentagon (Pew Charitable, 2002). During the invasion of Iraq, both MSNBC and Fox adopted the Pentagon's cliché 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' as the title of their coverage. MSNBC used as its slogan to

accompany stories of US troops: “God bless America. Our hearts go with you” (quoted in Sharkey, 2003). Its president, Erik Sorenson, said that “[t]his may be one time where the sequel is more compelling than the original” (quoted in Lowry, 2003). The US flag was a constant backdrop in coverage, correspondents identified with the killer units they travelled with, and jingoistic self-membership was universal (Sharkey, 2003; Folkenflik, 2003). The proliferation of US flag pins on reporters, and the repeated, embarrassingly crass, use of such othering membership categorization devices as ‘we’, is simply not permitted by major global newsgatherers, whether they are regionally or nationally based or funded. British viewers were so taken aback by the partisanship of Fox, which was rebroadcast in the UK via satellite, that they protested against it through the local regulator, the Independent Television Commission, which calls for impartiality (Wells, 2003).

As the invasion of Iraq loomed, Rupert Murdoch said, “there is going to be collateral damage ... if you really want to be brutal about it, better we get it done now” (quoted in Pilger, 2003). The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s analysis of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox found that in the opening stanza of the Iraq invasion, 50% of reports from journalists embedded with the invaders depicted combat but zero percent depicted injuries. As the war progressed, there were deeply sanitized images of the wounded from afar (Sharkey, 2003). Coverage of the impact of the invaders on the Iraqi people was dismissed by PBS *News Hour* Executive Producer Lester Crystal as not “central at the moment” (quoted in Sharkey, 2003). NBC correspondent David Bloom astonishingly offered that the media were so keen to become adjuncts of the military that they were “doing anything and everything that ... [the armed forces] can ask of us” (quoted in Carr, 2003). Marcy McGinnis, Senior Vice-President of news at CBS, claimed that the networks brought “this war into the living rooms of Americans ... the first time you can actually see what’s happening” (quoted in Sharkey, 2003), and Paul Steiger, Managing Editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, divined that US media coverage of the invasion of Iraq “was pretty darned good” (quoted in Friedman, 2003). What counted as “happening” and “darned good” was extraordinarily misshaped, unbalanced – in fact systematically distorted – by Yanqui media. This contrasted drastically with what other nations received. Military manoeuvres took second place to civilian suffering in the rest of the world’s media coverage of the Afghan and Iraqi crises, invasions, and occupations (della Cava, 2003; Greenberg, 2003).

No wonder Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s thought-disordered remark about Baghdad – “it looks like it’s a bombing of a city, but it isn’t” – received much uncritical US coverage. Statements by the International Red Cross and many other notable non-Pentagon sources detailing Iraqi civilian casualties from the bombing-of-a-city-that-wasn’t received virtually none (Wilkinson, 2003; FAIR, 2003b), just like the memorable Congressional speeches against this bloodthirsty militarism by Senators Robert Byrd and Ted Kennedy (Schlesinger, 2003). First-hand accounts of an unarmed family in a car being shot by Yanqui soldiers were overridden by the desire to promote the Pentagon’s strenuous insistence that the protocols for shooting an unarmed family in a car were followed (FAIR, 2003c). There was no mention on any network of the US military’s use of depleted uranium, and virtually no consideration of the impact of cluster bombs – both major stories everywhere else and subject to serious complaints by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The US

claim to have dropped just twenty-six cluster bombs was belied by the thousands and thousands that had to be 'cleaned up', but this information was not available through domestic media outlets (FAIR, 2003d). Even wounded US soldiers were left unnoticed by the mainstream media, with no bedside interviews from hospitals. Fallen men and women had become the 'disappeared' (Berkowitz, 2003). After the invasion, 82% of US residents believed that serious efforts had been made to spare civilians – infinitely higher numbers than in any other country, including those whose forces were present (Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press, 2003).

When it was decided to co-opt journalists for the Iraq invasion through the embarrassing quasi-homonym of 'embedding' them with the military, reporters were required to sign a contract agreeing with Pentagon instructions on coverage, including no off-the-record interviews, which had been crucial in Vietnam (Taiara, 2003; Thusu and Freedman, 2003: 6). This cosy arrangement was widely condemned in the international media as a deathblow to independent war reporting (Jones, 2003), and it had a chilling impact on gender balance amongst the media (Huff, 2003). When added to the speeded-up routines of twenty-four hour news channels, it also led to disgraces like the day when nine separate announcements were made that Umm Qasr had fallen to the invaders, none of which was accurate (Tryhorn, 2003), and a Fox news producer saying: "Even if we never get a story out of an embed, you need someone there to watch the missiles fly and the planes taking off. It's great television". No wonder that Bernard Shaw, former CNN anchor, saw these journalists as "hostages of the military" (quoted in Bushell and Cunningham, 2003). But on the dominant side of the debate were hacks like Marvin Kalb, for whom the events of September 11, 2001, meant "the rules have now changed", and anxieties over patriotism misplaced.

Domestically, more than half of TV studio guests talking about the impending action in Iraq in 2003 were US military or governmental personnel (FAIR, 2003a). TV news effectively diminished the available discourse on the impending struggle to one of technical efficiency or state propaganda. A study conducted through the life of the Iraq invasion reveals that US broadcast and cable news virtually excluded anti-war or internationalist points of view: 64% of all pundits were pro-war, while 71% of US 'experts' favoured the war. Anti-war voices were 10% of all sources, but just 6% of non-Iraqi sources and 3% of US speakers. Viewers were more than six times as likely to see a pro-war than an anti-war source, and amongst US guests the ratio increased to 25:1 (Rendall and Broughel, 2003). When the vast majority of outside experts represent official opinion, how is this different from a state-controlled media (Johnson, 2003)? *The New York Times* refers to these has-been and never-were pundits like this: "[p]art experts and part reporters, they're marketing tools, as well" – and, of course, retired killing-machine hacks were paid for their services, something quite shocking given the traditions of independent critique (Jensen, 2003). CNN's gleeful coverage of the invasion of Iraq was typified by one superannuated military officer who rejoiced with, "Slam, bam, bye-bye Saddam" as missiles struck Baghdad (quoted in Goldstein, 2003). Their virtually universal links to arms-trading are rarely divulged, and never discussed as relevant. Retired Lieutenant General Barry McCaffrey, employed in this capacity by NBC News, points to the cadre's "lifetime of experience and objectivity". In his case, this involves membership

of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, a lobby group dedicated to influencing the media, and the boards of three munitions companies that make ordnance he proceeded to praise on MSNBC. Could these ties constitute conflicts of interest (Benaim et al. 2003)? Perhaps not when NBC itself is owned by one of the world's biggest arms suppliers, General Electric.

This says something about US journalistic practice more generally. Emad Adeeb, the chair of *Al Alam Al Youm* and host of *On the Air!* in Egypt, summed up Yanqui foreign-correspondent techniques like this: "You come and visit us in what I call the American Express Tour – 72 hours. ... You stay at the same hotel where the 150,000 colleagues before you have stayed. You eat at the same restaurant because you've been given its name. You have the same short list of people who have been interviewed ... you buy the same presents for your wives or girlfriends or mistresses, because you have the same address from your friends before you. You don't do anything out of the norm, and you come writing the same story with the same slogan – a minute-and-a-half bite, or a 500-word story – and you think that you know the Middle East. ... And then when a crisis happens, you are interviewed as an expert" (Pew Fellowships in International Journalism, 2002).

In editor Fuad Nahdi's (2003) words, dumping "young, inexperienced and excitable" journalists in the Middle East who are functionally illiterate and historically ignorant means that the US media depends on "clippings and weekend visits" of dubious professional integrity. No wonder that CNN's Jerusalem Bureau chief, Walter Rodgers, insensitively proclaims that "[f]or a journalist, Israel is the best country in the world to work in ... On the Palestinian side, as is the case in the rest of the Arab world, there is always that deep divide between Islam and the West" (quoted in Ibrahim, 2003: 96). He seems to think there are no Israeli Arabs and no Christian Palestinians. Or perhaps he does not think. CNN, of course, reached its Middle Eastern nadir, and lost viewers to Al-Jazeera and others, when one of its 'reporters' stated that some nomads would be thunderstruck by seeing "camels of steel" (cars) for the first time (MacFarquhar, 2003). This makes CNN's rejection of Ted Turner as a war correspondent because of his inexperience entirely laughable (Auletta and Turner, 2003).

Attempts to provide a different story met swift rebukes. The noted CNN foreign correspondent Christiane Amanpour told CNBC after the war: "I think the press was muzzled, and I think the press self-muzzled ... I'm sorry to say, but certainly television and, perhaps, to a certain extent, my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News. And it did, in fact, put a climate of fear and self-censorship, in my view, in terms of the kind of broadcast work we did".

She was immediately derided by Fox as "a spokeswoman for *Al Qaeda*" (quoted in Zerbisias, 2003). And because MSNBC's Ashleigh Banfield occasionally reported Arab perspectives during the 2003 conflict, Michael Savage, then a talk show host on her network, called her a "slut", a "porn star", and an "accessory to the murder of Jewish children" on air, for which he was rewarded by NBC's executives by being named as their "showman" (quoted in Lieberman, 2003). Banfield told a Kansas State University audience during the Iraq invasion that "horrors were completely left out of this war. So was this journalism? ... I was ostracized just for going on television and saying, 'Here's what the leaders of *Hezbollah*, a radical Moslem group, are telling me about what is needed to bring peace to

Israel” (quoted in Schechter, 2003). She was immediately demoted and disciplined by NBC for criticizing journalistic standards.

Conclusion

Domestic ignorance is not the only cost associated with these tendencies. A study by the International Federation of Journalists in October 2001 found blanket global coverage of the September 11th attacks, with very favourable discussion of the United States and its travails – even in nations that had suffered terribly from US aggression. But the advertising firm McCann-Erickson’s evaluation of thirty-seven states saw a huge increase in cynicism about the US media’s manipulation of the events (Cozens, 2001), and the Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press’ (2002) study of forty-two countries in found a dramatic fall from favour for the US since that time, while a 2003 follow-up (Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press, 2003) encountered even lower opinions of the US nation, population, and policies worldwide than the year before, with specifically diminished support for anti-terrorism, and faith in the UN essentially demolished by US unilateralism and distrust of Bush Minor. “Which country poses the greatest danger to world peace in 2003?”, asked *Time* magazine of 250,000 people across Europe, offering them a choice between Iraq, North Korea, and the United States. Eight percent selected Iraq, 9% chose North Korea, and ... but you have already done the calculation about the most feared country of all (Pilger, 2003). A BBC poll in eleven countries in mid-2003 confirmed this and found sizeable majorities everywhere disapproving of Bush Minor and the invasion of Iraq, especially over civilian casualties (“Poll”, 2003).

The challenge is to right the ignorance of the US public – to ensure that the quality of coverage and comment from *The Washington Post*, CBS, ABC, NBC, CNN and *The New York Times* can begin to approximate what is available via *La Jornada*, *The Independent*, *Al-Jazeera*, CBC, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, All-India Radio, or *El País*. For now, those of us who live in the US must rely on such outside truth-telling and political pressure. The places that provide the US with bases, material, personnel and ideological support, must change their tune. There must be pressure within the UN, NATO, OAS, the African Union, ASEAN, the Arab League and the EU against the US and specifically contra Israel’s position on territory claimed since 1967 and its anti-Arabism. There must be pressure on totalitarian US allies, such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Pakistan, to become genuinely democratic. There must be pressure to open up the US media system to retrain journalists in keeping with best democratic practice and to require internationalist content on the air. We need fewer ugly concepts and more cosmopolitan words: less finance, less emotion, more knowledge.

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