

Media coverage of the war

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Mass Me
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David Kirkham is a war hero. This Canadian didn't brave enemy fire to rescue a fallen comrade, and he didn't shoot down an enemy missile. His courage was the sort that doesn't usually get public recognition.

Kirkham was a news reporter at CBC Radio in Edmonton, Alberta during the Gulf war. Over the national news one day came an item from a CBC reporter in the Persian Gulf. The journalist -- with unabashed enthusiasm -- described as "brilliant" a tactical maneuver by U.S. ground forces.

The Edmonton reporter thought the term 'brilliant' had more to do with boosterism and less to do with journalism, and so he fired off an e-mail to his bosses in Toronto. Senior news management was furious. The incident pretty well put the brakes on Kirkham's journalism career at the CBC. It also hurt morale of the newsroom since David Kirkham was a respected man.

I tell you this little story to illustrate there are "wars within wars", and media coverage is one of those wars. Other journalists have stepped on political landmines. They too have discovered that freedom-of-speech can be a figure of speech.

Two newspaper columnists in the U.S. were severely reprimanded after they wrote articles critical of George Bush. They said their President was running scared because of the attacks on New York and Washington. The penalty for these two journalists was an 'economic execution'. They were fired. And more than journalists are feeling the heat of not 'playing the game'.

U.S. film-director Michael Moore, usually in high demand by the major TV talk shows in the U.S., is not very popular with the American networks these days. Moore figures it's because the U.S. media -- which he describes as embarrassing and pathetic -- is "singing with the chorus", and he's not.

What Moore has to say about U.S. foreign policy upsets North Americans, especially those in Washington. He says terrorism funded and supported by the U.S. has orphaned thousands of children around the world ... and no one should be too surprised these children grow up to be a "little whacked in the head".

Former CBC producer Dennis Sherbanuk makes the observation there are two opinions about the war, but only one counts. Canadian Professors Sunera Thobani of the University of British Columbia and Shyamal Bagchee of the University of Alberta have been accused of being "insensitive" for saying U.S. foreign policy is "soaked in blood".

Truth is not always sensitive.

A former Nicaraguan Consul-General to Canada says the news media to North America should report on the roots of terrorism instead of contributing to a "war frenzy". Pastor Valle-Garay says "educated, intelligent and well-to-do individuals simply don't just get up one morning and decide to destroy America's democratic institutions for the hell of it."

Valle-Garay knows all about the damage of terrorism. His Sandinista administration battled terrorism in the 1980's at a cost of 30,000 lives. The Contra rebels -- equipped and financed by the United States -- randomly attacked and murdered civilians and aid-workers in Nicaragua. The International Court of Justice in the Hague ruled the U.S. violated international law and fined it 17-billion dollars US. That was about 10 years ago. Not a penny has been paid.

Valle-Garay says a 'witch-hunt' by the U.S. and its allies is wrong and heavy-handed -- "not unlike the tactics of the terrorists". George Kennan, former head of policy planning with the U.S. State Department, summed things up pretty well in 1948 when he said: "We have 50 per cent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 per cent of its population. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will allow us to maintain this position ..."

The U.S. has attempted or succeeded in carrying out dozens of assassinations of foreign individuals. It has poked its nose in the internal affairs of many countries, has toppled democratically-elected governments and has carried out full-scaled invasions.

After the attacks on New York and Washington, an American man asked a reporter, "Why do they hate us?" Good question. That fellow should get out more, and the media could do a better job.

American media critic Noam Chomsky is critical of U.S. State Department evidence that Osama Bin Laden is behind the attacks on New York and Washington, describing the evidence as thin. He says he expected more, given the "most intensive international investigation in history".

Chomsky also says charges against the Taliban are virtually non-existent. And he says "if harbouring suspected terrorists is a crime that merits bombing, then much of the world -- including the U.S.-- should be instantly attacked."

Incidentally, Chomsky's comments are from an alternative news site (www.rabble.ca) -- not the mainstream media. Should journalists describe the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan as the "war on terrorism", like Washington says ... or the "war on Afghanistan"? No matter where they're living or where they work, real reporters should be neutral and avoid using government buzz-words ... unless of course they're bucking for a military public relations job ... or planning to take part in the next overseas all-expenses-paid military junket. The military and the government love those junkets because the news reports are usually nothing but free commercials for them.

The Australian journalist John Pilger maintains there is no "war on terrorism". "If there was", he writes in the British paper *The Mirror*, "the Royal Marines and the SAS would be storming the beaches of Florida, where more CIA-funded terrorists, ex-Latin American dictators and torturers, are given refuge than anywhere on earth."

"The hypocrisy does not stop there," Pilger continues. "When the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, Washington said nothing. Why? Because Taliban leaders were soon on their way to Houston, Texas, to be entertained by executives of the oil company, Unocal. With secret U.S. government approval, the company offered them a generous cut of the profits of the oil and gas pumped through a pipeline that the Americans wanted to build from Soviet central Asia through Afghanistan."

It is no easy job being a reporter, especially in a country that is sending soldiers to support the attack on Afghanistan and where most people support the war. It's tough being neutral because everyone wants you on their side, especially the locals. I broadcast news at one of the private radio stations in Edmonton. It's one of the top stations in Western Canada and we have a fairly large audience. I also write and edit my news, and that's important. Here are some things I do to help my listeners better understand the issues:

In my copy, what remains of the World Trade Center is not "ground zero" but debris or rubble. There are no 'terrorist' attacks, just 'attacks'. I agree with management at Reuters which recently issued the following memo, "our policy is to try to avoid the use of emotional terms and not make value judgments concerning the facts we attempt to report accurately and fairly."

Canadian news editors often use voice reports from U.S. journalists, some of them based in Washington. If these journalists indicate at the end of their dispatch they're reporting from the Pentagon, I tell my listeners that right off the top. ("Joe Blow reports from the Pentagon > ..."). This way the listeners can better evaluate what they're getting. In my copy it's not the 'war on terrorism', but the attack on Afghanistan.

Sometimes our wire copy describes Osama Bin Laden as a 'terrorist', but since the man has not been convicted I leave that out. A conviction by the U.S. State Department doesn't cut it with me. 'Suspected-terrorist' or 'suspected-mastermind of the attacks on New York and Washington', is acceptable however.

As for wire stories about U.S. missiles accidentally hitting an Afghan village or a U.N. food depot in Kabul, I remove the word 'accidentally'. Listeners can decide for themselves if the attacks were an accident.

I also include news from the many alternative online sites and from news organisations that are not American or British. News agencies in Pakistan have been remarkably fair and their stories are insightful. Because of this I have been able to include more points of view from others, including the Taliban.

Included as well in the casts are comments from people who are critical of U.S. foreign policy, comments from peace groups, and of course comments from those in favour of war. As Dennis Sherbanuk puts it, "people have the RIGHT to be given the facts. They don't need cheerleading journalism."

Former journalist David Kirkham, now with a health-care union, would agree.