

AGAINST ALL REASON

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Original Article

MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

MEDIA ALERT: LOGICAL MEDIA LUNACY

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By David Edwards and David Cromwell

Dotty Watchdogs

In the last hours of a momentous year for the media, both the BBC and ITN reported that Dotty, an English bull terrier owned by Princess Anne, had been cleared by Buckingham Palace of fatally wounding Pharos, one of the Queen's corgis. A second bull terrier, Florence, it seemed, had been responsible. The reports were the last in a week-long series on the attack - the BBC website records mentions of the story on December 24, 28, 30 and 31.

The media has a long and distinguished record of covering important royal news. The BBC's 6 O'clock News on January 26, 1998, devoted 10 minutes, or 30% of the programme, to the Queen Mother's fall and fracture of her left hip. On January 29, 1999, ITN summarised its 1 O'clock News bulletin thus:

"And the main headline this lunchtime: Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles have appeared as a couple, in public, for the first time."

In mid-December, the news also broke that David Kay, head of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) searching for Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, would "leave his post prematurely" in the next few months "amid dwindling expectations that there is anything to be found". ('Iraq weapons hunter to quit early as hopes of finding arsenal dwindle', Julian Borger, *The Guardian*, December 19, 2003) This was "a big blow to the administration", one that would "signal the effective end of the search for weapons of mass destruction," according to Joseph Cirincione, a weapons expert at the Carnegie Endowment Institute for Peace in Washington. "Some will continue looking", Cirincione added, "but very, very few expect there to be any significant finds at this point". (Ibid)

Kay's early departure was big news - the final disaster for the Bush-Blair claims

on WMD - but it was afforded only a fraction of the coverage granted the story of the attack on the Queen's corgi. The BBC site, for example, records a single entry on Kay's resignation, which was mentioned in passing, if at all, on TV news.

The psychiatrist R.D. Laing once wrote:

"The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years." (Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, Penguin, 1990, p.24)

It is vital that we be trained to tolerate absurdity in this way. The media's self-appointed task of attempting to reconcile our leaders' actions with the libertarian values they claim to uphold requires frequent resort to what we have called *Logical Media Lunacy*.

Logical Media Lunacy involves ignoring known facts and documented history, and violating elementary norms of rational debate to the point of insanity, but in a way that consistently benefits powerful interests. Thus media performance might be likened to a series of insane fits of irrational behaviour - but with every 'fit' nevertheless manifesting a consistent pattern benefiting the same vested interests in the same way. A good example was provided by the BBC's Laura Trevelyan on December 28.

Trevelyan was reporting on a dramatic, Keystone Cops-style failure of the "coalition of the willing" to coordinate its propaganda line on Iraq. In mid-December, Blair had told British troops that there was "massive evidence of a huge system of clandestine laboratories" indicating that Saddam had tried to "conceal weapons" (Quoted, Jonathan Dimbleby, ITV, December 28, 2003). Clearly unaware of these claims, Paul Bremer, head of the coalition provisional authority in Baghdad, told ITV's Jonathan Dimbleby:

"I don't know where those words come from but that is not what David Kay [head of the Iraq Survey Group] has said. I have read his reports so I don't know who said that. It sounds like a bit of a red herring to me.

"It sounds like someone who doesn't agree with the policy sets up a red herring then knocks it down." (Ibid)

On the BBC's news that same evening, Trevelyan reviewed the interview, con-

cluding with the comment that the conflicting version of events "was probably down to confusion rather than a genuine split". (Trevelyan, BBC1, 10:45 News, December 28, 2003)

Consider that Blair had made dramatic claims supposedly vindicating his policy on Iraq. Bremer, the leading Western representative in Iraq, then dismissed these claims as nonsense. The British prime minister was thus revealed to have knowingly lied (it could hardly be interpreted as a mistake). And Trevelyan's response? Bremer's contradiction of Blair did not indicate a "split" in the US-UK alliance.

No reasonable person who had seen the interview could possibly believe Bremer's words had anything to do with a diplomatic "split" - the idea was unworthy even of mention. Bremer was clearly unaware that Blair was the source of the claims - Dimbleby did his best to make this clear but Bremer stubbornly talked over him. Also, upon being told that Blair was the source, Bremer immediately tried to row back in the most cringe-making way, saying:

"There is actually a lot of evidence that has been made public."

Trevelyan's rejection of the possibility of a "split" -not merely a mention, but the concluding comment of her report - was thus not merely superficial, not merely a distortion, it was actually an insane response to what had happened. Clare Short, the former international development secretary, drew the rational conclusion when she accused Blair of telling worse "lies" than John Profumo, and called on him to resign.

But the media is not in the business of rationality; it is in the business of imposing absurdity and irrationality in a way that is, in fact, entirely rational from the point of view of power in maintaining an exploitative and violent status quo. This, indeed, is *Logical Media Lunacy* because the media is a cornerstone of power - this is power acting rationally to defend itself.

The term *Logical Media Lunacy* is bizarre enough but, for a public subjected to rapidly changing news coverage, experience of the phenomenon itself is bewildering in the extreme. Viewers sense that there has been some kind of grave violation of common sense - why would anyone even mention the possibility of a US-UK "split"? But before we can make sense of what has been said, or why, news programmes move us on to new deceptions, absurdity and confusion. Meanwhile the fleeting emphasis on a "split" has successfully pointed large numbers of people in exactly the wrong direction - towards the concocted possibility of some diplomatic row and away from the truth: that this country's prime minister lied to us.

We are not for one moment suggesting that Trevelyan, or any other journalist, deliberately misleads the public - we are sure she is sincere and believes every word she's saying. But we believe that the media has a deeply ingrained, unconscious sensitivity to statements and conclusions that will incur the wrath of the powers that be, and that are therefore to be avoided. Quite simply, for our political system some ideas +have+ to be true and some ideas have to be unthinkable.

Democracy Actually

Thus, in his interview Jonathan Dimbleby asked Paul Bremer about his plans for "what you hope will be a democracy" in Iraq. Is it reasonable to so casually assume that democracy really is what the US hopes for in Iraq? Is there perhaps evidence to be found in the Third World - for example in the history of Iraq itself - to suggest that the US has different priorities? How does Dimbleby's assumption square with Guardian reporter Julian Borger's analysis in April 2001:

"In the Bush administration, business is the only voice... This is as close as it is possible to get in a democracy to a government of business, by business and for business." (Borger, 'All the president's businessmen', *The Guardian*, April 27, 2001)

If American business, not the American people, is "the only voice" in the United States itself, how can the Iraqi people constitute the leading voice informing US "hopes" for an oil-rich country it has invaded and occupied?

Former Reagan State Department official Thomas Carothers explained that the earlier Reagan-Bush Administrations had reluctantly adopted "prodemocracy policies as a means of relieving pressure for more radical change" in Latin America, "but inevitably sought only limited, top-down forms of democratic change that did not risk upsetting the traditional structures of power with which the United States has long been allied". Carothers described the goals of these "democracy assistance projects" as being to maintain "the basic order of... quite undemocratic societies" and to avoid "populist-based change" that might upset "established economic and political orders" and open "a leftist direction". (Quoted, Neil A. Lewis, 'What can the US really do about Haiti?', *New York Times*, December 6, 1987)

Noam Chomsky comments:

"US planners surely intend to establish a client state in Iraq, with democratic forms if that is possible, if only for propaganda purposes. But Iraq is to be what the British, when they ran the region, called an 'Arab facade,' with British power

in the background if the country seeks too much independence. That is a familiar part of the history of the region for the past century." ('An interview with Noam Chomsky', by Hawzheen O. Kareem and Noam Chomsky, www.zmag.org, January 2, 2004)

Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser for Bush I, is clear in his own mind that if there is an election in Iraq and "the radicals win... We're surely not going to let them take over". (Quoted, Bob Herbert, *New York Times*, April 10, 2003)

And how does all of this, including Borger's comments, square with the Guardian's own recent description of how the White House's "hopes of bringing democratic governance in Iraq and Afghanistan hang in the balance amid continuing violence and discord"? ('Rebranding Bush as man of peace', Suzanne Goldenberg, Simon Tisdall and Nicholas Watt, *The Guardian*, January 3, 2004)

"The only voice" in US politics might want to *appear* to bring democratic governance in order to pacify Western public opinion. This is a tried and trusted propaganda strategy described brilliantly by Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead in their 1984 book, *Demonstration Elections*:

"A demonstration election is a *media event* above all else. Its success requires massive publicity at home, carefully focused on the right questions, and avoiding the wrong ones. The media, moreover, must not follow up this reporting to see whether 'peace' and 'reconciliation' result from the election, or whether it merely consolidates the power of the war party and allows intensified violence. 'Good questions' are those about election day weather and prospective turnout, candidate foibles, and the likelihood of 'leftist [or 'terrorist'] disruption'; 'bad questions' concern security force murders, the rise and operations of [government-backed paramilitary forces], the legal requirement to vote, and the bearing of all these on the 'turnout'. Many of the 'bad questions' fall under the general heading of 'conditions essential to a genuinely free election.'" (Herman and Brodhead, *Demonstration Elections*, South End Press, 1984, p.153)

Should this kind of triumph of appearance over reality be described as "democratic governance"?

And is it reasonable to suggest that "violence and discord" are obstacles to such an outcome? Is it not more reasonable to suggest that such an eventuality is *itself* a form of political discord, one that typically depends on the availability of overwhelming state violence? Does "the only voice" in US politics not, in fact, have a long history of precisely *sowing* "violence and discord" where it stands to profit from them?

After all, ITN's Trevor Macdonald may have described how Saddam's "brutal dictatorship had made him a pariah in Western eyes". (ITN News Special, December 14, 2003) But as we recently described, in the same year that Saddam gassed civilians at Halabja, UK export credits to Baghdad rose from £175 million in 1987 to £340 million in 1988. The US and UK governments simultaneously affirmed the importance of trade with Saddam while the regime's human rights atrocities were "off the media agenda" as Fairness And Accuracy In Reporting (www.fair.org) noted. Macdonald's words, in other words, flew completely in the face of all the readily available, known and indisputable facts - making it just one more example of Logical Media Lunacy.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to: Laura Trevelyan
Email: laura.trevelyan@bbc.co.uk

Write to the BBC's director of news, Richard Sambrook
Email: richard.sambrook@bbc.co.uk

Write to Trevor Macdonald
Email: trevor.macdonald@itn.co.uk

And copy the email(s), or write separately, to ITN's head of newsgathering, Jonathan Munro:
Email: jonathan.munro@itn.co.uk

Please also send all of these to us at Media Lens: Email: editor@medialens.org

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