

If you can't shoot the messenger, lock him up

The U.S. has looked at the media it can't control as the "enemy."

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Global Research, November 30, 2005

The Hindu 30 November 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

President Bush's alleged threat to bomb Al Jazeera shouldn't surprise us. Ever since the NATO attack on Yugoslavia, the U.S. has looked at the media it can't control as the "enemy."

IF THERE were any doubts about the authenticity of [the Daily Mirror story](#) on President George W. Bush wanting to bomb the head offices of Al Jazeera, the British government would appear to have cleared them up by [threatening editors with prison](#) if they publish the text of the confidential memo from which the London tabloid sourced its account.

After all, if the [White House's line](#) about the story being "outlandish" were really true, why on earth would Tony Blair — whose conversation with the American President last April is the subject of the memo — invoke the Official Secrets Act to prevent its publication? I can think of only two reasons, neither of which does Mr. Blair or Mr. Bush any credit. Either the American President did threaten to blow up the Qatar-based Arabic news channel because he was upset at its coverage of U.S. counter-insurgency operations in Fallujah. Or he did not, in which case the British Prime Minister wants to suppress the memo because it records Mr. Bush admitting — or threatening — something even more terrible.

Tempting though it is to dismiss the alleged threat against the Arabic broadcaster as a "conspiracy theory" ([as Mr. Blair is suggesting](#)) or a "joke" on the part of the U.S. President, there is the unsettling coincidence of Al Jazeera having been hit by American bombs twice before.

In November 2001, the channel's [Kabul office was hit by a U.S. missile](#) and in April 2003, [a 'smart' bomb terminated its Baghdad operation](#) with extreme prejudice, killing a journalist, Tareq Ayoub. Even without reading the April 2004 memo, we know from an earlier outburst by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that the Bush administration just doesn't like the upstart broadcaster. They move about on their own in Iraq and refuse to be tied down as 'embeds'. They speak the local language. And the footage they show has rather more shock and awe than what the Pentagon is comfortable putting on air. Does this mean the U.S. would deliberately bomb journalists in contravention of the laws of war — and the "freedoms" in whose name Iraq was invaded? Perhaps not, but what NATO did to the Radio Television Serbia (RTS) studios in Belgrade in 1999 suggests this military and moral Rubicon is more easily crossed than one would like to imagine.

During the U.S.-led bombing of Yugoslavia, [NATO aircraft deliberately bombed the RTS station in Belgrade](#). Sixteen civilians were killed in the attack that NATO and Pentagon spokesmen defended as an act of military necessity against "enemy propaganda." RTS

broadcasts may have been propaganda and Yugoslavia, technically, was NATO's enemy. But RTS was media and the people who worked — and died — for it were entitled to the Geneva Convention's protections from armed attack both as civilians and journalists. The bottom line, however, was that they broadcast things which the U.S. military couldn't control and didn't like. Images of civilians killed or injured by NATO bombings. The same sort of images Al Jazeera was showing out of Fallujah. The only difference is that in those days, the Clinton administration didn't have a Secretary of Defence who went around saying, "We don't do Geneva Conventions here."

Contagious intolerance

Unfortunately for press freedom, intolerance towards the media is a malignant and contagious disease. One hostile act against journalists quickly begets another. Mr Bush's threat against Al Jazeera quickly led to Mr. Blair's ultimatum to the British media. Slobodan Milosevic did not go after CNN or the BBC, whose NATO correspondent during the war went on to become NATO spokesman after it ended. But had the Yugoslav leader done so and cited a dislike for their "enemy propaganda" as justification, how different would he have been from NATO? Similarly, threatening Al Jazeera makes the terrain in Iraq and elsewhere more dangerous for all journalists because it tells Al Qaeda and their allies that journalists are fair game, that it is okay to kidnap or kill foreign reporters.

The slippery slope doesn't end there. President Bush's dislike of Al Jazeera is only an extreme manifestation of the antipathy governments around the world feel towards media coverage that they cannot suppress, spin or control. In the aftermath of 9/11 — and the extraordinary perversion of democratic norms this has led to in almost all established democracies — this intolerance is being kitted out with legal and even military teeth. Britain's new anti-terror proposals and Australia's draft anti-terrorism legislation and proposed extensions to the sedition law, for example, both aim to regulate what journalists can and cannot report on pain of imprisonment. Under India's Prevention of Terrorism Act — repealed under public pressure last year — the definition of "providing support" to a designated terrorist organisation was left so vague as to encompass even news reports or opinion pieces.

Moreover, as the recent British gag order shows, governments are quite capable of dredging up old, anachronistic laws like the OSA to control the dissemination of information when they find their backs truly up against the wall and when anti-terrorism laws are of no help. Section 5 of the OSA — making it illegal for an unauthorised individual to be in possession of official documents — has rarely been used in Britain and never against journalists. Sometimes, governments don't even need a 'compelling' reason to act against the media other than the very existence of laws that can be invoked. In India, the OSA was used by the erstwhile Vajpayee government in 2002 to <http://svaradarajan.blogspot.com/2005/02/my-foreword-to-iftikhar-gilani-my.html> "imprison a senior Kashmiri journalist, Iftikhar Gilani", on the flimsiest of grounds in pursuit of a political vendetta against his father-in-law, the separatist politician Syed Ali Shah Geelani.

Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Jose Padilla, the White House torture memos and other dystopic products of the post 9/11 world testify to just how corrosive the war on terror has been for civil liberties and democratic values. We are some way away from the point of no return but if the media were also to fall victim, the prospects for collective recovery would be dim indeed.

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