

Propaganda and Haditha

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In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.

- Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister during World War II

Propaganda is when the Western corporate media tries to influence public opinion in favor of the Iraq War by consistently tampering with truth and distorting reality. It is to be expected. And it is to be recognized for what it is. On occasions when the media does its job responsibly and reports events like the November 19, 2005, Haditha Massacre, it must also be willing and able to anticipate and counter propaganda campaigns that will inevitably follow. It is to be expected that the responsible members of the media fraternity will stick to their guns and not join the propagandists.

This piece is a summary of five most commonly deployed crisis management propaganda tactics which the State and Media combine that we can expect to see in relation to the Haditha Massacre. Listed in a loose chronological order of their deployment, the tactics are: Delay, Distract, Discredit, Spotlight and Scapegoat. Each of the five public relations campaigns will here be discussed in the context of the Haditha Massacre.

Delay

Al-Jazeera channel, with over 40 million viewers in the Arab world, is the largest broadcaster of news in the Middle East. It has been bearing the brunt of an ongoing violent US propaganda campaign. Their station headquarters in both Afghanistan and Baghdad were destroyed by US forces during the US invasions of both countries. In Baghdad, the attack on their office by a US warplane killed their correspondent Tareq Ayoub. Additionally, al-Jazeera reporters throughout Iraq have been systematically detained and intimidated before the broadcaster was banned outright from the country. These are somewhat contradictory actions for an occupying force ostensibly attempting to promote democracy and freedom in Iraq.

On November 19, 2005, the day of the Haditha Massacre, al-Jazeera had long since been banned from operating in Iraq. The station forced to conduct its war reporting from a desk in Doha, Qatar, was doing so via telephone. Two Iraqis worked diligently to cover the US occupation of Iraq through a loose network of contacts within Iraq. Defying the US-imposed extreme challenges, al-Jazeera, by dint of its responsible reporting, had the entire Haditha scoop as soon as it occurred, which they shared with Western and other media outlets, while the latter were content to participate in delaying the story nearly four months by

regurgitating unverified military releases.

Two days after the massacre, DahrJamailIraq.com was the only free place on the Internet that carried [al-Jazeera's report](#) translated into English (it could be viewed at MidEastWire.com for a fee).

The anchorperson for al-Jazeera in Doha, Qatar, interviewed journalist Walid Khalid in Baghdad. Khalid's report, translated by MidEastWire.com, was as follows:

Yesterday evening, an explosive charge went off under a US Marines vehicle in the al-Subhani area, destroying it completely. Half an hour later, the US reaction was violent. US aircraft bombarded four houses near the scene of the incident, causing the immediate death of five Iraqis. Afterward, the US troops stormed three adjacent houses where three families were living near the scene of the explosion. Medical sources and eyewitnesses close to these families affirmed that the US troops, along with the Iraqi Army, executed 21 persons; that is, three families, including nine children and boys, seven women, and three elderly people.

Contrast this to the reportage of the slaughter by the New York Times, the "newspaper of note" in the United States. Unquestioningly parroting the military press release, their story of November 21, 2005, read: "The Marine Corps said Sunday that 15 Iraqi civilians and a Marine were killed Saturday when a roadside bomb exploded in Haditha, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad. The bombing on Saturday in Haditha, on the Euphrates in the Sunni-dominated province of Anbar, was aimed at a convoy of American Marines and Iraqi Army soldiers, said Capt. Jeffrey S. Pool, a Marine spokesman. After the explosion, gunmen opened fire on the convoy. At least eight insurgents were killed in the firefight, the captain said."

The organization Iraq Body Count (IBC) immediately endorsed this, clearly demonstrating how its tally of Iraqi civilian deaths due to the war is way below the actual numbers. Exclusively referencing samples from the Western media that willingly embrace the official propaganda, IBC can hardly constitute an unbiased or truthful source of information.

In April 2006, their database of media sources cited an AP story and a Reuters story from November 20, 2005, along with a March 21, 2006, London Times article. This is how IBC distilled the stories; "Haditha - fighting between US Marines and insurgents-gunfire" and the number of civilians killed was recorded as 15. It is difficult to understand why IBC has once again opted to cite US fabrications mindlessly repeated by the Western media rather than take into account the readily available English translation of al-Jazeera's Haditha report.

On June 6, 2006, the Haditha Massacre is recorded by IBC as "family members in their houses and students in a passing car" and the declared number of victims is 24. One cannot help wonder how many uncorrected, unverified and unchallenged pieces of US military propaganda lurk in IBC's database. Haditha could be just the tip of the iceberg.

It wasn't until four months after the event that the Western corporate media started to straighten out the story. On March 19, 2006, it was Time Magazine that "broke" the Haditha story in a piece titled "Collateral Damage or Civilian Massacre in Haditha." The primary sources for this piece were a video shot by an Iraqi journalism student produced the day after the massacre and interviews conducted with witnesses. Another glaring evidence of

how a few simple interviews with Iraqis and some readily available photographs and video can drastically correct the glaring errors in the Western media's representations of the occupation.

It is significant that this "exclusive" story came from the same publication that graced its cover with George W. Bush as the 2004 Person of the Year for "reframing reality to match his design." That brazen advertisement for the most unpopular re-elected US president in history more than establishes the fact that the magazine has an agenda that has less to do with responsible journalism than it does with influencing public opinion. That Time set its clocks back four months in regard to Haditha, when evidence was readily available the day after the event, only supports the charge that it willingly participates in US state propaganda. Journalists should aggressively expose the truth that Time, like its acclaimed 2004 person of the year, also reframes reality to match its design. If journalists do not look at Time's story with a skeptical eye as an exercise in PR before jumping on the Haditha bandwagon, they too risk shortchanging the public's trust with a meaningless opportunity to participate in a PR crisis anagement campaign.

But the Haditha Massacre is far from being the only story that the Western corporate media has delayed covering. On May 4, 2004, journalist Dahr Jamail, one of the authors of this piece, wrote "Telltale Signs of Torture Lead Family to Demand Answers." The story, published by the [NewStandard](#), was about a 57-year-old Iraqi named Sadiq Zoman, who was detained at his residence in Kirkuk on July 21, 2003, when US troops raided the Zoman family home in search of weapons and, apparently, to arrest Zoman. Over a month later, on August 23, soldiers dropped Zoman off, comatose, at the main hospital in Tikrit. [His body bore telltale signs of torture](#): point burns on his skin, bludgeon marks on the back of his head, a badly broken thumb, electrical burns on the soles of his feet and genitals and whip marks across his back.

Jamail originally wrote the story in January 2004 and shared the information with over 100 newspapers in the US for them to report on. The story was conveniently ignored by the US corporate media until it was forced to run other torture photos from Abu Ghraib after journalist Seymour Hersh threatened to scoop 60 Minutes II by running his piece about torture in the New Yorker, in late April 2004.

Another example of this delayed "reporting" involved the report on the use of white phosphorous by the US military against civilians in Fallujah during the November 2004 assault on the city. Jamail [originally reported](#) a story titled "Unusual Weapons Used in Fallujah" with Inter Press Service. US corporate media ignored [the story](#) until the Independent in the UK ran his reporting about the atrocity. Even after this, aside from a few token editorials that mentioned this war crime, most major news outlets continued in their silence. This despite the fact that the Pentagon admitted to the use of these weapons, and residents of Fallujah like Abu Sabah had long since told a reporter, "They used these weird bombs that put up smoke like a mushroom cloud, then small pieces fall from the air with long tails of soke behind them." He also described pieces of these bombs that exploded into large fires that burnt the skin when water was thrown on the burns.

There are countless other stories which the US corporate media has deliberately delayed from their reportage and which may never reach the wide US audience that they deserve. It is necessary to ask, when will the corporate media report on stories such as the following:

November 19, 2004: “As [US Forces Raided](#) a Mosque,” Inter Press Service (At least four worshippers are killed and 20 wounded during Friday prayers when US and Iraqi forces raided Abu Hanifa Mosque in Baghdad.)

April 19, 2004: “US Troops Raid Abu Hanifa Mosque, Destroy Fallujah Relief Goods,” The NewStandard News (Tanks and Humvees are used to [crash through the gates](#) of a mosque in the middle of the night. Foodstuffs stockpiled for Fallujah relief are destroyed, worshippers are terrorized, shots fired, copies of the Holy Qu’ran are desecrated.)

December 13, 2004: “US Military Obstructing Medical Care,” Inter Press Service (US military [prevented delivery of medical care](#) in several instances and regularly raided hospitals in Iraq.)

April 23, 2004: “Fallujah Residents Report US Forces Engaged in Collective Punishment,” The NewStandard News (Despite what Marines called a “ceasefire” in Fallujah, refugees trapped outside and Fallujans still under siege [continued to face measures of collective punishment.](#))

January 3, 2004: “US [Military Terrorism](#) and Collective Punishment in Iraq” ([Mortars fired](#) at a farmer’s home and land in al-Dora, near Baghdad. As Jamail wrote in the aforementioned web log at that time, residents reported, “We don’t know why they bomb our house and our fields. We have never resisted the Americans. There are foreign fighters who have passed through here, and I think this is who they want. But why are they bombing us?” When the farmer was asked what happened when he requested that US military remove the unexploded mortar rounds, he said, “We asked them the first time and they said ‘OK, we’ll come take care of it.’ But they never came. We asked them the second time and they told us they would not remove them until we gave them a resistance fighter. They told us, ‘If yo won’t give us a resistance fighter, we are not coming to remove the bombs.’” He held his hands in the air and said, “But we don’t know any resistance fighters!”)

November 18, 2004: “Media Repression in ‘Liberated’ Land,” Inter Press Service ([Journalists increasingly detained and threatened](#) by the US-installed interim government in Iraq. Media were stopped particularly from covering recent horrific events in Fallujah. The “100 Orders” penned by former US administrator in Iraq L. Paul Bremer included Order 65, passed March 20, 2004, to establish an Iraqi communications and media commission. This commission has powers to control the media because it has complete control over licensing and regulating telecommunications, broadcasting, information services and all other media establishments. Within days of the “handover” of power to an interim Iraqi government in June 2004, the Baghdad office of al-Jazeera was raided and closed by security forces from the interim government. The network was banned initially for one month from reorting out of Iraq, subsequently extended to “indefinitely.” The media commission ordered all news organizations to “stick to the government line on the US-led offensive in Fallujah or face legal action.”)

February 14, 2005: “Media Held Guilty of Deception,” Inter Press Service (A people’s tribunal [held much of Western media guilty](#) of inciting violence and deceiving people in its reporting of Iraq. The panel of judges in the Rome meeting of the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI), an international people’s initiative seeking to unearth the truth about the war and occupation in Iraq, accused the United States and the British governments of impeding journalists in performing their task, and intentionally producing lies and misinformation.)

Once a damaging, and most likely delayed, story hits the Western corporate media consciousness, concurrent stories may be released that distract the audience or dilute the potency of the main story. The handling of the Haditha story by corporate Western media is being managed similarly.

For example, on June 1, 2006, the BBC released a story detailing an alleged “massacre” at Ishaqi on March 15, 2006. Dahr Jamail had [reported on the incident](#) and had [photographs posted](#) nearly two months before. [The BBC’s story was suspicious](#): not only was it delayed by two and a half months, but its timing was concurrent with a peak in media interest in the Haditha Massacre scandal. Meanwhile, the BBC’s version of the Ishaqi story itself, while tragic, didn’t seem to be much of a scandal at all. It was not surprising that the day after the BBC story “broke,” ABC published a story entitled, “US Military Denies New Abuse Allegation at Ishaqi” reporting that the US Military had conducted an investigation and found that there was no basis for claims of a massacre at Ishaqi. The idea that the BBC could “break” a story and the military could respond, investigate and have a press release about it in time for ABC to report findings of innocence the next day is unbelievable if not outright ridiculous. This series of media events served primarily to distract people from the Haditha story and sow seeds of doubt in their minds about the Haditha Massacre. One would expect savvy journalists to recognize the set-up from a mile away.

On June 5, 2006, the New York Times provides us with two additional distractions – one involving paid Internet advertising and the other the front page of the paper.

If one did a Google search on “Haditha” on June 5th, one was presented with a story entitled “Disbelief Over Haditha”: via Google’s AdSense. The story is essentially a patriotic piece comprised of interviews with military individuals at Camp Pendelton on Memorial Day where the interviewees were granted a national audience in the Times and an opportunity to shower sympathy on the soldiers involved in the massacre and cast doubt on the event itself. The fact that the NYT is paying for this story to appear every time one types in “Haditha” in Google, and that this story unarguably serves to create doubts about the events that occurred in Haditha, is clearly a distraction from the horrendous fact of the massacre itself. A question to ask: why isn’t the New York Times paying to promote a neutral piece about the Haditha Massacre rather than for a piece promoting blatant and exclusive American patriotism and denial?

But on this same day, the New York Times goes further in obfuscating the Haditha Massacre with distraction and doubt by swallowing whole a media event sponsored by the US military. Two reporters were flown by the US government to an excavated mass grave site in a military helicopter. The mass grave site was ostensibly created when Saddam Hussein’s secret police murdered people connected with the Shiite uprising in 1991. Coincidentally, the number of people found in this site is 28, nearly the same number allegedly killed in the Haditha Massacre. The reason that the US flew the reporters to the site is clear; this story of a similar massacre at Saddam Hussein’s hands distracts the public from the Haditha Massacre with the faulty logic of, “Well, if he did it ...” The New York Times did not feel the need to delay the story and published “Uncovering Iraq’s Horrors in Desert Graves” on the front page merely two days after the journalists received a government tour of the site. After the kind of directed criticism of the role that the New York Times, via US state and military propagandists like Judith Miller and Thomas Friedman, has played in orchestrating Iraq War propaganda, one would imagine that reputable journalists would know better than to accept a US-sponsored media outing in Iraq. Reputable journalists should additionally wonder why the New York Times continues to accept this type of

propaganda as news, while ignoring events such as the ones where the people of Fallujah dug mass graves to bury the thousands killed during the US assault of the city in November 2004.

But the mother of all distractions came on June 8, 2006, in the media spasm over the alleged killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. We can be certain of this week's front page news. The ridiculous thing is that Zarqawi himself is perhaps more a US propaganda and media fabrication more than a real threat to the Iraqi people, let alone the security of the US. The story of Zarqawi served to simplify and put an al-Qaeda face on what is really a much more complicated situation regarding the resistance and rising sectarian tensions in Iraq. Now with Zarqawi's alleged death reported by the US Government, the media is swallowing the state's version of this story whole, despite all the fraud that we've seen in past US propaganda stunts, such as the Jessica Lynch "rescue," the Pat Tillman fabrication, the pulling down of Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square in Baghdad, and even the capture of Hussein himself. Will the death of Zarqawi slow the violent resistance in Iraq? No. Will the death of Zarqawi bring improvement in the electricity, water and medical infrastructure in Iraq? No. Will the death of Zarqawi bring stability and security to the Iraqi people? No. But is the death of Zarqawi a perfect distraction from the Haditha Massacre, total failure of the US occupation of Iraq, and the ongoing US military assault on the city of Ramadi? Absolutely. And his death conveniently distracts the corporate media from reporting that while the Prime Minister of Iraq appointed most of his cabinet last weekend, the position of Vice President Abel Abdul Mahdi, which had been set over a month ago, was the re-appointment of one of the most aggressive supporters of the economic agenda of the Bush administration in Iraq. An agenda which includes the implementation of corporate globalization of Iraq's laws and far, far greater US corporate control of Iraq's oil supply.

Discredit

Perhaps the most interesting propaganda campaign we have seen in connection with the Haditha Massacre was a massive and well-coordinated effort on the part of FOX news and the right wing bloggers to discredit any allegations of war crimes simultaneously running down the entire "left wing" Internet. This campaign came in the form of fraudulent video testimony from Jesse MacBeth. In this video "testimony" Jesse MacBeth claims to have been a soldier in Iraq and to have committed a variety of horrendous war crimes. The video barely made a stir on the web since people questioned its validity within hours of its release. Yet, on May 24, 2006, mere days after the video's first appearance on the web, FOX news [spun fabrications about the video](#) calling it an "anti-war video" and claiming "that thing posted on the Internet [was] the #2 most clicked-on blog on the Internet in the last few weeks." #2 most clicked-on blog? One should question where FOX news had been able to obtain data on the most popular blogs - unless Dick Cheney's news favorite is even closer with the NSA than some might suspect. The data comparing traffic to various web sites certainly is not available to FOX to make such a claim. But the claim was false anyway. Jesse MacBeth never had a blog. The video was posted on a small, low bandwidth web site that could never have handled anywhere near the kind of traffic required for the #2 blog. In fact, three days before FOX's show, the web site publicly registered just over 1,500 hits - total - and the video wasn't available because the site couldn't meet even that meager demand. At 5 pm pst, two days before FOX's wild promotion of the MacBeth video, a Google search on Jessie MacBeth revealed only two obscure references to the video at all. The video was in fact downright difficult to find anywhere on the web that day, let alone! the "last few weeks" before FOX's broadcast. FOX's deceptive promotion of this video and concurrent discrediting

was deliberate propaganda to pre-empt any future or existing claims of war crimes, such as the Haditha Massacre, as well as an attempt to dismiss the entire left wing blogosphere and the “anti-war” movement. By far the greatest promoters of the MacBeth video were FOX news and the right-wing bloggers.

Spotlight

When an issue becomes too large and too damaging to control effectively, savvy PR professionals work to focus the public’s attention on a single topic within the larger issue. The public thereby loses its view of the forest – the more damaging and larger issue – for the single tree of a selective topic or event related to the issue. This single topic needs to be controversial enough to capture a large audience, but sufficiently containable so that the particulars remain debatable and do not spiral out of control. We have seen this pattern of PR repeated over and over in the war. Examples include endless debates about the 500 prisoners illegally held in Guantanamo Bay, when the reality of the larger issue involves over 14,000 Iraqis detained without trial in both disclosed and undisclosed Iraqi prisons, as well as countless people held in secret US detention chambers in Eastern Europe. Another instance is the torture “scandal” at Abu Ghraib, where public attention was focused on sexual humiliation and inane debates over the uses of dogs or water-boarding, when in fact there exists documentation of torture much more violent, systematic and widespread at US hands.

The Haditha Massacre is becoming the Spotlight event in the much broader and more volatile issue of US War crimes in Iraq. Haditha is by no stretch of the imagination an isolated incident. Journalists should work to broaden the reporting of Haditha to include a discussion of the much broader issue of International Law and War Crimes. This is, after all, a war where US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales described the Geneva conventions as “quaint,” chemical weapons were used on a civilian population in Fallujah, violent torture continues at the hands of the US or its proxies, arbitrary detentions of Iraqis continue in violation of international law, hospitals have been intentionally destroyed and occupied, cluster bombs and flechettes have been deployed on dense civilian habitations, civilians are being killed daily, and journalists have been intentionally targeted by US troops. If we lose the forest for the trees on the issue of the Haditha Massacre, we risk participation in US propaganda.

Scapegoat

Parallels are being drawn between what happened in Haditha on November 19, 2005, and the 1968 massacre in My Lai during the Vietnam War, in which US forces ruthlessly slaughtered 500 unarmed women, men and children in a small village. The most direct parallels will probably involve what happens legally to those chosen by the internal military investigation to take the blame for the event in Haditha. In the case of My Lai, a lengthy internal investigation was launched, and followed by a court-martial. Despite the massively brutal nature of the massacre, the cover-up, and the many people involved, in the end, one man, Lt. William Calley, spent roughly 3 years under house arrest.

As we see the media spotlight on the Haditha Massacre, we can expect to see damage control measures through inventing scapegoats as was done in My Lai and Abu Ghraib. As in the Abu Ghraib torture media blitz, the military will not concern itself with loyalty for the troops that put their lives on the line daily. The military will readily sacrifice its Charles Graners and Sabrina Harmans while its superiors dodge and evade responsibility and the

incident is made to look isolated. Haditha will be erroneously presented as the crime of a few “bad apples.” With the massive cover-up by military superiors, countless other war crimes occurring in Iraq, and a US media landscape that has assisted in the cover-up, journalists need to do more than produce propaganda of the various trials and legal minutiae of the scapegoats identified to pay for the Haditha massacre. There are much bigger stories that await telling if the offered PR bait can be rejected.

Conclusion: Is the US Corporate Media Complicit in War Crimes?

According to principles set during the Nuremburg Trials and the UNESCO Charter, the primary responsibility of journalists during a time of war is not to incite the public to violence. In the case of the Haditha Massacre cover-up, we need to ask: Is the US Corporate Media complicit in the cover-up of this War Crime? By helping to cover up countless events like the Haditha Massacre, is the US Corporate Media inciting the public to violence by distorting the truth about the war in Iraq?

Already, stories from the US Media and “journalists” like Judith Miller who promoted the war with fabrications have failed the test of journalistic responsibility set by the Nuremburg Trials and the UNESCO Charter. But the US corporate media seems extremely resistant to responsible reform. How can the New York Times be satisfied publishing an unverified official account of what happened in Haditha presented by a military that has been caught in countless lies, such as the Pat Tillman fabrication and the invented Jessica Lynch “rescue?” Is the US corporate media prepared to challenge these government propaganda deceptions? Or are they going to remain engaged in aiding and abetting the war crimes of the US military and its commander in chief?

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