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The Essential Role for News Media

On September 18, 2003, President George W. Bush said publicly that there was no evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001.¹ That announcement must have confused the 70 percent of Americans polled who believed that the deposed leader of Iraq was “personally involved” with the suicide bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.² The president’s admission certainly surprised me because it was President Bush and the White House staff who had intentionally created the erroneous connection in the first place.

The purported connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda was not the only thing that confused Americans. Polls conducted by scholars and news organizations since the “War on Terror” began in September 2001 showed the development of other disturbing misunderstandings.

For example, polls conducted soon after 9/11 showed that very few Americans, fewer than 5 percent, mentioned Iraq in speculating who was responsible for the attacks. But, by January 2003, a Knight-Ridder poll found that 44 percent of those polled believed that “some” or “most” of the hijackers were Iraqi. The correct answer is none.³

A poll conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland in June 2003 found that 41 percent of Americans polled believed either that the United States had found weapons of mass destruction in

Iraq (34 percent) or were unsure whether weapons of mass destruction had been found (7 percent).⁴

Misperceptions such as these led to a level of public support for the United States-led invasion and occupation that might not have been there otherwise. For example, the University of Maryland pollsters found that of those who approved of U.S. operations in Iraq, 52 percent believed that, in the ensuing conflict, the United States had found weapons of mass destruction.⁵

Four months later, the University of Maryland researchers explored further the connection between misperceptions and support of the war. They found a direct link between the 60 percent of Americans who held one or more of three misconceptions (that the United States had found weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam Hussein was involved with the 9/11 attacks, and that people in other countries either backed the U.S. invasion or were evenly split in their support), and support for the invasion and occupation. According to a news report of the poll, “Among those with one of the three misconceptions, 53 percent supported the war. Among those with two, 78 percent supported it. Among those with three, 86 percent backed it. By contrast, less than a quarter of those polled who had none of the misconceptions backed the war.”⁶

It ought to be no surprise that citizens support policy and governmental action on the basis of their

understanding of the justification for that policy and action. But, the consequence of misperceptions regarding Iraq is an important illustration of the breakdown in contemporary American democracy, as are the even more-disturbing polls that relate to Americans' perception of their ability to trust their president and the connection between news sources and citizens' misunderstandings.

According to a story published July 1, 2003, by the Associated Press, only 39 percent of those polled believed that the U.S. administration was being "fully truthful" in presenting evidence about a link between Saddam and the Al Qaeda terrorist network.⁷

The October 2003 University of Maryland poll found that "80 percent of those who said they relied on Fox News and 71 percent of those who said they relied on CBS believed at least one of the three misperceptions. The comparable figures were 47 percent for those who said they relied most on newspapers and magazines and 23 percent for those who said they relied on PBS or National Public Radio."⁸

Government, news media, and citizens form the necessary triad for democracy. Democracy can truly work only with active, informed citizens who have reason to trust the information that they get from the government and the information that they get from news media. All three segments have responsibility for the erroneous beliefs cited above. While I will note the problems with governmental deception and passive citizenry, my main focus for this piece is the failure of news media to ensure that citizens have the adequate and accurate information necessary for self-governance.

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THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a fragile form of government, dependent as it is on the interaction of self-governing citizens with their leader-representatives. In the words of contemporary philosopher Israel Scheffler, himself a student of the passionate proponent of democracy, John Dewey:

The democratic ideal is that of an open and dynamic society: open, in that there is no antecedent social blueprint which is itself to be taken as a dogma immune to critical evaluation in the public forum; dynamic, in that its fundamental institutions are not designed to arrest change but to order and channel it by exposing it to public scrutiny and resting it ultimately upon the choices of its members. The democratic ideal is antithetical to the notion of a fixed class of rulers, with privileges resting upon social myths which it is forbidden to question. It envisions rather a society that sustains itself not by the indoctrination of myth, but by the reasoned choices of its citizens, who continue to favor it in light of a critical scrutiny both of it and its alternatives.⁹

A government that claims to legitimately lead in a democracy is tolerable only to the extent that it is transparent to the people whom it serves. While the current Bush administration is far from being the first to intentionally deceive American citizens, there is an increasingly disturbing tendency for the White House to be matter-of-fact about its deceptions rather than to feel a need to justify them.

Beginning in September 2001, the Bush administration worked to link Saddam Hussein with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Then-White-House speechwriter David Frum said that his assignment "for the State of the Union last year was to extrapolate from the September 11 terrorist attacks to make a case for 'going after Iraq.'"¹⁰

Frum wrote and Bush said in the State of the Union address and news media repeated in January 2002 that "Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. . . . States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. . . . The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons. . . . We can't stop short. If we stop now — leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked — our sense of security would be false and temporary."¹¹

The subtle linking of Saddam Hussein with 9/11 continued throughout other speeches in 2002 and was reinforced in the State of the Union address in January 2003. Bush said:

And this Congress and the American people must recognize another threat. Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaeda

Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses, and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained. Imagine those nineteen hijackers with other weapons and other plans — this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known. We will do everything in our power to make sure that that day never comes.¹²

Frum’s claims of the White House-engineered link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were supported by candidate and retired General Wesley Clark in his June 2003 appearance on *Meet the Press*. Clark said that the White House had called him the day of the 9/11 attacks and asked him to claim that there was a link between Saddam Hussein and the attacks. Clark said that he refused to do so because there was no evidence for the claim.¹³

According to Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), “Clark’s assertion corroborates a little-noted *CBS Evening News* story that aired on September 4, 2002. As correspondent David Martin reported: ‘Barely five hours after American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon, the secretary of defense was telling his aides to start thinking about striking Iraq, even though there was no evidence linking Saddam Hussein to the attacks.’”

According to CBS, a Pentagon aide’s notes from that day quote Rumsfeld asking for the “best info fast” to “judge whether good enough to hit SH at the same time, not only UBL.” (The initials SH and UBL stand for Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.) The notes then quote Rumsfeld as demanding, omi-

nously, that the administration’s response “go massive . . . sweep it all up, things related and not.”¹⁴

Christian Science Monitor reporter Linda Feldman reported that President Bush continued, subtly to make the Iraq-Al Qaeda connection during the buildup to the war. In a press conference in early March, Feldman said:

President Bush mentioned September 11 eight times. He referred to Saddam Hussein many more times than that, often in the same breath with September 11.

Bush never pinned blame for the attacks directly on the Iraqi president. Still, the overall effect was to reinforce an impression that persists among much of the American public: that the Iraqi dictator did play a direct role in the attacks

“The administration has succeeded in creating a sense that there is some connection [between Sept. 11 and Saddam Hussein],” says Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland.¹⁵

It seems facile to state that a democratic government ought not deceive its citizens, or that it is unethical for leaders to create misperceptions in a people who are charged with self-governance. But, something has changed from the mid-twentieth century when American citizens expressed horror in learning that Senator Joe McCarthy would make false claims and manipulate the news media

into publishing the claims unchallenged. Manipulation of the truth and of media by governmental leaders — intolerable a half century ago — has been morally neutralized. Now that manipulation is called “spin,” and citizens assume that leaders cannot be trusted to tell them the truth.

This situation is a failing both on the part of

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leaders and of citizens. Citizens do have the power to protest, whether the protest be against the FCC for allowing more monopolistic corporate control of electronic media, or against a president who would dare to lead his constituency astray. Unfortunately, ex-President Clinton's lies about his sexual activities generated more citizen outrage than President Bush's efforts to provide a false basis for Americans to support the invasion of Iraq.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE FOR NEWS MEDIA

Most importantly, news media have gone through a disturbing transition since the days when broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow brought down Senator McCarthy and even since the days that a couple of young *Washington Post* journalists brought down President Nixon. In many newsrooms, marketing values have replaced news values. Media managers think in terms of consumers rather than citizens. Good journalism sells, but unfortunately, bad journalism sells as well. And, bad journalism — stories that simply repeat governmental claims or that reinforce what the public wants to hear instead of offering independent reporting — is cheaper and easier to produce.

According to a recent FAIR report, while news media are finally covering stories regarding the “flawed” intelligence that was used to justify the Iraqi invasion, few journalists are speaking directly to what might be euphemistically called the “disinformation campaign.” The media, these critics say, are “strangely reluctant to pursue stories suggesting that the flawed intelligence — and therefore the war — may have been a result of deliberate deception, rather than incompetence. The public deserves a fuller accounting of this story.”¹⁶

News media have the responsibility to be an independent chorus in the triad of government, citizens, and journalism. Like the Greek Chorus of ancient dramatic performances, journalists have the responsibility to be separate from government and separate from citizens as well. The journalistic voices should give citizens information that they need instead of perceptions that that might make citizens happier to have reinforced. Journalistic voices should put governmental messages always in context of the truth. If journalists are doing their jobs well, the resulting stories will cause citizens and leaders alike a little discomfort.

Learning and educated action — the bedrock of democracy — begin with dissonance, with the discomfort of having one's worldview shaken. The open and dynamic society that Scheffler describes depends on continual inquiry and reflection. True democracy is possible only with leaders and citizens who are actively working together to create, and recreate, an increasingly better world.



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End Notes:

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