

How the
misrepresentation of
war and conflict can
lead to a false view of
events



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Introduction

In June 2009, it was announced that there would be an Inquiry looking into the Iraq War, and the United Kingdom's involvement within it ("About the Inquiry", 2009). The Chilcot Inquiry aimed to cover the period between the summer of 2001 and the end July 2009, looking at not only the run-up to the conflict, but also the period during, and the outcomes after measures had been taken. Its aims were set to find out the legality and legitimacy of the conflict (Hirsch, 2009), and how it was presented to the public, prior to engagement.

There has been much debate over whether what the public are presented with is as truthful as it states to be. Whether it be giving a cleaner depiction, with exaggerated sophistication, or "inflated claims" (Meacher, 2010, para. 2), such as the 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq, it can be debated that a fair representation is somewhat hard to find.

The purpose of this dissertation is to look at how conflict can become misrepresented via the media. It aims to look at the various ways that the media communicate the conflict to the public, and how it poses itself as a watchdog, supposedly working as the public's eyes and ears, as well as giving them an outlet via which their 'voice' can be heard.

Whilst one initially thinks of war as a brutal and life affecting situation, more recent war seems to leave most western citizens relatively untouched, and therefore, perhaps less informed. What little they may know tends to be gathered via television or print media, and tends to somewhat be taken quite

literally as the ' way it is'. Chapter one brings together these ideas, and explores how the news present conflicts to its audiences.

The dissertation then goes on to address the problematic representations that have occurred, and looks at how news can be manufactured for audiences, depicting situations in differing ways to how they are really occurring. It also looks at the idea of propaganda, and the negative and positive ways in which it can be used. This second chapter also addresses the Abu Ghraib situation, and how such a horrific situation can by-pass the media, and perhaps be covered-up. The media however, proved to play a positive role, informing the public of the situation, bringing them into the loop.

Other elements which must be addressed is alternative representations. From documentary to video games, people now often use media which originates from conflict as a form of entertainment. Whether it be to inform themselves further, in the cause of documentaries, or to entertain and ' participate', the media enables audiences to approach the idea of conflict from other angles. This is therefore why it is vital that such genres be addressed when looking at the representation of war and conflict.

Chapter One: The Media; Our Eyes and Ears and Voice?

When considering how most people get their news and current affairs information, most tend to trust and favour certain institutions. They trust these sources to deliver them accurate and truthful reports. Few people would question their favourite institutions ability to do so, or would question

the validity of the ‘ stories’, consuming them as factual information, and would rarely think beyond it.

As discussed by McChesney and Nichols, ideally, the media is supposed to “ serve as a stern watchdog over those in power and those who want to be in power” (McChesney & Nichols, 2002, p. 24). This supports the idea that the media can be used to aid a country’s citizenship, helping those who do not have power to have a voice. Without the media, the public would find it hard to be heard, so they need to have the media on their side, likewise, the government must have the support of the media to influence the public (Katz, 2009, p. 200).

But whether the media really honours its role as ‘ watchdog’ is questionable. When considering the media, particularly in relation to reporting conflict, it seems somewhat unlikely that a completely fair and accurate representation, to all audiences, could occur. The BBC, according to Aitken (2007, p. 8), is thought of as one of the most trustworthy places that one can gather news and information. This could be due to a sense of ownership in which the UK public feel (via the license fee), or due to it being the most historically established. Either way, nationally, and internationally, it has become a trusted organisation. Zelizer and Allan even argue that, particularly post September 11, the BBC has become an organisation that the American public trust to deliver what they see as more extensive information. In comparison to US media representations, the BBC “ provided a much more in depth approach, [...] along with [a] ‘ blunter attitude’” (Zelizer & Allan, 2002, p. 12).

According to Aitken, (2007, p. 2), the BBC does have a duty under its Royal Charter, in order to maintain the license fee, that it must not be biased or favour views. This may indicate why it is seen as a more trustworthy source of information. However, as questioned by Aitken, it may be seen as the BBC holds people and organisations to account, but “ who holds the BBC to account?” (Aitken, 2007, p. 2). Particularly, when as Aitken suggests (2007, p. 20), the political opinion within the organisation would be formed by those working within it.

As Navasky discusses, “ journalism, the flow of news, information, and ideas, is the circulation system of our democracy, the way we find out what’s what. It is based largely on journalism that we make up our national mind” (Navasky, 2002, p. xiii). The media’s influence over the public is tremendous, especially as it may be the main influence over many of one’s beliefs. It therefore shows that there is a sense that the media should be aware of its power, and should therefore be regulated in such a way that it does allow diversity of representations to occur. As Doyle asserts, it is vital that there is a number of “ different and independent voices, and of differing political opinions and representations” (Doyle, 2002, p. 11). However, as Aitken continues, journalists report using their own views, and may do so completely unintentionally. However, when many journalists within an organisation are of similar beliefs, it could be hard for them to realise they may be biased. This is an “ institutional deformation, invisible to the people working there, unless you were one of a small minority who happen to take a different political view” (Aitken, 2007, p. 20).

When considering journalism of attachment, it is easy to see where one may be unable to stand neutrally. As it is a “journalism that cares as well as knows” (Bell, 1998, p. 15), the journalist is increasingly likely to be more emotionally entwined with the story, and therefore may find it harder to stand in a non-biased position. As Ellis addresses (1998, p. 167), moral responsibility often takes over when journalism becomes closer to the victims.

Emotion is a powerful tool used by the media, it can help to draw in an audience, and get them following along. According to Boltanski (1999, p. 5), there must be sufficient contact between the ‘victim’ and those who are ‘fortunate’ for one to be able to connect with the victim or ‘unfortunate’. Despite this though, as Boltanski (1999, p. 27) states, the two groups actually mean nothing to one another. Therefore, it is believed that the emotional effect of such reporting is relatively short lived for the audience consuming.

Bystander journalism however, seems to be the more idealistic approach that media organisations may favour, if wishing to be non-biased. This form of journalism is more concerned with factual elements of war. This is a less biased approach, as it tends to report an overall representation via factual elements. It allows audiences to walk away without feeling an attachment or moral obligation. Whilst audiences may tend to favour this form of reporting as more accurate, it can cause problems. According to Sanders, there is “a time to be passionate and a time to be dispassionate” (Sanders, 2005, p. 43). As he continues, this approach to journalism allows a “more truthful depiction of the horrors of war” (Sanders, 2005, p. 43). It may give a more <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

accurate reading into the devastation (on paper), but how one interprets that information though is where the problems occur. If one is not given the chance to physically see the devastation, it is hard to really understand.

Therefore, by dispassionately reporting, one may lack the emotional tie, and get a cleaner depiction of what is 'intended' to be communicated. Whilst one may feel they understand the situation, they are only being told facts, and whether they can really translate these into reality, is problematic. If one does not get the full picture, including the emotional and social impact that such a war may have over others, it is an unfair representation. Economical and statistical figures only tell so much, and do not communicate a reality.

As Nichols and McChesney discuss, we "don't see the reality of war" (Nichols & McChesney, 2005, p. v). Although this is in reference to the US press and public, it could be applied to any countries depiction, according to the countries own national belief, even if not to the same extent. "War is the most serious use of state power: organised, sanctioned violence" (Nichols & McChesney, 2005, p. 37). It is therefore a serious issue if one is not being given the chance to see the reality of a conflict, and the arguments behind it. It is all very to have a vague understanding behind a conflict, via information received from the media, but many audiences may take this information too literally. They may not look beyond the information offered, and may take the media's chosen narrative as a truthful and fair depiction, without questioning why the media has taken that particular angle.

As discussed by Aitken, it is about "constructing 'narratives' which give the audience a coherent framework within which to judge current developments" (Aitken, 2007, p. 17). But as Aitken continues, most people consume and <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

trust one narrative, despite there being many other competing versions of the same situation, which may be a more accurate representation.

Narratives give audiences a platform to work on, and a basis to which they can base their beliefs. If however, there are many competing versions a situation, as Aitken suggests (2007, p. 17), this demonstrates the various views that a broadcaster may possess. It would be hard for a broadcaster to deny their biases, particularly when there are other similar reports of other viewpoints. No one can truly assess a situation fairly without viewing every angle of the situation, not only from the home governments wished depiction, but also from the 'enemies' depiction.

This draws onto another point. Due to the technology of today, audiences are now able to access news instantly as situations are occurring. They are led to believe this gives them a bigger picture. It is also a good position for the public to be in, as they are therefore able to access the same information as others, and are less likely to be misled. This however can be problematic for controlling bodies, particularly in relation to conflict. "Leaders must be prepared to handle the rapid pace of global communication and to avoid serious policy mistakes deriving from global television's demands for a fast and effective response" (Gilboa, 2005, p. 24). They have little time for preparation, and therefore have to be somewhat careful in what they say, and aim to be somewhat vague, to give them the ability to be able to change their angle later if necessary.

Videophones have also proven problematic for those reporting via the media. Whilst they can "empower journalists [...], documenting the effects of battle while capturing a dramatic but information-rich account of war" (Livingstone, <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>)

Bennett & Robinson, 2005, p. 34), they can display more than a chosen government may have wished audiences to witness. However, it must be recognised that even with such resources, reporters are often not actually at the ' frontline', and are still some distance from the actual action, and therefore may only have the details which they may have been given by officials. It may also vary with the type of people which they are surrounded by, i. e. civilians or the military.

Another issue to discuss when considering reporting a conflict is where the information reported has been obtained from. Reporters are often “ given access to a steady and predictable supply of information that is typically provided by official government sources” (Livingstone, Bennett, & Robinson, 2005, p. 34). This therefore, shows that the information may not be directly from the source, even if we are led to believe so. It therefore may not be the full bulk of the situation, particularly when the government is the middle man, as it may wish to represent its own view. If the government is passing the information on, they are able to edit the information into a situation that compliments their desired standpoint. Why would one wish to humiliate or inflate problems for itself when it is unnecessary to do so? This therefore raises the question of whether we should be in fact more concerned by what we are not being shown, rather than what we are. This process of eliminating and censoring news via gatekeeping is a way of ensuring only ' newsworthy' subjects reach the public, whilst other things they deem unnecessary, do not.

The reporting of the 1990-1991 Gulf War can demonstrate where a lack of information was relayed to the public. During the conflict, the public were <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

given a cleaner depiction, and were under the impression that bombs dropped were precise and accurate. However, “ after the war it was revealed that in fact only 7 per cent of bombs were ‘ precision’ or laser-guided weapons” (Philo & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 149). Throughout the conflict, there was an obsession around the sophisticated weapons that were being used, which could now be seen as somewhat misleading. As cited by Philo and McLaughlin (from The Daily Mirror), “ The world watch in awe yesterday as Stormin’ Norman played his ‘ home video’ – revealing how allied plans are using Star Wars technology to destroy vital Iraqi targets. Just like Luke Skywalker manoeuvring his fighter into the heart of Darth Vader’s space complex, the US pilots zeroed into the very centre of Saddam Hussein’s Baghdad” (Philo & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 149). Such an article would give a very unfair representation of the real effect, but this may not be clear to audiences until after the situation has taken place.

Surely therefore, this misleading of the public could be seen as a form of propaganda? As Rosenfeld suggests (2007, p. 70), it may be necessary to represent events in certain, perhaps biased ways, as this should encourage support and patriotism within the public. Today one may assume that due to our knowledge and understanding of propaganda, it is less likely to happen to us. But as a victim of propaganda, would you really realise you were being subjected to it? According to Edward Bernays, propaganda is seen as a vital tool for societies. “ Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are together as a smooth functioning society” (Bernays, 2005, p. 37). Essentially, propaganda is “ the establishing of reciprocal understanding between an individual and a group” (Bernays, 2005, p. 161).

So if as Bernays suggest, propaganda is needed to obtain a joint understanding within a group, this may indicate why it may be used by governments to persuade the public to join their beliefs, in order to get a desired outcome. This can show why, it is essential that certain representations be presented to the public, however inaccurate or biased they may be, to create an alliance of beliefs. This would also support the idea behind over-emphasising the sophistication of war and cleanliness, in order to maintain support.

As you can see from this chapter, the media are there as our eyes and ears, feeding us information, but also serves, as a watchdog over government and other elite bodies. Also demonstrated is how the media have a great responsibility when reporting, due to their persuasiveness, and the fact that the public can be easily manipulated, and often follow and gather their national belief via what the media feeds them. It shows how ones understanding of a situation may differ depending on how it is reported. If reported using emotions, it may create a different perception to if it was reported factually, even if the factual representation, on paper, gives more information.

This gives a good basis upon which to discuss why such reporting takes place, and how it may benefit those in power. It also raises the questions around what is not being shown to audiences, and what happens when the media or government are shown to have been untruthful.

Chapter Two: Censorship, Deceit and Propaganda

As discussed in Chapter One, it can be somewhat confusing to consider the various ways that the media can present particular views. As suggested previously, it is thought that they do so consciously, but other views suggest that it is often unintentional. Whilst aiming to appear open, they often present a marginal view of the information they themselves are aware of. It therefore must be questioned why such actions are implemented, rather than presenting as much as possible, and why particular views are manufactured for audiences.

Ellis (1998, p. 170) considers the lack of information reported about a conflict to be incredibly important. The national security of a country could be jeopardised if one were to report everything occurring, on both the front line, and the tactical decisions behind it. As Ellis continues, it is thought that the media coverage of the Vietnam War was partially to blame for the conflict's failure. It is thought that "television coverage critically sapped the support of the American public" (Ellis, 1998, p. 170). As this was the first war that was able to be broadcast 'live', the problems were unforeseen, and therefore led to a problematic position for the government. Whilst the government was saying one thing, images shown were undermining their words, subsequently making the government appear somewhat untrustworthy.

This, therefore, would show that it is necessary that the media and its coverage of a conflict should be censored and paid close attention to, so that support is maintained by the public. But, if censorship is in such a way that it helps the audiences to form a chosen opinion, effectively, this could be seen

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as propaganda. As Bernays states, propaganda is “ the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses” (Bernays, 2005, p. 37). But, also adds that it is important for democratic society, and without which, it would be hard for one to live harmoniously, especially if everyone was of differing opinions. Therefore, presenting a situation in a particular way should help society to form a joint understanding. For example, when thinking in relation to Iraq, the main reason for intervention was due to supposed ‘ weapons of mass destruction’. If the public understand the threat, they are more likely to consent. As demonstrated during the ‘ Iraq Enquiry’, when it was discovered that there were no weapons, the public support was threatened. It therefore is essential that the politicians defend what they have formerly said, just as Alistair Campbell has demonstrated, defending their statements as not misrepresentative (“ Alastair Campbell defends”, 2010). As Bernays reiterates “ We are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of” (Bernays, 2005, p. 37). Therefore, whether it is government who we have chosen, the military, or other leaders that we have not, this would support the idea that our feelings about conflict are generally dictated to us.

So, as it would appear, sometimes the restriction of coverage may take place when it is not entirely necessary. As Ellis addresses, during both the Falklands War in 1982 and the Gulf War of 1991 “ citizens were prevented from learning information which in a democratic society, they had a right to know” (Ellis, 1998, p. 170). This seems particularly unfair, as citizens were

unable to witness the real war that was being fought in their name, paid for by themselves.

Since technology developed though, it would appear that censorship has become more necessary. As discussed in the previous chapter, videophones and correspondents worldwide enable audiences to access the action, at a much closer distance than previously (Livingstone, Bennett & Robinson, 2005, p. 34). This gives an impression to audiences that there is nowhere to hide, and they may believe what they are seeing is a fully representational true account, rather than the edited snippet that it really is. This kind of opinion, of knowing more, does not take into account that there are plenty of other journalists who are not as close to the action, or those who are closer to it, who may wish to protect the interests of those surrounding them.

As previously stated, there is always fear that public support may be jeopardised, which is why on occasions there may be a haze over what is reality, as well as what is fabricated truth within the media. When one is able to 'witness' war from multiple angles, from multiple genres, and even witness it live, it creates public curiosity. Especially since problematic representations of previous conflicts have been reported, the public find it harder to know the truth, so they no longer have the wool pulled over their eyes. They want to ensure the war fought in their name is a war which they support. Particularly, when considering the fact that many nations are bound together as 'one' for the purpose of the media, forgetting the fact that there are many cultures, viewpoints and faiths with differing opinions. The public need the media to take on their role of 'watchdog', and need it to marshal

what is taking place beyond their vision on their behalf. The media, therefore, it seems has begun to honour this role more greatly.

In 2004, the media brought us evidence of what is referred to as Abu Ghraib. It was revealed that some Iraqi detainees had been subjected to torture and other physical abuse. According to Miles, an Al-Jazeera cameraman, who was mistakenly arrested for a crime he did not commit, found out that “torture was still standard in America’s principle military detention centre in Iraq” (Miles, 2005, p. 326). According to Miles, as the time of the accusations against the American military, “few in the West believed their stories at the time, probably because they were Arabs, perhaps because they worked for Al-Jazeera” (Miles, 2005, p. 326). The US government and military repeatedly denied the accusations, “Donald Rumsfeld has described Al-Jazeera as ‘consistently lying’, [and] accused the network of causing ‘great damage and harm in Iraq by continuously broadcasting wrong and inaccurate information, impairing what the coalition forces [were] trying to achieve’” (Miles, 2005, p. 327). As Miles describes (2005, p. 328), it was US officials that were angry, believing that such allegations would fuel Iraqi hatred against the West further. At the time, the officials may have not known of the occurrences, but it cannot be ruled out that they had no knowledge of it. This demonstrates an example whereby the American media were feeding the public with false information, whether it was intentional or not. If it was intentional though, it would have been in favour of government, who would obviously not want to be painted in a bad light. It was not until the New Yorker magazine published evidential pictures of the abuse that it was uncovered and believed, and finally admitted to be the truth (Miles, 2005, p. 328).

However, this is not where the only problem lies. Since then, it has been debated whether or not all of the images should be released for the public to view. On the one hand, it is believed that the images should be realised due to the fact that it was the American citizen's own troops causing the offences, under the American name, whilst others believe it could potentially cause further harm. According to a report, "Obama said he believes release of the abuse photos would incite hatred against American troops" (Alberts, 2009, para. 4). This again brings up the subject of national security.

Understandably the release of such images during a time of conflict could incite further hatred, but due to freedom of information, what right do officials really have to withhold them? Surely if one is to fully understand war, they must have the full picture, however horrific and problematic it may be. If the images are not fully released, is there a reason behind this other than protecting our conscience? What is being hidden? Could it be contributing to part of a 'cover-up', with fear of something more sinister than what we already know being revealed? If therefore, officials had known about the situation (prior to it being confirmed), yet it had not made its way to mainstream media, this is misinforming the public, giving them a one-sided 'clean' account of their position in the conflict. By never witnessing the faults of one's own government, one cannot really claim to know. Even by withholding the images, it does not allow the American and Western democratic public a clear view as to what is really occurring under their name. Particularly as it is 'our' men, who are normally painted as positively heroic, committing such horrific offences.

This sort of behaviour by the media and government causes other problems too. Conspiracy theories to try and help explain other supposed reasoning's behind war and decisions made by government begin to emerge. It helps give a new blame figure, and is perhaps fuelled by paranoia and suspicion (Knight, 2003, p. 20). As Knight asserts, conspiracy theory may put “ forward the idea that sometimes people at the very centre of power might create (or perhaps just cynically promote) a popular outburst of demonology in order to further their own political schemes. This view is sometimes known as the elitist theory of moral panics, because it suggests that the elite deliberately fuel moral panics in order to legitimate repressive measures that would otherwise be unacceptable” (Knight, 2003, p. 20).

When the public begin to doubt their own government, feeling they are being fed propaganda, it is obvious they should want an explanation, so may turn to conspiracy theories as an alternative and comfort. For example, the documentary *The Conspiracy Files* (Rudkin, 2010, January 10) demonstrates how one may begin to become suspicious. It claims that a video of Benazir Bhutto talking after her first attempted murder was edited to exclude a statement she made about Osama Bin Laden. The version it claims the BBC presented cut out this section, for no apparent reason, so it is questionable as to why it was censored.

A further example where the Western governments' fear of what could be revealed via the media was demonstrated in October 2009 (Gray, 2009, October 25). Lance Corporal Joe Glenton was a soldier once serving in Afghanistan, who now faces a court martial and has been arrested. He claimed that he had “ witnessed sights during his time in Afghanistan that <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

forced him to question the morality of his role” (‘ Soldier arrested’, 2009, para. 8). Alike him, many other documentaries and interviews with ex-soldiers seem to unveil similar situations, where soldiers have a different picture of the war than the media have led the public to believe. The sanitization that takes place in the media is a view which soldiers alike Corporal Glenton would like to set straight.

Glenton began to get the media’s attention when he spoke at an anti-war demonstration that called for the British troops to be brought home. He claimed that many of the soldiers and demonstrators believed that it was not longer justifiable to have troops in the Middle East, and was trying to raise public awareness of this. This particular story came at a time when the public in both the UK and America were starting to doubt whether the war was really getting anywhere. Jeremy Corbyn MP is quoted as stating that the “ war in Afghanistan had no clear war aims” (“ Britons believe ‘ Afghan war is failing’”, 2009, para. 15). He also states that it is now “ the time to change policy and bring the troops home to prevent Nato involving itself in a Vietnam style quagmire” (“ Britons believe ‘ Afghan war is failing’”, 2009, para. 17).

With such stories and statements emerging in the media, it does cause the public to question why the media and government would not present the ‘ full’ picture. Especially when thinking about how the US media is less open about situations than the UK and other countries media (Zelizer & Allan, 2002, p. 2). Previously, it was easier for a government to deny that they knew about a situation, but technology has now taken this advantage away, making it impossible not to know. However, as Zelizer and Allan argue, the <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

media may be used in such a way that it helps the public. “ Journalism plays a key role in moving whole populations from trauma to recovery” (Zelizer & Allan, 2002, p. 2). It can therefore help to unite a nation, regardless of differing backgrounds, and help them to work together, particularly through traumatic times like conflict. With this view, it would seem that the US in particular may have needed such treatment. As the targeted nation in the 9/11 attacks, they may have required more help than other nations to come to terms with the situation, as well as needing ‘ encouragement’ in the right direction, and perhaps protection from the truth.. However, there is no doubt that this is a form of propaganda, as it does not demonstrate a clear communication of all the information one would need to make a fair judgement in order to make a justified opinion. This may demonstrate why the American citizens have trusted foreign institutions such as the BBC for increased information, as previously addressed

The media also tend to emphasise violence and negative features of the enemy in order to justify the conflict in hand. Today, “ terrorists have been given a voice” (Liebes & Kampf, 2004, p. 78). Since technology has greatened, other views, beyond just violence, have been represented. Interviews and arguments have been appearing in the media, with direct responses from the ‘ enemy’. Despite perhaps this being a positive thing, it can be used by government and the media to paint their own picture. They do not have to show everything, and can edit it as they desire, as previously discussed with the Bhutto footage.

Another clear example is in the Joint Forces military publication. It has a dismissive attitude when discussing anything anti-American. It even <https://assignbuster.com/how-the-misrepresentation-of-war-and-conflict-can-lead-to-a-false-view-of-events/>

addresses the problems of ' foreign' propaganda. It gives a sense of heroism, stating that via the American efforts in the war on terror, that they will " enable populations misinformed by censorship and other impediments to hear the truth" (Dailey& Webb, 2006, p. 46). It does not take into account the use of their own propa