

# WHY THE PRESS FAILED

EL ROTO



"I STARTED OUT IN JOURNALISM, BUT I CHANGED TO MANIPULATION TECHNOLOGY, BECAUSE IT OFFERS MORE OPPORTUNITIES."

## BY ORVILLE SCHELL

When on May 26, 2004, the editors of the *New York Times* published a *mea culpa* for the paper's one-sided reporting on weapons of mass destruction and the Iraq War, they admitted to "a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been." They also commented that they had since come to "wish we had been more aggressive in reexamining claims" made by the Bush Administration. But we are still left to wonder why the *Times*, like many other major media outlets in this country, was so lacking in skepticism toward administration rationales for war? How could such a poorly thought-through policy, based on spurious exile intelligence sources, have been so blithely accepted, even embraced, by so many members of the media? In short, what happened to the press's vaunted role, so carefully spelled out by the Founding Fathers, as a skeptical "watchdog" over government?

There's nothing like seeing a well-oiled machine clank to a halt to help you spot problems. Now that the Bush Administration is in full defensive mode and angry leaders in the Pentagon, the CIA, and elsewhere in the Washington bureaucracy are slipping documents, secrets, and charges to reporters, our press looks more recognizably journalistic. But that shouldn't stop us from asking how an "independent" press in a "free" country could have been so paralyzed for so long. It not only failed to seriously investigate administration rationales for war, but little took into account the myriad voices in the on-line, alternative, and world press that sought to do so. It was certainly no secret a number of our Western allies (and other countries), administrators of various NGOs, and figures like Mohamed El Baradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Hans Blix, head of the UN's Monitoring, Verification & Inspections Commission, had quite different pre-war views of the "Iraqi threat."

Few in our media, it seemed, remembered I.F. Stone's horatory admonition, "If you want to know about governments, all you have to know is two words: Governments lie." Dissenting voices in the mainstream were largely buried on back pages, ignored on op-ed pages or confined to the margins of the media, and so denied the kinds of "respectability" that a major media outlet can confer.

As reporting on the lead-up to the war, the war itself and its aftermath vividly demonstrated, our country is now divided by a two-tiered media structure. The lower tier — niche publications, alternative media outlets (such as the *Times Eagle* and Astoria's KMUN-FM) and Internet sites — hosts the broadest spectrum of viewpoints. Until the war effort began to unravel in spring 2004, the upper-tier — a relatively small number of major broadcast outlets, newspapers and magazines — had a far more limited bandwidth of critical views, regularly deferring to the Bush Administration's vision of the world. Contrarian views below rarely bled upwards.

As Michael Massing pointed out in the *New York Review of Books*, Bush Administration insinuations that critics were unpatriotic — White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer infamously warned reporters as war approached: "People had better watch what they say" — had an undeniably chilling effect on the media. But other forms of pressure also effectively inhibited the press. The President held few press conferences and rarely submitted to truly open exchanges. Secretive and disciplined to begin with, the administration adeptly used the threat of denied access as a way to intimidate reporters who showed evidence of independence. For reporters, this meant no one-on-one interviews, special tips or leaks, being passed over in press conference question-and-answer periods, and exclusion from select events as well as important trips.

After the war began, for instance, Jim Wilkinson, a 32 year old Texan who ran Centcom's Media Center in Qatar, was, according to Massing, known to rebuke reporters whose copy was deemed insufficiently "supportive of the war," and "darkly warned one correspondent that he was on a 'list' along with two other reporters at his paper." In the play-along world of the Bush Administration, critical reporting was a quick ticket to exile.

The impulse to control the press hardly originated with George W. Bush, but his administration has been less inclined than any in memory to echo Thomas Jefferson's famous declaration that "The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether they should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

The Bush Administration has little esteem for the watchdog role of the press, in part because its own quest for "truth" has been based on something other than empiricism. In fact, it enthroned a new criterion for veracity, "faith-based" truth, sometimes corroborated by "faith-based" intelligence. For officials of this administration (and not just the religious ones either), truth seems to descend from on high, a kind of divine revelation needing no further scrutiny. For our President this is evidently literally the case. The Israeli paper *Ha'aretz* reported him saying to Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Prime Minister of the moment, "God told me to strike Al Qaeda and I struck, then he instructed me to strike Saddam, which I did."

It is hardly surprising then, that such a President would eschew newspapers in favor of reports from other more "objective sources," namely, his staff. He has spoken often of trusting "visceral reactions" and acting on "gut-feelings." For him as for

much of the rest of his administration, decision-making has tended to proceed not from evidence to conclusion, but from conclusion to evidence. Reading, facts, history, logic and the complex interaction between the electorate, the media and the government have all been relegated to subsidiary roles in what might be called "fundamentalist" policy formation.

Just as the free exchange of information plays little role in the relationship between a fundamentalist believer and his or her God, so it has played a distinctly diminished role in our recent parallel world of divine political revelation. After all, if you already know the answer to a question, of what use is the media except to broadcast that answer? The task at hand is never to listen but to proselytize the political gospel among non-believers thereby transforming a once interactive process between citizen and leader into evangelism.

Although in the Bush political universe freedom is endlessly extolled in principle, it has had little utility in practice. What possible role could a free press play when revelation trumps fact and conclusions are preordained? A probing press is logically viewed as a spoiler under such conditions, stepping between the administration and those whose only true salvation lies in becoming part of a nation of true believers. Since there is little need, and less respect, for an opposition (loyal or otherwise), the information feedback loops in which the press should play a crucial role in any functioning democracy, has ceased operating. The media synapses that normally transmit warnings from citizen to government froze shut.

Television networks continue to broadcast and papers continue to publish, but dismissed and ignored, they became irrelevant, except possibly for their entertainment value. As the press has withered, the government, already existing in a self-referential and self-deceptive universe, has been deprived of the ability to learn of danger from its own policies and thus make course corrections.

Karl Rove, the President's chief political advisor, bluntly declared to *New Yorker* writer Ken Auletta that members of the press "don't represent the public any more than other people do. I don't believe you have a check-and-balance function." Auletta concluded that, in the eyes of the Bush Administration, the press corps had become little more than just another special-interest lobbying group. Indeed, the territory the traditional media once occupied has increasingly been deluged by administration lobbying, publicity and advertising — cleverly staged "photo ops," carefully produced propaganda rallies, preplanned "events," tidal waves of campaign ads, and the like. Afraid of losing further "influence" access, and the lucrative ad revenues that come from such political image-making, major media outlets have found it in their financial interest to quietly yield.

What does this downgrading of the media's role say about how our government views its citizens, the putative sovereigns of our country? It suggests that "we the people" are seen not as political constituencies conferring legitimacy on our rulers, but as consumers to be sold policy the way advertisers sell product. In the storm of selling, spin, bullying and "discipline" that has been the Bush signature for years, traditional news outlets found themselves increasingly drowned out, ghettoized and cowed. Attacked as *liberal* and *elitist*, disesteemed as "trouble makers" and "bashers" (even when making all too little trouble), they were relegated to the sidelines, increasingly uncertain and timid about their shrinking place in the political process.

Add in a further dynamic (which intellectuals from Marxist/Leninist societies would instantly recognize): Groups denied legitimacy and disdained by the state tend to internalize their exclusion as a form of culpability, and often feel an abject, autonomic urge to seek reinstatement at almost any price. Little wonder, then, that "the traditional press" has had a difficult time mustering anything like a convincing counter-narrative as the administration herded a terrified and all-too-trusting nation to war.

Not only did a mutant form of skepticism-free news succeed — at least for a time — in leaving large segments of the populace uninformed, but it corrupted the ability of high officials to function. All too often, they simply found themselves looking into a funhouse mirror of their own making and imagined that they were viewing reality. As even the conservative *National Review* noted, the Bush Administration has "a dismaying capacity to believe its own public relations."

In this world of mutant "news," information loops have become one-way highways; and a national security advisor, cabinet secretary, or attorney general a well-managed and programmed polemicist charged to "stay on message," the better to justify whatever the government has already done, or is about to do. Because these latter-day campaigns to "dominate the media environment," as the Pentagon likes to say, employ all the sophistication and technology developed by communications experts since Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, first wed an understanding of psychology to the marketing of merchandise, they are far more seductive than older-style news. Indeed, on Fox News, we can see the ultimate marriage of news and PR in a fountainhead of artful propaganda so well packaged most people can't tell it from the real thing.

For three-plus years, we have been governed by people who don't view news, in the traditional sense, as playing any constructive role in our system of governance. At the moment, they are momentarily in retreat, driven back from the front lines of faith-based truth by their own faith-based blunders. But make no mistake, their frightening experiment will continue if Americans allow it. Complete success would mean not just that the press has surrendered its essential watchdog role, but — a far darker thought — that, even were it to refuse to do so, it might be shunted off to a place where it would not matter.

As the war in Iraq descended into a desert quagmire, the press belatedly appeared to awaken and adopt a more skeptical stance toward an already crumbling set of Bush Administration policies. But if a bloody, expensive, catastrophic episode like the war in Iraq is necessary to remind us of the important role that the press plays in our democracy, something is gravely amiss in the way our political system has come to function.

A highly acclaimed writer and journalist, Orville Schell wrote this article for the Independent Media Institute.

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## TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Mudslinging, falsehoods and lies have more effect on our democratic process than does the truth. The only way to restore genuine debate in our elections is to put some truth in advertising regulations into the political process.

When any political ad can be proved to be blatantly false by nonpartisan groups such as Ad Watch, the offender should immediately be required by law to not only pull the ad but should also be fined enough to fund an equal or greater amount of air time for his/her opponent. The fines should come directly out of federal campaign funding.

This is the only way that political mudslinging falsehoods would finally be condemned to the dustbin of history.

—RON BETTS

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