

Media Disinfo: Viet Nam, Iraq, and “The Wires”

So much of this country’s future will be shaped by what the news wires tell us about the present

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It is a sad and dangerous development when supposedly objective news media yield to national pressure to slant the news in favor of the government.

This routinely happens in dictatorships at all times but it can happen in democracies as well, particularly in time of war. It was no surprise that, during the rape of Nanking, a correspondent for a Japanese daily paper wrote home giddily about a nauseating contest by two crazed officers to see which of them could be the first to behead a hundred Chinese prisoners! During the Second World War the Japanese press reflected government policy, and if the government was mad so was the press. Later, when Britain entered the war, a BBC broadcaster named George Orwell lied through his teeth to conceal the systematic bombing of German civilians by the RAF, and he wasn’t the only one.

Many American conservatives today believe “the liberal press” slants the news. (Liberals think the mainstream media, MSM, is conservative.) They single out *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* to illustrate this bias. Yet it is not these two influential dailies that shape the news as much as the wire services. It is wire service copy, particularly that of the Associated Press and Reuters, that accounts for so much non-local news in the world press, and to most readers their names stand for objectivity.

The reports of these wires not only feed newspapers around the world but also thousands of broadcast outlets. AP is said to serve some 5,000 radio and TV stations and around 1,700 newspapers, reaching more than one billion people daily. Reuters, now Thomson Reuters, operates out of 200 cities in 94 countries, and competes strongly with AP. Much of what humanity sees and hears is prepared by wire service correspondents whose names are almost never household words and who, presumably, learned somewhere how to write an accurate, objective account of a news event. The role of the wire services takes on increasing importance, too, as financially strapped newspapers downsize house staff and purchase more wire copy.

Wire services influence public opinion not only by what they report but also about what they choose not to report. If a wire service knew of a major scandal, say, in Washington, and did not reveal it, the corruption could do much damage. Needed reforms would never be pressed. So it was disappointing to me to read what Pulitzer Prize-winner Peter Arnett had to say in his autobiography “Live From The Battlefield”(Simon & Schuster) concerning the manner in which his employer, the AP, slanted the news during the Viet Nam war, even if it didn’t suppress it. That war, possibly, might have been ended earlier if the American public possessed all the facts. Countless American and Vietnamese lives might have been saved.

"We (reporters) were...forced to examine battlefield reverses in terms of American and South Vietnamese inadequacies, rather than the communists' competence," Arnett writes.

"There were no limitations on our reporting on the courage or the transgressions of the American soldier, and we could praise or ridicule the tactics of U.S. commanders as factors in the pursuit of victory, yet it was understood that while we could be negative about the enemy we would not dwell on his military virtues..."

Arnett adds, "It would still have been professional suicide for us in the AP to suggest that the Vietcong insurgents and Hanoi's regular forces were generally superbly trained and well motivated and seemed to believe in their revolutionary cause. We were dissuaded by our editors from suggesting that the Vietnam conflict contained significant elements of a civil war, even though every Vietnamese knew the truth of that description."

And the result of not telling the full story? Arnett puts it well:

"I understood the confusion of the American public over the course of the war. Their government was telling them that the communists were on the ropes and their boys would soon be coming home. Then came Tet. I was surprised myself by the vast scale of the offensive but not by its tenacity and boldness. The skill, perseverance and rise of the Vietcong insurgents under the most difficult conditions was never properly acknowledged until the Tet Offensive, when their formidable capabilities could not be ignored."

Thus, it was only when the Tet Offensive penetrated the media curtain did the tragic mistake the U.S. made in entering Viet Nam become widely apparent. Tet was a victory for the enemy that could not be concealed or slanted by any jingoistic media. By and large, though, if the press had not been doing its job in Viet Nam it would not have been the target of successive administration attempts to muzzle it. As Arnett writes, "If we had been as irresponsible as our critics suggested during that span of 13 years, then surely it would be obvious in hindsight. We survived the many investigations by the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, all of which endeavored to manage Vietnam reporting by disparaging the press, and were not unwilling to use both the FBI and the CIA to achieve their ends." So the media had to be doing something right. But if AP had allowed its reporters to tell the whole truth earlier, fully and frankly, the casualties and devastation might have been less epic.

Are the wire services slanting the war news today? Because AP slanted coverage in 1965 does that mean it has followed a like policy in Iraq? Has it succumbed to Bush administration pressure to act as a propaganda arm of government? How critical were the wire services of the Bush/Cheney/Rice/Powell lies about Iraq's WMD that led up to the war? How much space did they give to anti-war critics? Walter Brasch, a professor of journalism at Bloomsburg University, Pa., said the AP "could have been stronger in questioning the (Bush) government" but he points out that "almost NO paper was questioning, including (N.Y.) *Times* and (Washington) *Post*."

Brasch added, "The problem is that AP tends to be so lacking of freshness and insight, it writes for the masses and tries to go down the middle. By doing so, it also doesn't offend anyone." He criticized "a culture among reporters that THEY don't question. Too much of 'he said/she said' world. Too much observing but not understanding." Going "down the middle," however, might well be construed as "writing it straight."

Depending on your viewpoint, AP can be a shill for, or a remorseless critic of, the U.S. government. Columnist Jules Crittenden, of the Boston *Herald*, asserts AP is an “anti-American news agency that seeks to undercut a wartime president and American soldiers in the field.” (Note: I have never heard anybody accuse the *Herald* of being a great newspaper.) On the other hand, the web site Minutemanmedia.org of Rowayton, Conn., reports, “A new study conducted at Sonoma State University shows widespread bias in AP news reports favoring U.S. government positions.” Peter Phillips, a sociologist at Sonoma State University, Calif., and director of “Project Censored,” says, “The American people absorb these biases (AP) and make political decisions on skewed understandings.” AP’s 3,700 employees in some 240 news bureaus are churning out so much copy, one can probably make a selection of the reports and argue either as Crittenden or Phillips do. Crittenden’s claim seem patently preposterous but Phillips might be wide of the mark, too, depending on his evidence. Unquestionably, though, Arnett made a strong case against AP’s bias during the Viet Nam war.

Seventy years ago, Curtis MacDougal, the journalism dean of Northwestern University, published a textbook titled “Interpretive Reporting”(MacMillan) that posited it wasn’t enough for reporters to gather the facts; it was incumbent upon them to explain to readers what those facts meant. A lot of journalists attempt to do precisely this, and it’s not an easy trick to be both objective and interpretive, especially when news sources lie frequently.

The objectivity of wire services merits careful scrutiny as so much of this country’s future, as sociologist Phillips points out, will be shaped by what “the wires” tell us about the present. Surely, a wire service’s first allegiance must be to the truth, not the nation-state. These days, it should be noted, multinationals routinely operate in their own interests even when it involves trashing their country of origin. They move offshore to avoid taxes; they transfer jobs to foreign countries to take advantage of cheap labor, etc. Surely a wire service whose primary obligation is to the truth can also transcend any nationalistic allegiance when it gathers and reports the news.

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