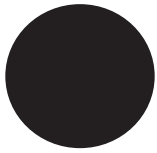


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The Media's Independence Problem

Jonathan Mermin

The word occupation...was never mentioned in the run-up to the war. It was liberation. This was [talked about in Washington as] a war of liberation, not a war of occupation. So as a consequence, those of us in journalism never even looked at the issue of occupation.

—*Jim Lehrer*

In other words, if the government isn't talking about it, we don't report it. This somewhat jarring declaration, one of many recent admissions by journalists that their reporting failed to prepare the public for the calamitous occupation that has followed the "liberation" of Iraq, reveals just how far the actual practice of American journalism has deviated from the First Amendment ideal of a press that is independent of the government.

A fundamental tenet of our First Amendment tradition is that journalists do not simply recount what government officials say, but function instead as the people's "watchdog" over their government, subjecting its words and deeds to independent critical scrutiny. As *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius explains, however, these expectations are often frustrated, because journalists have "rules of our game" that "make it hard for us to tee up an issue...without a news peg." This means that "if Senator so and so hasn't criticized post-war planning for Iraq, then it's hard for a reporter to write a story about that." Instead, reporters say to themselves, "I have to wait for somebody [in Washington] to make a statement, and then

I'll report on the statement." Ignatius describes the inability of the major media to focus on an issue unless "Senator so and so" has "teed it up" for them as "a professional rule that we really ought to examine."¹

The same phenomenon is described by Pulitzer Prize-winning Associated Press reporter Charles J. Hanley, whose fall 2003 story on the torture of Iraqis in American prisons—before a U.S. Army report and photographs documenting the abuse surfaced—was ignored by major American newspapers. Hanley ascribes the lack of interest to there having been "no official structure to the story. It was not an officially sanctioned story that begins with a handout from an official source." There is "a very strong prejudice," Hanley explains, "toward investing U.S. official statements with credibility while disregarding statements from almost any other source," such as (in Hanley's story) Iraqis recounting their own personal experience at Abu Ghraib.²

While Ignatius and Hanley are concerned about the media's subservience to official sources, Judith Miller of the *New York Times*—the author of several stories on the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) issue about which the *Times* has now expressed misgivings—is not. Responding to the suggestion that she could have been more critical of U.S. claims that Iraq possessed vast WMD stockpiles, Miller declared: "My job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself. My job is to tell readers of the *New York Times* what the govern-

ment thought about Iraq's arsenal."³ Of course, Iraqi journalists under Saddam Hussein could have said much the same of their relationship with the government of Iraq, their job having been to tell readers what Saddam Hussein thought about the United States.

For Jim Lehrer, the host of "The News-Hour" on PBS, it is too much to expect that journalists question the prevailing wisdom in Washington. Asked by MSNBC's Chris Matthews to account for the media's failure to "look at the issue of occupation" in advance of a war with the unmistakable aim of conquering and then reconstructing a foreign nation, Lehrer first suggested that the prospect of an "occupation" of Iraq "just didn't occur to us. We weren't smart enough." Perhaps thinking the better of this, Lehrer tried again: "Let's say a group of journalists had gotten onto that [the "occupation" issue]. It would have been difficult to have had debates about that going in, when the president and the government of the—it's not talking about occupation. They're talking about—it would have been—it would have taken some—you'd have had to have gone against the grain."⁴ In other words, since Washington officials were unconcerned about what exactly to do with Iraq once it had been conquered—beyond the general concept of "liberation"—neither was Jim Lehrer, as that would have required him to talk about something that was not being talked about in Washington.

Contrary to the impression one might get in reading Michael Massing's critique of Judith Miller in the *New York Review of Books*, the problem these journalists have identified is nothing new. In 1986, Daniel C. Hallin demolished the notion that the media had been an independent critical force in turning the public against the Vietnam War. His systematic examination of newspaper and television coverage (*The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, Oxford) revealed that journalists did not start to question the wisdom of U.S. intervention

in Vietnam until 1967, after opposition to the war had emerged inside the U.S. government. Once dissent surfaced in official channels, the coverage turned negative. But it was critics within the government who put oppositional perspectives on the media's agenda, not—as neoconservative mythology has it—the other way around.

Subsequent studies, including my own book on media coverage of U.S. interventions since Vietnam (*Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era*, Princeton 1999), have found that journalists continue to be incapable of focusing on an issue or perspective on U.S. foreign policy that has not first been identified or articulated in official Washington debate. For example, when President Reagan ordered an invasion of Grenada in 1983 on the peculiar pretext that the tiny island nation threatened U.S. national security and that military action was necessary to shield American citizens in Grenada against inchoate dangers, and Democrats in Congress disputed these justifications, criticism of the invasion was featured in the news. But when President George H. W. Bush invaded Panama in 1989 peddling the same improbable justifications, the Democrats—cognizant of the perception that unsuccessful presidential candidates Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis (and Jimmy Carter in 1980) had not been tough enough on national security—made no objection. As a consequence, the media coverage, except for some anxious journalistic chatter (seen also in the first days of the Iraq War) about *how quickly* the president's necessary and just action would achieve its objectives, read much like a White House press release.

When President Bush responded to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 by sending tens of thousands of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia and likening Saddam Hussein to Hitler, and most Democrats voiced no discernable displeasure, critical viewpoints on the merits of Bush's move were

again marginalized in the news. Opposition to the deployment was not exactly a radical position; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin L. Powell, was against it, and prominent Democrats had declared, just a few days before, that sending troops to Saudi Arabia was unnecessary. But once the decision was announced, Democrats changed their tune, and the media fell into step. In November 1990, when Bush doubled the size of the American force in Saudi Arabia and made clear that he would use it to remove Iraq from Kuwait, Democrats found their voice for a time, and the coverage became more critical. But once the war started and Democrats decided that it would be a good idea to say nice things about it, critical reporting more or less ceased.

Transcribers of Official Utterances

Is this any way for a free and independent press to behave? In the media's defense, the president is elected to office, and of course journalists should report his position on world events. To balance the perspective of a Republican White House, journalists turn to Democrats in Congress. If the public is displeased with the spectrum of debate among its elected representatives, one could argue, let the public elect new representatives. Don't blame the messenger for the holes in the Washington debate.

But the media are supposed to be independent of the government, not mere transcribers of official utterances. It's easy to see that a press that just reported whatever the president and his subordinates in the executive branch said would not be an independent press. Yet expanding the universe of sources with the power to set the news agenda to include government officials in the legislative branch does not resolve the independence problem, for there is no escaping the fact that members of Congress are government officials. So turning to Congress to balance the perspective of the White House does not result in news that is independent of the government; it simply adds

detail to the picture of "what the government thought."

Or not so much detail, since Democratic politicians, whatever their actual views on the merits of a specific intervention, have compiled an impressive record of succumbing to perceived political incentives to support Republican military adventures. Therefore the absence of opposition to a Republican military intervention among Democratic politicians is not persuasive evidence that the policy is sound, or even that presumptively informed and thoughtful people believe it to be sound. It may be that Democrats have simply made a strategic political decision not to speak out. Like the Panama invasion of 1989, the Gulf War of 1991, and the "global war on terrorism," the Iraq War is a case in point.

Before the war started, journalists looking to Democrats for critical perspectives on the impending invasion found some expressions of concern about the speed at which President George W. Bush was moving toward war and his disregard of the views of major European allies but no sustained questioning of whether it made any sense, under any circumstances, for the United States to launch an unprovoked war to remove the Iraqi government and then endeavor to remake Iraq in America's image. Leading Democrats such as Sen. John F. Kerry surveyed the political landscape and cast votes to authorize the war. Because journalists could not see (or were unwilling to report) beyond the narrow debate being held in Washington, President Bush was able to stake out an extraordinary position—that a preemptive invasion of a nation that had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks would somehow advance the U.S. cause in the global war on terrorism—and have this breathtaking initiative debated in the media, as it was by the Democrats, as if the only points of substantial controversy were how soon to implement it (more weapons inspections first?) and what to do about France and Germany.

So it was that the Bush administration could lead America to war based on its purported concern that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that might fall into the hands of terrorists, and then, after eliminating the government of Iraq and permitting a state of anarchy to emerge in its place, make no discernable effort to secure suspected WMD sites until it sensed political pressure to locate such weapons to justify the war.⁵ Journalists made much of the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, a theme Democrats emphasized, calculating that it could play to their political advantage. But like the Democrats, journalists failed to connect the dots on a more telling point: if the reason for the war had really been to keep terrorists from getting WMD, U.S. forces would not have looked on impassively as nuclear waste sites and other sensitive installations in Iraq were looted and vandalized by a population that, if the pre-war propaganda was to be believed, had been infiltrated by al-Qaeda. This contradiction must have been obvious to reporters who had paid attention to the arguments advanced to justify the war, yet the media declined to report it.

Journalists also failed to challenge the White House's conflation of chemical and biological weapons (which many believed Iraq possessed) with nuclear weapons (which no one believed Iraq possessed) under the umbrella heading of "WMD," despite the fact that a well-placed truck bomb in an American city could cause far more massive destruction than a cache of artillery shells loaded with nerve gas or anthrax spores hidden in the Iraqi desert. Because Democrats, cautious about saying anything that could possibly be construed to suggest a lack of fortitude on the WMD issue, elected not to point this out, the White House's undifferentiated framing of the WMD menace escaped critical scrutiny.

For journalists who purport to occupy a vantage point independent of the government, but cannot focus on a critical perspec-

tive on U.S. foreign policy that has not been framed for them by the opposition party in Congress, here's a news flash: Congress is a branch of the government. If you permit a branch of the government to function as a de facto gatekeeper deciding whether critical perspectives on U.S. foreign policy make the news, you are not independent of the government.

"It's Not Our Fault"

If the points being made now by notables such as Jim Lehrer about the media's lack of independence have been true since Vietnam, why the sudden acknowledgment of the problem by journalists? If the Iraq War had been a success on its own terms, academics and assorted marginalized media critics would have noted the points made herein, but their commentary would have been ignored in the media, as it was after the 1991 Gulf War. It is because the Iraq War has gone so far off the tracks, and because the claims made to justify it have been so decisively refuted, that journalists are now examining their own role in getting us to this juncture.

Unlike the Panama invasion and the Gulf War, the Iraq War is not achieving its own stated objectives. Whatever grounds may have existed for questioning the Panama invasion and the Gulf War, these actions seemed to work (although, as it happens, the establishment of American military bases in Saudi Arabia was a major source of inspiration for al-Qaeda). Thus journalists never had occasion to reflect upon their failure to offer independent critical coverage, a phenomenon many in the media may not even have noticed. But with thousands of Americans killed or injured in Iraq, no weapons of mass destruction found, an occupation that lurches from one crisis to the next, and no sign of an exit strategy—that is, with the policy to which the media had given a free pass now in tatters—journalists realize they have some explaining to do.

The explanation advanced by Jim Lehrer and Judith Miller seeks to pass the buck—we just reported what the government was saying, and it's not our fault if they got it wrong. But David Ignatius and Charles J. Hanley acknowledge that an institution purporting to be independent of the government cannot defend its coverage on the ground that its description of the government's position was accurate. The tension this creates with the First Amendment ideal is simply too great.

Independent journalism in the true spirit of the First Amendment would not have waited for Democratic officeholders to ponder what might ensue once Saddam Hussein was gone before making that vital issue a focus of the prewar coverage. Journalists not so reliant on official cues would have reported the widespread opposition to the war among foreign policy experts outside of Washington, as evidenced by an antiwar advertisement in the *New York Times* in September 2002, signed by over 30 distinguished international relations professors, which flatly declared: "Even if we win easily, we have no plausible exit strategy," but "would have to occupy and police [Iraq] for many years to create a viable state."⁶ An independent press would not have soft-pedaled this urgent issue, even if Washington debate was focused elsewhere.

Nor would an independent press have been so fixated on official sources that it marginalized the accounts of Iraqi prisoners who described their experience at Abu Ghraib several months before the story "broke" in the United States. Independent journalism would not have waited (and the wait continues) for an official source to point out that the failure to secure suspected WMD sites revealed, if not unfathomable incompetence, the fraudulent nature of the

president's purported concern about Iraq giving such weapons to terrorists.

Is it too much to expect that journalists who have a First Amendment right to report criticism of government policy in fact *exercise* that right, even if the government declines to criticize itself? It is no defense for journalists to blame the Democrats for not speaking up, because journalists and politicians have different roles in a democratic system. One institution cannot simply cede its autonomy to the other without adverse consequences for democracy.

The job of politicians is to devise strategies to win elections, and successful strategies often entail blurring differences between the parties, which may require that important substantive points go unmade. This is one reason why we have a First Amendment, and why we are supposed to have a press that is independent of the government and free to say what politicians do not. If, in fact, journalists don't say much that politicians have not said first, then the press is not doing the work the First Amendment envisions.

What would happen if we had a First Amendment, but journalists let the government decide what the press should report? Watch the occupation of Iraq and see. ●

Notes

1. "On the Media," April 30, 2004.
2. "Pressing Issues," Editor & Publisher website, May 13, 2004.
3. Michael Massing, "Now They Tell Us," *New York Review of Books*, February 26, 2004.
4. "Hardball with Chris Matthews," May 12, 2004.
5. Rod Nordland, "WMDs for the Taking?" *Newsweek*, May 19, 2003.
6. "War with Iraq Is Not in America's National Interest," *New York Times*, September 26, 2002.