

WAR AND THE MEDIA:
Moral Responsibilities and the violations
by the media today

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Introduction

Whether we like it or not, war seems to have become part of our human existence. There have been quarrels, disputes and confrontations among diverse groups of human beings from time immemorial. And the way things are happening in our contemporary world, there is no guarantee that 'wars' would be eliminated altogether from this world. Perhaps, this is why the Second Vatican Council re-echoed the sentiments of the great St. Augustine when it said: *War, of course, has not ceased to be part of the human scene.*¹ So, we may say that wars have come to stay with us as long as humanity exists.

Ever since Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th century, mass media² in the form of newspapers, radio, television

¹ Gaudium et spes, No: 79, as given in Austin Flannery (General Editor), Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and post - Conciliar Documents, (Revised Edition), New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1988, p.988.

² Today, the term mass media would surely encompass the modern electronic media, too. However, in this article, I am using the term to deal almost exclusively with newspapers, radio, TV and films.

and films, have been gradually shaping the opinions of human beings all over the world. In fact, today mass media have become an indispensable element in not only shaping but also in conditioning the way we look at reality. That is why politicians depend heavily on diffusing their political agendas in and through the same mass media, so that the masses may be in their favour.

One area in which we have been witnessing the influence of mass media on our peoples is to do with war and other disputes among the diverse groups or nations all over the world. Many studies have revealed what a vital role modern media plays in not only informing us about various wars in different parts of the world, but also in conditioning us in such a way either to justify them or to condemn them. In recent years, we have had two wars in Iraq that drew the attention of the entire world, thanks to modern mass media. On both occasions, the media played a crucial role in justifying the two wars. In what follows, I intend to highlight certain elements of media coverage of the recent war in Iraq which ensued when the US and British troops invaded that country. I hope to demonstrate how such coverage was far from being responsible. I will divide this article into two main parts. In the first part, I will very briefly discuss the evolution of the concept of 'responsibility' in the arena of mass media. In the second part, I will use some concrete illustrations from the recent war in Iraq to show how irresponsible the media have been in highlighting only one side of the happenings in the battle-field.

1. Media and Responsibility

1.1. The Origins of Mass Media

When Johannes Gutenberg first printed the Bible using his printing press in 1453 AD, it was surely a turning point in our human history. This invention gave an unexpected but welcome impetus to the spread of information, by means of handbills and pamphlets. The Gutenberg press presented the nascent journalists with a gift well beyond the means of mere handwriting - a large audience:

An item of new information of public interest, once set in the movable type Gutenberg had devised, was able to reach a much larger public. And each printed copy that marched off the press had a crucial advantage: it was an exact replica.

Those thousands of readers would each receive the same story, with no added errors, distortions or embellishments.³

Thus, in contrast to the earlier method of hand copying, this new invention helped also to reduce the margin of error, in diffusing information. The reporting of news too, took a new turn with various European rulers soon realizing the power of the press:

Europe's rulers were among the first to exploit the power of the press. In England, in 1486, Henry VII had printed and distributed the pope's bill confirming his shaky claim to the throne. (The first printing press had arrived in England in 1476.) And in France, the press became an important tool in Charles VIII's campaign to persuade a skeptical public of the merits of his invasion of Italy.⁴

Thus, we see how within a couple of decades of the very invention of mass media, the rulers began to exploit it to justify their actions, even actions like invading another sovereign territory.

1.2. The Evolution of the Concept of Responsibility in Mass Media

With the rulers and other political powers increasingly realizing the impact mass media could make on the general public, they eventually became obsessed with controlling the diffusion of information through the media. Altshcull expresses this point succinctly when he writes:

Before Gutenberg, the church and its royalist allies were able to restrict the broadcasting of ideas and hence to control the thinking of the multitudes. No longer could authority exercise a monopoly over access to books. A mighty blow was struck for literacy. And when ordinary people may read and write, what control can their rulers retain over their thoughts—or indeed their actions?..... For the first time in history

³ Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News*, New York: Penguin Books, 1989, pp.84-85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.87.

public opinion became an important element in political controversy.⁵

Proportionate to the efforts of the rulers to control the diffusion of information to their advantage, there grew simultaneously a movement among journalists to fight for their right to a free press. Eventually, this right to a free press also became an essential element of the struggle for democracy and other connected rights. The writings of people like John Milton, John Peter Zenger, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, also enhanced this movement for the freedom of the press. Their main point was that every free citizen has not only the right to express his or her opinions freely, but also to communicate such opinions in and through the press. Towards the end of the 19th century, the concept of "investigative journalism" was born. Investigative journalism explicitly defined the role of a journalist as "a watch-dog". According to this definition, not only is it essential for the journalist to help educate the citizen, to supply him/her with information but it is equally necessary for the journalist to serve as the citizen's eyes and ears in scrutinizing especially the powerful.⁶ Here, we see the first seeds of the concept of 'responsibility' being sown in the field of mass media.

During the first part of the twentieth century, the ideology of "objective reporting" was born:

The ideology of objective reporting took root in the 1930's; presenting unvarnished facts became the standard of good reporting. The supreme goal was publishing as much uncensored information about as many events as quickly as possible from a nonpartisan, "facts only" point of view.⁷

Thus, the impartial transmission of information" became a virtue in mass media. However, in the 1940's, "a countervailing

⁵ J. Herbert Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan: The Ideas behind American Journalism*, New York: Longman, 1990, p.250.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.263.

⁷ Clifford G. Christians, "Ethical Theory in a Global Setting", in Thomas W. Cooper, et.al. (eds.), *Communication Ethics and Global Change*, New York: Longman Inc., 1989, p.9.

trend" emerged, with media critics attacking the media as "socially complacent".⁸

Just after the Second World War, a Commission was appointed in the United States to inquire into various questions on the functioning of the press -- the Hutchins Commission.⁹

In its Report, published in 1947, the Commission while reaffirming press freedom condemned the prevalent journalism for its "meaninglessness, flatness, distortion, and perpetuation of misunderstanding".¹⁰

One of the main demands of the Commission was that the press not only presents facts in a meaningful context, but that it must also disclose the truth about the facts. In other words, the press was burdened with the moral obligation to go beyond the "objective" facts, to read between the lines of information, to look at what lay under, over and behind events, and to seek out and present the truth of what the reporters had uncovered. So, the Commission while rejecting sensationalism, provided a moral foundation for investigative reporting.¹¹

By insisting that the journalist is obliged not only to present facts or information, and the truth behind such information, but also to be accountable to society if he or she fails, the Hutchins Commission, explicitly laid the foundation for what was to emerge in journalism as "the social responsibility doctrine".¹²

This doctrine, which eventually became a universal norm in media ethics, insists that every journalist has the responsibility to keep the citizens accurately informed, according to the best of his/her ability. It is not a question of merely presenting the facts as the journalist receives them, but of scrutinizing the facts conscientiously and then reporting them. In other words, every

⁸ *ibid.*, p.263.

⁹ For the report of this Commission, see William Ernest Hocking, *Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principle. A Report from the Commission on Freedom of the Press*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1972.

¹⁰ Altschull, *ibid.*, p.283.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.284.

¹² *ibid.*

journalist has a social responsibility in communicating information to their respective audiences.

Media Responsibilities in the Coverage of the Iraqi War

2.1. War in Iraq and the Media Empires' Bias for the USA-led Coalition

Contemporary wars are fought not only in the battlefields, but also in the minds of the people; the media has a vital role in forming those minds in the sense that today's powerful influence of the media can either justify a war or condemn it. Unfortunately, this justifying or condemning of a war by the media does not depend merely on the facts reported from the war-torn areas, but mainly on the stance the particular media agencies take with regard to a war. In communicating information, the suppression of certain facts/news items, the twists given to such facts, the additions and deletions, in short, the interpretations given to such facts, depend entirely on this slant adopted by the media agencies. This issue becomes acute and even further complicated when one considers the fact that most of the influential leading international media agencies are owned by a very few but powerful group of people in the Western world. The uneven distribution of the international means of communications (i.e., international media agencies) adds insult to injury! It is shocking but true that the four leading news agencies that dominate the distribution of information throughout the world are all based in the United States and Western Europe. They are the Reuters, the Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI) and Agence France Presse (AFP). It is estimated that these four agencies account for 80% of the immediate international news circulating around the planet earth each day.¹³ Their services have become indispensable to the biggest as well as the smallest newspapers, to major television networks as well as tiny local radio stations. Needless to say that they possess the clout to form the minds or the consciences of the people all over the world.

¹³ Jonathan Fenby, *The International News Services: A Twentieth Century Fun Report*, New York: Shocken Books, 1986, p.

Closely associated with these well-known media agencies are a handful of mammoth private organizations that contribute to the domination of the international flow of information by the Western countries. In keeping with the current trends of economic globalization, the common tendency of these mammoth organizations is to concentrate among themselves all the means and networks that communicate information to the whole world. This clearly constitutes a threat to the free flow of information even in those so-called "free societies" of the West. This is because the men who run these media-empires like Rupert Murdoch, Robert Maxwell (who died a few years ago), Reinhard Mohn, Jean-Luc Lagardere and Silvio Berlusconi are not only "the lords" of these media-empires but they also have strong political affiliations with some of the Western political leaders and their political ideologies. One begins to have legitimate doubts about the "objective" nature of the news reported by these mammoth organizations. In fact, Ben Bagdikian has documented some mutually profitable relationships between Western political leaders and media monopolies, such as those between Murdoch and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Murdoch and former US President Jimmy Carter, Murdoch and former US President Regan, Berlusconi (who himself is at present, the Prime Minister of Italy) and the former Italian Prime Minister Bertino Craxi, Lagardere and present French President Chirac,..... etc.¹⁴

It is humanly impossible to conclude that these media-empires will not communicate their political agendas along with their news reporting.

This indeed was the case in the news-reporting of the recent war in Iraq which ensued when the USA and Britain invaded Iraq, claiming that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In fact, already there have been reports which uncover the explicit support rendered by most of these media agencies to the recent invasion of Iraq, by the partial, one-sided coverage they gave to the events before and during the war.

¹⁴ Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, (Third & Revised Edition), Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, pp.41, 245. See also, Ben H. Bagdikian, "The Lords of the Global Village", *The Nation*, 12 June 1989, pp.805-819.

Just after the recent war in Iraq, it was pointed out by no other person than the founder of the CNN, Ted Turner himself (the billionaire and the largest share-holder of the world's largest media company, AOL Time Warner), that 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".¹⁵

Turner daringly identified Rupert Murdoch as "a war monger" who had "promoted" the war in Iraq in and through his mammoth news agencies. In a separate speech, the BBC Director General Greg Dyke, too, found fault with the way the American media, especially those owned and controlled by Murdoch covered the recent Iraqi invasion. In their separate speeches, both Turner and Dyke sought to lay the blame for the super-patriotic tone of the war coverage largely on the media empire of Murdoch whose News Corp. owns Fox News, the biggest cable news network, as well as Britain's Sky News and nearly 200 daily newspapers worldwide.¹⁶

One has to be careful, however, to notice that neither the BBC nor the CNN was un-biased either in their own reporting of war events in Iraq. Both these news agencies too, overtly supported the US and British governments in their coverage of war news.¹⁷

According to the Catholic moral tradition, the legitimacy of a war was judged by the moral principles of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Accordingly, the conditions before the war and during the war were scrutinized minutely by the tradition before establishing the morality or the immorality of a given war. In that spirit, in this article, the writer intends to analyze two important factors in the recent Iraqi war, one before the war and the other during the war: the cause of the war and the way the war was conducted, respectively. In the context of this article, the idea is to illustrate with concrete examples how biased the media was in communicating information connected to these two factors. Was

¹⁵ Patrick Martin, "Media Bosses Admit Bias in Coverage of Iraq", *The Sunday Times*, May 4, 2003, p.14.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

there a just cause to invade Iraq? And was the eventual war conducted in a just moral way? How did the media communicate information to the people to form their consciences in giving their response to these two vital questions? How responsible were the media agencies in doing so? The following section will deal with these issues.

2.2 How did the Media Communicate War Information to form the Consciences of the People?

2.2.1 Was there a Just Cause to Invade Iraq?

Since the American war in Vietnam, which ended in 1974, there has been no other war that had courted so much of mass public opposition as the recently concluded invasion of Iraq by the USA and Britain. Opinion polls even in the Western countries (including the USA and Britain!) were overwhelmingly against a war in Iraq. It was also reported that the mass anti-war rallies and demonstrations that were witnessed across the globe, were unprecedented. According to the TIME magazine, the anti-war protest in London was the largest protest march ever in the history of Britain.¹⁸

One needs to ask a couple of crucial questions in the light of these empirical facts: why did the masses in their thousands take themselves to the streets to oppose this war? Isn't it because they did not see a just cause to go to war against Iraq?

However, the leaders of the USA and Britain, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were determined to convince the world that there was indeed a just cause to invade Iraq, namely, the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein was alleged by them to possess Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). This eventually was the unique main cause given by Britain and the USA to invade Iraq. According to the existing international law, no country or group of countries can invade another country without a just cause, which often is to do with self-defence. So Bush and Blair made every effort to show the world that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was indeed a threat to world peace because Iraq (according to them) indeed possessed WMD.

¹⁸ TIME, February 24, 2003, p.26.

Thus, their main plan was to demonstrate that here was a case of self-defence, and that too, not the self-defence of one or two countries, but of the entire world! How did the media support them in 'establishing' the existence of such a cause?

When the United Nations met several times in the course of recent past years and discussed this issue of Iraq and WMD, they decided to send a group of weapons inspectors to probe into the allegation of Iraq possessing WMD. It is true that Saddam Hussein did not cooperate initially with the inspectors, and that they had to return without any success a couple of times. But, when the UNO issued stern warnings, (of course, along with the threats of the USA and other leading Western nations) he finally complied and allowed the inspectors in. As the work of the inspectors progressed, there were signs that they could not find any substantial evidence to prove the alleged possession of WMD by Iraq. It was then that the USA and Britain became uneasy and impatient with the weapons inspection of the UNO saying that Iraq was mis-leading the inspectors. After a few further visits and investigations, the weapons inspectors could not find any of the alleged WMD in Iraq, but the inspectors headed by Hans Blix wanted more time to accurately assess things. While the rest of the world (including the other three permanent members of the UN Security Council, France, Russia and China) was insisting that the weapons inspectors be given more time to investigate and submit their report, both Bush and Blair were frantically insisting that the world could not wait anymore, and finally, they invaded Iraq unilaterally (without any UN approval) which resulted in the unfortunate war that killed thousands of Iraqi civilians and destroyed the entire infra-structure of Iraq (including the Baghdad museum which housed priceless treasures of early human civilizations).

According to the cherished just war doctrine (and of course, also according to International Law) one goes to war as a last resort, when there is no other alternative to solve the issues at stake. Did the USA and Britain respect this international understanding expressed in the Charter of the UN? Another stipulation of the same UN Charter is that it is the legitimate authority that has to authorize war (namely, the UNO). But, did this happen? For the purposes of this article, we may just ask: What was the role of the media in this "preparatory period" (for war) in

answering these vital questions? Since WMD was the pivotal issue according to the arguments of the USA and Britain, we may also ask: what was the role of the media with regard to communicating information on WMD that Saddam was alleged to be possessing or hiding?

This writer was monitoring carefully the way the BBC World Service reported news on Iraq as the USA and Britain were getting set to invade Iraq. The BBC world news bulletin at 6 AM (Sri Lankan time) on each of the following dates had the following news items which were clearly manipulations of news:

- On 5th February, Saddam Hussein's accusations that the USA and Britain were trying to invade Iraq under false pretexts, were branded by the BBC as "classic Saddam propaganda".
- In the very second headline of the same news bulletin, the violent disagreement of President Chirac of France against the persuasions of the visiting Tony Blair, was reported with an apparently simple, harmless phrase: "Britain and France agree to disagree on Iraq".
- On both 4th and 5th February, the comments of a Turkish ruling party member that Saddam was a dangerous threat to peace was given prominence. In fact, it was repeated in all the BBC news bulletins throughout the day. But surprisingly, the strong criticisms of the former South African President Nelson Mandela against President Bush (made on 4th February) were not even mentioned once in the BBC news bulletins during the two days!
- On 5th February, the entire speech of the US Secretary of State Collin Powell at the UNO to convince the world that Iraq indeed possessed WMD, was telecasted live. His views were portrayed as undeniable 'dogma'.
- On 6th February, wide coverage was given to the same speech throughout the day.

Then, in the BBC news bulletin, more than 5 minutes were given to highlight the same speech made by the US Secretary of State. But the thousands of mass anti-war protest rallies, which were being held across the globe simultaneously, were given only 12 seconds!

- On 7th February, while the speech of the US Secretary of State which accused Iraq of possessing WMD (which was delivered the previous day at the UNO) was still being highlighted by the BBC throughout the day, just 45 seconds were allotted to cover the Iraqi defence against this accusation of the Secretary of State!
- Then, on 8th February the BBC reporter from Washington began his coverage of USA sending troops to Iraq by saying: "The days of denial are now over"! (implying the days of Saddam's denial of WMD are now over!).

All these concrete illustrations should suffice for the reader to conclude in whose favour the BBC was reporting news. Moreover a study conducted by the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, also substantiated what the present writer tried to establish above in this article, i.e., the BBC was overtly trying to establish that there was 'a just cause' to go to war against Iraq, namely, Iraq indeed possessed WMD. According to this German study, the BBC provided the lowest proportion of coverage to dissenting views: only 2 percent of coverage, even lower than the 7 percent of coverage provided by the US-based ABC network.¹⁹

So hostile was the BBC's attitude towards the massive anti-war protests that even the British anti-war demonstrators regularly denounced the BBC coverage, along with Murdoch's tabloid *SUN* for its coverage.

Although the writer has taken the BBC to illustrate with concrete examples how biased the BBC was in reporting about WMD which was the cause for the recent war (as argued by the USA and Britain), one needs to be aware that most of the other Western media agencies were equally biased in favour of going to war with Iraq, and they espoused a sort of a crusade in the months of preparation for the war. As another vivid illustration, let us just consider how the portrait of President George W. Bush (who from the moment of his controversial nomination to US Presidency in

¹⁹ Patrick Martin, *ibid.*

2000, was bent on accomplishing the task which his father, George Bush, Sr., failed to do, i.e., ousting Saddam Hussein either by hook or by crook) was presented by the TIME magazine in the weeks prior to the war.²⁰ And during the war, in one main feature article, this is how the TIME described Bush:

Iraqi forces are proving tougher than many imagined, forcing Washington to modify its tactics. But George W. Bush is more determined than ever to destroy Saddam Hussein.²¹

One has to keep in mind that this was the time when the majority of nations (including strong US allies) were wondering whether Bush with his all-out war-mongering, was sane enough to be a leader, leave alone being the President of the USA.²²

On the contrary, almost all of the US media painted Saddam and his Iraq as an absolute threat to the world, and thus, implied that any means could be used to achieve the obviously "noble" end: the ouster of Saddam.²³

Here is yet another case in which 'an absolute end' (=the ouster of Saddam) justified any means used, including war, even if such a war caused untold suffering, damage and loss of life and property. To illustrate this point, here is how the TIME magazine described Saddam:

[Saddam is] a man who likens himself to Nebuchadnezzar and Saladin and who first killed someone as a teenager and has ruthlessly pursued power ever since probably won't quit now, say intelligence analysts. The analysts are virtually

²⁰ See for example, Michael Elliot, "Countdown to War", TIME, February 17, 2003, pp.20-25; Joe Klein, "The Blinding Glare of His Certainty", TIME, February 24, 2003, p.38; Michael Elliot, "Who's With Him?" TIME, March 3, 2003, pp.21-26 Joe Klein, "The Poker Player in Chief", TIME, March 17, 2003, p.17; Romesh Ratnesar, "His Lonely March", TIME, March 17, 2003, pp.18-21.

²¹ Romesh Ratnesar, "Sticking to his Guns", TIME, April 7, 2003, p.25.

²² A respected leader like Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Publicly questioned the psychological integrity of president George W. Bush, as reported (very inconspicuously) in some sections of the media in the beginning of February 2003.

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unanimous in their assessment that Saddam will not go standing up. For one thing, it's his power that has kept him alive. Saddam sleeps in different beds every night, has body doubles and food tasters, all for good reason.²⁴

Surprisingly, such minute descriptions about such private matters as eating and sleeping habits of President Bush were never highlighted! The role played by the media in painting Saddam so absolutely evil enabled the warmongers to convince the masses of the need to go to war. Moreover, the stark contrast created by the media between Bush and Saddam was a parallel equivalent of the contrast between 'good' and 'evil', so much so, that the ensuing battle was portrayed as a crusade in the name of God! One has many doubts whether the media acted responsibly in reporting about the persons and events that led the world to such a disaster. In 'the preparatory period' (for war), the deliberate diffusion of inaccurate information, distortions, lies and manipulations of news by the media in order to achieve their absolute end (i.e., the ouster of Saddam) are far from responsible media reporting.

However, there is also the question of how free the journalists were actually to act responsibly according to their consciences. For example, it is alleged that the US media as a whole barred employees from participating in anti-war rallies, and in fact, one major newspaper, the San Francisco Chronicle fired a tech columnist who joined a protest march against the war.²⁵

When one considers the powerful influence these mammoth media agencies exert over the rest of the media in the world (and eventually, over the minds of the people), one wonders what sort of responsibility did the media evince in the preparatory period for the recent war. Now (at the time of writing this article) nearly three months after the war, there has been not a single trace to prove that Saddam did possess large amounts of WMD, posing a threat to the rest of the world. As the writer pens down these lines, The Telegraph of London reported that the chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix has challenged the US and Britain to prove

²⁴ Nancy Gibbs, "Would Saddam Simply Leave?", TIME, February 10, 2003, pp.36,37

²⁵ *ibid*

that Saddam Hussein had large stocks of WMD to pose a threat to the world, and thus, to justify the war on Iraq.²⁶

If Saddam really possessed such WMD, the inevitable question is: why did he not use them when he was badly cornered and his own life was at stake, during the recent invasion? Was Saddam keeping such WMD (if he really had any!) just as ornaments but not as weapons? If that is the case, he was not a danger to world peace (as alleged by the USA and Britain) at all! Although some sections of the media are very vociferous today, (after the war), in pointing out that the cry of the USA and Britain about WMD was a false and rather exaggerated alarm,²⁷ it is sad but true that the same media were not that keen to even discuss such an eventuality before the war. In this sense, one has no other option but to conclude that the media has failed badly in its responsibility, especially in not having ascertained the facts presented, and then, not having ever questioned the veracity of the US and British claims, before the war. A responsible media has the duty to investigate such crucial "facts" according to the social responsibility doctrine, which we discussed in the first part of this article.

2.2.2 Was the recent Iraqi War conducted in a Just Way?

What the writer intends to highlight in this section is that during the war proper, the media as a whole, failed again in its responsibility to tell what really was happening. It is said that ever since the American debacle in Vietnam, news control in all the American military interventions throughout the world, has been very tight. For the American military strategists, one of the main lessons of Vietnam seems to have been that no war can be won on the battlefield or on the home-front without tight control of information.²⁸

²⁶ Marcus Warren and Anton La Guardia, *The Telegraph*, 6th June 2003.

²⁷ See for example, John Pilger, "WMD will be on Blairs Political Headstone", *Daily Mirror*, June 9, 2003, p.10; Thalif Deen, "Weapons of Mass Deception Return to Haunt Authors", *The Sunday Times*, June 8, 2003, p.14; Neville de Silva, "Blair-faced Lies Cause Labour Pains", *The Sunday Times*, June 8, 2002, p.12

²⁸ John Whelan, "Has the Sword become mightier than the Pen?", *U.S. Catholic* 57:5 (May 1992), p.53.

The strict press controls imposed during all the recent major US military interventions, such as the invasion of Grenada, the invasion of Panama and the Persian Gulf War (1991) confirm that the US authorities are convinced that without strict control of news they can never win a war.²⁹

But, it was in the 1991 Gulf War that the journalists were subjected to an unprecedented press censorship, by the Allied forces headed by the USA. During that war, the military cracked down hard on the press by limiting battlefield access to a handful of "pool" reporters, approved by the military and by censoring all tapes and dispatches.³⁰

This carefully orchestrated control of all news from the war-front, and the one-sided presentation of such news to the general public, enabled the Allied forces to manipulate public opinion in their favour, irrespective of any ethical considerations.³¹

An excellent study by Iyengar and Simon showed convincingly how the news coverage of the Gulf War had effects on public opinion in favour of the Allied forces.³²

Perhaps, it was this immense success in manipulating the public opinion in the coverage of the Gulf War in 1991 that prompted the USA and Britain to use the same strict news control tactics again in the recent Iraqi war. There are also allegations made that the Western media (especially, the US media) deliberately struck the chords of emotional patriotism in order to cover up the brutal, gory scenes in the actual battlefield. No other person than the Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke himself

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp.51,53. For a discussion on press "pools" that operated during the Gulf War (1991), see William Boot, "The Pool", *Colombia Journalism Review*, May / June 1991, pp.24-26.

³¹ *Cfr.*, James Petras, "The Meaning of the New World Order: A Critique", *America* 164:18, May 11, 1991, p.513. See also my article "Mass Media and its Effects on the 'Just War' Criteria in the Gulf War", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 55:11, November 1991, pp.639-652.

³² *Cfr.*, Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda - Setting, Printing and Framing", *Communication Research* 20:3, June 1993, pp.365-383.

made the remark at a public speech: "I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during the war".³³

As an illustration, just note how the TIME magazine opened its account of American military operations in Iraq: A stunning burst of speed and power took coalition troops to the gates of the Iraq Captain.³⁴

Not only did this phrase contain a hair-raising adventure, which automatically evoked patriotism in the USA, but it also contained the word "coalition" with a mis-leading connotation. As Dean points out, every single report in the mainstream US media gave the distorted impression that the predominantly US military force attacking Iraq included the 49 so-called "coalition" members including tiny island nations such as Palau, Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Tonga. This was far from the truth.³⁵

Also, it may not be out of place to draw the attention of the reader to the phrase used by the media once the invasion of Iraq began. Instead of calling it "invasion of Iraq", the media very shrewdly used the phrase "liberation of Iraq" implying that it was such an altruistic act performed by the USA and Britain solely for the sake of "liberating" Iraqi citizens from "the absolute evil dictator called 'Saddam Hussein'"! The intended effect of this subtle phrase was obviously again the justification of the invasion of Iraq.

Tony Jenkins, the president of the UN Correspondents' Association (UNCA) told a seminar on "The Media and Armed Conflict" how deliberate attempts were made by the mainstream US news media to win people over to support the US invasion of Iraq. According to him, one tactic used was to give repeatedly slanted reports of what was happening in the war-field. The underlying presumption was "as with ad jingles, the drumbeat of

³³ Patrick Martin, *ibid.*

³⁴ TIME, April 14th, 2003, p.16.

³⁵ Thalif Dean, "Buzzwords that Buy over US Media", The Sunday Times, May 11th 2003, p.15.

repeated news lingo stays with us and takes a life of its own, so, in the long run, what's repeated endlessly becomes a social reality".³⁶

One message that the US and British media were at pains to emphasize was that the military authorities had taken every possible measure to ensure the least collateral damage. Most of the news items consisted of how accurately the "guided" missiles and the bombs would find their intended targets. As an illustration, one may take the description given about the US weaponry that would be used to destroy a bunker, in the TIME magazine of April 21st 2003:

The first set of bombs, hard-target penetrations laden with metal, drive deep into the ground before exploding, destroying underground structures. By exploding underground, the bombs concentrate the destruction on the target area, limiting collateral damage. The second pair of guided bombs, each loaded with 945 lbs, (429 kg) of explosives, destroys what is left.

The same TIME article described how JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munition) works. It was described as "a guidance tail kit that attaches to a conventional bomb. Steered by its tail fins, it uses the global positioning system (GPS) to guide the bomb to a target".

To top such bizarre descriptions, the news agencies, especially TV stations gave 24-hour non-stop coverage to the US-British indiscriminate bombing expeditions, in the form of a firework display. Interestingly, what was shown was the "fireworks" part, but not how the bombs hit the targets and how some of them missed their targets! That most of those targets were human targets was never mentioned. Surprisingly, it did not occur to either the media personnel or to their audiences that all those mega-tons of explosives had to explode somewhere on the ground in the country called 'Iraq'! This was a well-intended strategy of the media controllers to keep the public sensitivities untouched. For any indication of civilian casualties would have created an uproar and an eventual setback to the intended military operations in Iraq. This sort of bizarre-coverage of war forced the well-known

³⁶ *ibid.*

Italian Ecclesiastical media analyst Cardinal Roberto Tucci to say on Vatican Radio that the style of reporting which treated the war in Iraq as if it were a "soccer match" should be avoided.³⁷ In the same week, Pope John Paul II himself said:

[The] fundamental moral requirement of all communications was to show respect for and service of the truth. Freedom to seek and speak what is true is essential to human communication, not only in relation to facts and information but also, and especially, regarding the nature and destiny of the human person, regarding society and the common good and regarding our relationship with God.³⁸

There are also reports that during the war, the Pentagon and the leading US news agencies employed retired US Generals to give commentaries and to partake in talk shows to support the US invasion. Surprisingly, not a single expert commentator thus recruited came from the anti-war movement!³⁹

Moreover, as already mentioned above, the journalists were not free to report things as they observed them in the battlefield. 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, on 24th April. Banfield blasted the US media coverage of the war for presenting "a grand and glorious picture" which covered up the real impact of US bombs, missiles and shelling. "These were horrors that were completely left out of this war" she said.⁴⁰

"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 endeavour. You did not see where those bullets landed. You did not see what happened when the mortars landed. A puff of smoke is not what a mortar looks like when it explodes, believe me".⁴¹

³⁷ "The Media's Power", *The Tablet*, 5 April 2003, p.28.

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp.27,28.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Patrick Martin, *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

NBC officials rejected Banfield's criticism as soon as it was made public, and within three days had extracted from her a statement of retraction.⁴²

In the face of such intimidation of journalists, one wonders how free the journalists were to report the truth about the war. In this sense, one wonders whether one could speak of responsibility at all, for according to all moral traditions, where there is no freedom, there is no responsibility in the true sense of that word!

Conclusion

From what has been said above, it should be clear to the reader that the Western dominated media enthusiastically prepared their audiences for the invasion of Iraq, especially by the way they reported news about WMD. And then, during the war, the same media (especially, the mainstream American news media) gleefully put on the role of being the cheerleaders for the US-British military forces in Iraq. Striking the patriotic chords of the Americans (and their supporters), and portraying the roles of President Bush and President Saddam Hussein, as agents of absolute 'good' and absolute 'evil' respectively, the media went on to portray the war as a crusade between 'good' and 'evil'. Moreover, they miserably failed in their duty to report accurately about the immense suffering of the Iraqi civilians, their loss of life and property, as a result of the indiscriminate bombing of that country.

To judge any war to be moral or immoral, or to justify a war, one needs the basic moral criteria of jus ad bellum and jus in bello. That is, one needs at least to know whether there was a valid reason/s (a just cause) to go to war, and how that war was conducted, respectively. Unfortunately, the media failed to give a correct picture to the world in both these areas, before and during the war. Of course, after the war was over, we get flooded with information in both these areas, but then, the damage is already done, though in retrospect we may be able to pass judgment on this war in Iraq using such information. But, isn't it too late now to

⁴² *ibid.*

pass judgment, unless such a judgment would enable us to be cautious at least in future?

The writer is fully aware that during a war, no government or authority can communicate all the information available. This is because one has to keep in mind that military strategy and the security of a country can be at stake if all the available information is to be made known to the general public. But, certain portions of information available are due to the citizens, for such information is essential to form the moral judgments regarding the very war. They have a right to know such information. For example, in the context of the recent Iraqi war, if the world citizens (including those in the USA and Britain) were told clearly and accurately (before the war) about what the media is telling us now (after the war) so eloquently about the WMD, most probably, the war would have never taken place. And if the world citizens were told clearly and accurately (during the war) what the media is telling us now (after the war) about the Iraqi civilian casualties that took place due to indiscriminate bombing (during the war), the war would have never continued to such disastrous proportions as to destroy the infra-structure of an already battered nation. The available information force us to believe that the media was hand in glove with the USA and Britain in justifying this war. As such, we just cannot help but conclude that the media failed miserably in its role of responsibility, especially in the background of the evolution of that concept of 'responsibility' in the history of mass media. Of course, as pointed out above in this article, one may argue that the individual journalists were not free to report news according to their consciences because of the unjust restrictions imposed on them by the media agencies, and the US and British governments. In that case, the blame has to be put mainly on the media agencies and those respective governments, but still, one cannot help but hold that the media as a whole did fail in their responsibility in news reporting in the recent Iraqi war.
