

H-Net Reviews

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Ralph D. Berenger, ed. *Global Media Go to War: Role of News and Entertainment Media During the 2003 Iraq War*. Spokane: Marquette Books, 2004. xxxiv + 369 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-922993-10-9.



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Collusion, Distortion, Manipulation: War Is Media Hell

American patriotism on Fox News. Graphic realism on Al-Jazeera. Abundant misinformation everywhere. Whatever else the 2003 Iraq War demonstrated about the potential for commentary and coverage from the twenty-first century's new media system, an obvious consequence was the ease with which falsity, propaganda, and rumor rippled around the world.

The fifty-one contributors to this examination of global media performance mention the positive and negative aspects. They certainly are inclusive regarding media. Chapters review the content of blogs, Web sites, television news programs, late-night t.v. talk shows, newspapers and magazines. Media from Africa, Arabia, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the United States are in the mix, although Latin American media are absent.

Some contributors to this book support their conclusions with solid scholarship. Other contributors merely make statements, and expect us to accept their judgments. Others expound on theory without application to actual media performance. It is the uneven academic quality throughout that lessens the book's general utility to scholars.

Among the strong chapters are "Global News Agencies and the Pre-War Debate: A Content Analysis," "U.S. and British Press Coverage of the Search for Iraq's WMD," and "Propaganda and Arab Audiences: Resisting the 'Hearts and Minds' Campaign." (Disclosure: a colleague is co-author of "Search," a fact not noticed by me until reviewing my notes after reading the particular chapter and then noting the authors.)

"Global News Agencies" systematically examines news articles from Agence France Presse, Associated Press, Inter Press Service, ITAR-TASS, and Xinhua. The examination identifies the nationality of sources cited in news articles to determine preference according to agency country of origin, but finds that only the Russian agency-ITAR-TASS-obviously relied on Russians. Agence France Presse, AP, and Xinhua used approximately the same percentage of American sources. Also, non-Western news agencies obtained information to a greater degree from non-Western sources than did the Western agencies, Agence France Presse and AP. Coverage by the non-Western agencies also tended to reflect the foreign policy of their home nations. Finally, de-

spite France's opposition to U.S. policy on Iraq articles by Agence France Presse were not noticeably more negative than AP articles.

"Search for Iraq's WMD" provides a systematic examination of articles in two major British newspapers, the *Guardian* and the *Times*, and two major American dailies, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Headlines, story text, story tone, and patterns in reporting were analyzed. Although the *Guardian* is liberal politically and the *Times* conservative, both newspapers thoroughly reported the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, a reason given the public for the war. Initial reports that such weapons existed later were refuted, and both British newspapers aggressively questioned government officials about pre-war statements and then published articles on doubts among intelligence analysts whether the weapons had ever existed. A dramatic difference distinguished the *Washington Post* from the *New York Times*. *Post* articles appeared in mid-March questioning the existence of weapons of mass destruction, while similar *New York Times* articles did not appear until three weeks later. Also, the *Post* highlighted the issue of these weapons much more frequently than the *New York Times*.

"Propaganda" provides an informative review of media that serve the Arab populace and the importance of these media sources to Arabs. The messages from Arab media differed markedly from messages by other media, and the framing of messages by Arab media demonstrated a dramatic divergence.

Unfortunately, several chapters really do not say anything new, at least to readers who paid any attention to media criticism before, during, and after the 2003 Iraq War. These chapters perhaps will be of some value to future scholars whose memory of events began after the symbolic imagery of the giant statue of Saddam Hussein toppling from its pedestal in central Baghdad. Until then, several chapters of this book simply reiterate critical commentary previously available from a variety of mainstream news sources and from sources that serve journalists.

For example, a chapter titled "Language, Media and War: Manipulating Public Perceptions" summarizes previous scholarship and provides examples pertaining to euphemisms that mask the brutality of war and imagery that stereotypes a people or society with the intent to dehumanize an actual or potential enemy. Numerous articles in the mainstream press and observers on mainstream television programs mentioned these same issues, and journalists are aware of the harm euphemisms and

stereotypes do. Thus, this chapter would be more useful if it examined the degree to which journalists or other communicators merely relayed the obfuscations and distortions of official pronouncements without interpretation or qualification. Also of value would be scholarship to determine the effects on the public mind of euphemisms and stereotypes during the war's build-up phase and actual combat.

Similarly, "An Insider's Assessment of Media Punditry and 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'" consists of judgments on the qualifications of so-called experts who appeared on television programs prior to the war and a brief first-person account about the experiences of the author being interviewed by journalists. Again, articles in the mainstream press and publications serving journalists dealt with the topic of those "talking heads" whose expertise was questionable and whose comments were subsequently shown to be terribly inaccurate. This chapter might have documented the number of appearances by each so-called expert, the qualifications or lack thereof for each expert, and the reliance on a relatively small pool of experts by mainstream media. This is an old issue, and it needs thorough study.

"The Framing of the 'Axis of Evil'" exemplifies scholarly discourse without application to media performance. Essentially, this chapter reviews concepts of framing. It would be wonderful to know how American media and international media reported and commented on the presidential speech that promoted this phrase and framed the U.S. war on terrorism.

Various chapters on media performance in specific countries vary in quality. Some rely on systematic methodology and some lack methodology altogether, relying instead on impressionistic judgments or anecdotal examples. Some have interesting information on the political nature of media in specific countries, but lack merit for media scholarship.

Another problem affecting the utility of the entire book is the lack of a unifying consistency for periods of analysis of media performance. Granted, it would be difficult to pinpoint specific periods of time that were more relevant than others between September 2001 and March 2003, but a timeline would have suggested an attempt to focus on weeks relating to President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech in January 2002 to gauge reaction by American and international media; the president's declaration to the United Nations in September 2002 that the United States would act unilaterally against Iraq; consent by Congress in October 2002 to use military

force against Iraq; deployment of American troops to the Gulf region in December 2002; Bush's State of the Union address in January 2003 that essentially committed the United States to war; and the March-April 2003 period of intense combat. It would be informative to have an evaluation of media performance, American and international, during some or all of these periods for comparative purposes.

Despite some flaws and occasional superficiality, this book could serve as background for scholars unfamiliar with media issues regarding ethnocentrism, national chauvinism, and influence of official sources on journalists. Also, it could prove useful for classroom discussions.

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