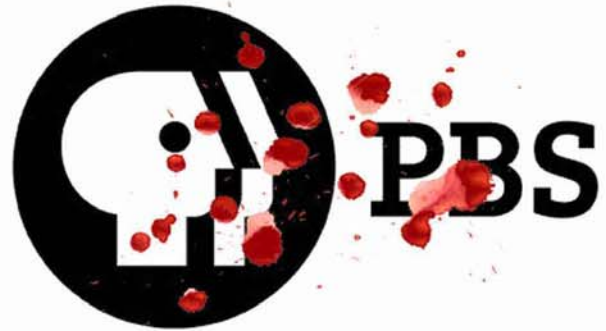




Media Watch

A litany of lies and omissions



By Scott Sanders

themediastucturefailed@yahoo.com

Why did *Buying the War*, the 2007 documentary by Bill Moyers about journalism's failures in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, omit virtually all criticism of PBS? Why didn't U.S. public television broadcast something like it five years ago? Is it simply the nature of "old media?" Won't the Internet fix everything anyway? Do we really need public broadcasting in the 21st century?

Broadcasting will soon lose its dominance over the Internet as our primary media conduit, after which it will fade as a transmission method. But after the last broadcast of the Star Spangled Banner, test pattern, and the static that will then follow, after the last decrepit broadcast receiver is turned off for the last time, we will continue to require portals to a neutral Internet to access an expansive, commerce-free, public media commons. Regardless of technology, citizens in a democracy require places where they can access diverse cultures and live events and, in the process, become educated, entertained, and engaged; a place where they can be assisted in finding a full range of resources and ways to take action aimed at solving community problems in the real world.

In Al Gore's new book *Assault on Reason*, the gist of his appraisal is succinct, regardless of your predilection towards him: "We Americans must resolve to repair the systemic decay of the public forum" and ensure that we all are "well and fully connected" to an open, neutral and robust public Internet forum.

And there's this warning by media lecturer Graham Murdock of Loughborough University, UK: "It's now possible only to look at those things that you know you will already like, and only to have contact with those people you know you will already agree with. So that you have a radically segmented polity emerging. That I think is incredibly dangerous. So, we need to rebuild a common space.... Public broadcasting I think has been historically one of those places where that has happened. But it needs to be addressed again in the light of what's happening now on the Internet."

The commercial enclosure and corrosion of the public commons started well before George W. Bush. What has followed merely throws the problem into far higher relief. Towards a solution of the problem of the public media commons, let's start with the March 2007 C-SPAN interview of PBS president and CEO Paula Kerger. Kerger is an affable endowment builder who perpetuates a dangerous myth: that public broadcasting in the U.S. is public.

- False assumption #1: Corporate money doesn't talk. In the interview, Kerger stated, "(PBS) Corporate underwriting is about, I would say, it's about 25 percent of the revenue that comes in." She went on to state that corporations do not affect PBS program content because of a "firewall."
- False assumption #2: The public broadcasting system knows best what the community needs. Kerger also claimed that she understands the importance of the programming "needs...communities have."

Community programming needs? I helped organize meetings between programmers at Chicago public TV outlet WTTW and area anti-war community groups and citizens in the months before the invasion of Iraq. Together, we pleaded for airings of live town hall broadcasts and independent documentaries to enable the gen-

eral public to more knowledgeably discuss the Iraq issue. Such forums, if replicated elsewhere, could have slowed the drumbeat to war. But the Chicago public TV station (which then had former Fox executives in the three top news posts) informed us that our suggested forums “just didn’t seem feasible.... We’re sorry. It’s not going to work out for us. There are new ‘budget counts,’ and there is a freeze on new programming.”

Similarly turgid dramas played out at other media outlets, “public” and private, across the U.S. We desperately needed public broadcasters to set an example for mainstream media, but both failed us miserably. Public broadcasters arguably led the way in the mass media’s assault on the public interest during the run-up to war.

“We Don’t Do News or Public Affairs Here”

I researched public TV’s programming in the run up to war, working my way down the U.S. Census Department’s 2005 list of Metropolitan Statistical Areas. The results are from the first eight primary public TV station services responding. Each was asked if, on the topic of Iraq, during the period June 2002 through March 2003, they had aired:

- (1) Live town halls
- (2) Live call-ins
- (3) Independent documentaries
- (4) Other specials

The documentaries sought for research included:

- *Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq* by award-winning John Pilger—“A profoundly unsettling programme” (*Financial Times*). Chris Award, Columbus Film & Video Festival
- *Hidden Wars of Desert Storm* (Brohy/Ungerma)—“Uncommonly sober, well-researched” (*NY Times*). Grand-prize, 2000 Cine Eco International Film Festival
- *In Shifting Sands* by former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter—excerpted briefly by “Frontline.”

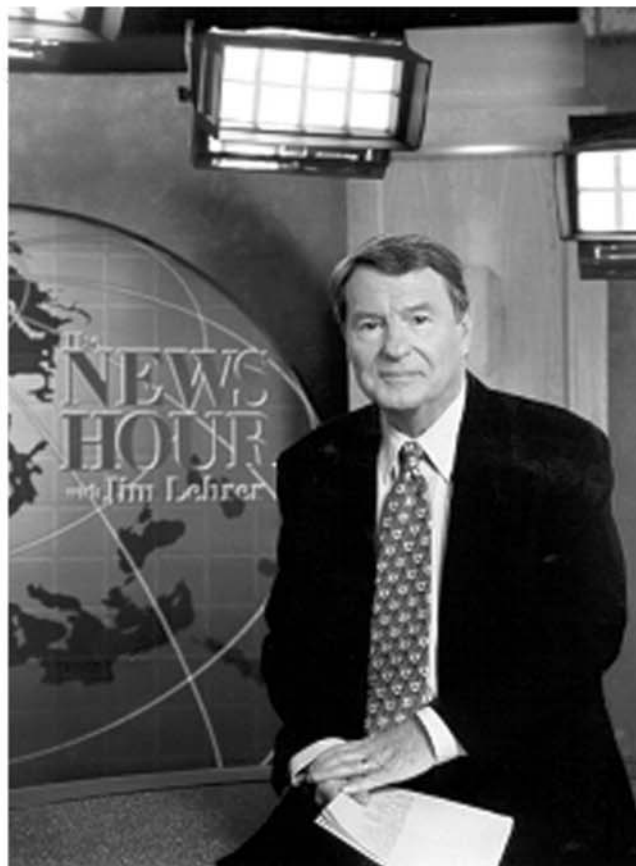
It was assumed that the stations’ local programming covered Iraq to some extent before the invasion; the purpose rather is to examine the system’s insularity. The stations queried included the most prestigious in the system—then station manager Paula Kerger’s WNET (New York), KCET (Los Angeles), KQED (San Francisco), KTCA (Twin Cities), WTVS (Detroit), WETA (Washington, DC), WHYY (Philadelphia), and KAET (Phoenix). Each answered no to the four questions, as did PBS, and WTTW (Chicago). Therefore, this pattern would very likely hold true for almost all of the stations upon a closer look. Pittsburgh’s WQED wasn’t interested in my questions, explaining to me, “We don’t do news or public affairs here.”

“The NewsHour” and “Frontline”

A study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), “In Iraq Crisis, Networks Are Megaphones for Official Views,” examined broadcast news coverage from 1/30/03 to 2/12/03. Of 393 on-camera sources appearing in nightly news stories about Iraq on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS’s “NewsHour,” only 3 were identified as anti-war. In a 2004 MSNBC interview, “NewsHour” anchor and editor Jim Lehrer explained, “We weren’t smart enough.” In a recent Australian Broadcasting Corporation interview, Lehrer strained credulity again, saying, “There weren’t...enough people who had answers who were reliable, believable, and credible.”

Is Lehrer talking about three-time Nobel nominee Kathy Kelly? Or Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, or Tariq Ali? Before the invasion, most Americans either opposed it or wanted to give the inspectors more time. So did many in Congress. Then came this interview’s clincher when Lehrer let slip a Bushism: “It’s hard work.” Media critic Norman Solomon noted in the film *War Made Easy: How Presidents & Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, “When it comes to life and death, the truth comes out too late.”

What follows is an incomplete litany of the willful lies and misleading and inaccurate claims and omissions in the seven “Frontline” episodes that mentioned Iraq in the run-up to its illegal invasion by the U.S. Each was broadcast and repeated throughout the U.S.



Gunning for Saddam (2001)

- Perhaps the worst public affairs documentary ever broadcast in the U.S. Of 27 sources, the only war skeptic was reporter Helen Thomas, who was given 15 seconds
- Eerroneously claimed there was a terrorist training camp featuring a Boeing 707 south of Baghdad
- It mentions the severely misquoted Hussein Kamel seven times and quotes him
- Iraqi National Congress (INC) founder, alleged spy for Iran, and bank fraudster Ahmad Chalabi is mentioned once and quoted three times, but is never questioned at all about any of the INC's claims
- The discredited Khidir Hamza is mentioned once and quoted seven times
- It misrepresents why inspectors were withdrawn in 1998
- The statements, "We know he's been developing weapons of mass destruction," made by G.W. Bush, and reference to "(Saddam's) nuclear program," go unchallenged
- Though evidence of an operational relationship between Al Qaeda and Iraq never existed, and the "Prague meeting" was always doubted, these claims were allowed and unquestioned
- An attempt to tie Iraq to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing is unchallenged. The specter of an Iraqi connection to the anthrax attacks in the U.S. is raised and top neocon Richard Perle says, "I rather doubt that it's Iraqi anthrax. But what the delivery of anthrax through the mail forces us to consider is a range of options available to Saddam Hussein that we didn't consider before. Saddam Hussein has biological weapons"
- Columbia University should reconsider the duPont Gold Baton it awarded "Frontline" for *Gunning for Saddam*. The baton is inscribed with Edward R. Murrow's famous observation about TV: "This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box."

"Inside the Terror Network" (2002)

- This show aired the discredited claim that 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta "traveled to Prague" (in 2001). Columbia University should reconsider the duPont "gold baton" awarded this "Frontline" episode also

"Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero" (2002)

- One of those interviewed weaves a brief, subtle story about 9/11, Saddam, violence, and regime change. Bonus propaganda points

"Campaign Against Terror" (2002)

- This covers the war in Afghanistan's first year. But early in the hour, Colin Powell says, "We can look at those (i.e., Iraq) as problems later on." Later on comes with the second and last mention of Iraq during the conclusion. The president's axis of evil speech is excerpted, then a learned reporter focuses us on Iraq and we end with Bush saying, "We now press on"

"Missile Wars" (2002)

- Adds more unnecessary fearmongering concerning Iraq

"The War Behind Closed Doors" (2003)

- Only 4 of 23 sources in this episode were skeptical of or opposed to an invasion of Iraq
- This episode misrepresents the inspections in the 1990s. Again
- It misrepresents the reason the inspectors were withdrawn in 1998. Again
- It minimizes the continual bombing campaign against Iraq. Again
- Only one source was a regular citizen—an audience member from the 1998 town hall meeting also shown in "The Long Road to War"
- "Well, no, I don't think anybody's manufactured reasons (to go to war)," said Michael Kirk, director of "The War Behind Closed Doors," on "Fox News: The Big Story With John Gibson" (2003)

After abundant countervailing evidence was in, the unaccountable makers and distributors of "Frontline" chose to repeat many lies of omission and commission on the eve of the illegal and immoral U.S. invasion. Again. The following persons, claims, and omissions in "The Long Road to War" were in virtually every case left to stand unchallenged as "reality" by other sources and by the deep-voiced, deliberate, and oh-so-serious "Frontline" narrator:

"The Long Road to War" (2003)

- The discredited INC-tied exile Khidir Hamza is mentioned and quoted
- Chalabi is quoted



- Hussein Kamel is misrepresented again and quoted five times, even after the February 2003 “revelation” that he had stated categorically to the UN inspectors in 1995 that, “All weapons—biological, chemical, missile, nuclear were destroyed”
- The regular U.S. bombing of Iraq between 1992 and 2003 was omitted, again
- The estimated half million child deaths in Iraq due to the U.S.-led sanctions was omitted, again
- The inspectors’ withdrawal in 1998 is misrepresented
- The narrator declares: “It was also clear that Saddam Hussein’s propaganda had actually had an impact inside the U.S.”
- It fails to mention that the U.S. facilitated Iraq’s acquisition of poison gas and biological warfare precursors, again. And so on

Judicious Studying

The “Frontline” website to date has made but one actual correction directly on the transcripts studied here—and that was made after the invasion. The sources used by “Frontline” in the three episodes that are primarily about Iraq overwhelmingly represent a bundle of four groups: current and former government officials, including military officials 48.3 percent, Iraqi exiles 9.3 percent, conservative think tanks 1.7 percent, and U.S. corporate news media 22 percent, for a total of 81.4 percent. The rest are split among the Iraqi government and Kurds, academics, book authors, citizens, and foreign journalists. The picture is bleak: pro-war sources versus sources opposing the attack worked out to 27-1, 6-1, and 10-1 in “Gunning for Saddam,” “The War Behind Closed Doors,” and “The Long Road to War,” respectively.

Even these statistics need to be qualified. Perhaps most tellingly, citizens demonstrating against the threatened 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq are 100 percent absent from all 7 episodes. Not a single person who speaks on Iraq in any of them is identified as a representative of an anti-war community group or any community group. A few moments from a 1998 public forum doubles as the only “town hall” on Iraq that PBS aired nationally during the ramp-up. The screen time for the “town hall”? About one minute.

The inescapable conclusion is that PBS’s “Frontline” repeatedly promoted, in a “fair and balanced,” repugnant, and anti-democratic manner, the lies and omissions that took Americans to war against Iraq, particularly examining the two central calumnies: Iraq’s alleged 9/11 ties and its alleged weapons of mass destruction. That Iraq did not attack the United States first and posed no serious threat to it wasn’t mentioned.

All things considered, the journalism in “Frontline” must be hard work, just like “NewsHour.” In fact, hard-

working “Frontline” filmmaker Michael Kirk participated in a post-broadcast online discussion at washingtonpost.com for each of his three pieces of work discussed here. From the 11/09/01 “Gunning for Saddam” online discussion:

- Michael Kirk: “That’s the very heart of the question.... The nature of the proof, conclusive evidence versus strong indications.... Conclusive proof or indications? Can we go it alone based on indications?”
- Pittsburgh, PA: “The Commander in Chief will be able to point to ‘Frontline’ when he wades in and say, ‘Look even ‘Frontline’ proved Saddam is implicated.’ The CIA, etc., didn’t have the evidence, but ‘Frontline’ got it. You will have a lot of blood on your hands if and as the war is globalized by the hawks.”

And from the 2/21/03 “The War Behind Closed Doors” online discussion:

- Helena, MT: “The program was absolutely frightening.”
- Tampa, FL: “Why did you make the PNAC (Project for a New American Century) look so warm and fuzzy? Their goal is world dominion, and it is a chilling prospect. I turned it off after 20 minutes. I felt it was a commercial for the neo-conservatives. Good use of public television, huh? You should be ashamed. You could have done a lot of good.”
- Michael Kirk: “Obviously, I disagree that we were doing a ‘commercial’ for anyone. Explaining the positions of people who have for more than 20 years been near the center of power in America is our obligation.”

The same point came up in the Australian Lehrer interview. Lehrer said, “In my opinion, the number one function of the media...is to watch the government and report back on what the government is doing.” And, Lehrer again, from the *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004: “The (G.W. Bush) aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.... That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”

PBS failed to stand up to the sort of brazen nonsense spouted by this anonymous Bush aide. PBS’s “judicious studying” of and catering to corporate and government power (not by coincidence also its two controlling funders) comes at the expense of the perspectives of the public, civic organizations, and the proper functioning of our democracy, our civil liberties, and world peace.

U.S. public TV broadcasters failed to adequately educate and engage citizens on a nation’s most important decision—whether or not to go to war. They encouraged the



Michael Kirk (l) and David Fanning (r)

for-profit media to beat its powerful war drums, and together both impelled the U.S. towards an insane march to a catastrophic attack based on lies. Iraq became “a tough story to challenge authoritatively,” as PBS ombudsperson Getler tried to put it, when the one television outlet charged by law to be that challenging, “noncommercial,” “alternative”—public TV—wasn’t any of those things.

And so came the “shock and awe” and the 654,965 excess deaths through the end of June 2006, as estimated in the “robust” and “best practice” *Lancet*/Johns Hopkins study, “Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey.” Not much has changed:

- FAIR’s study “Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent” covered six network nightly news programs, including “NewsHour,” during the first three weeks of the war, revealing that only 3 percent of all U.S. sources of 1,617 on-camera sources appearing in stories about Iraq expressed opposition to the war. “Not a single show in the study conducted a sit-down interview with a person identified as being against the war.”
- The FAIR study “Are You on the ‘NewsHour’s’ Guestlist?” found from October 2005 to March 2006 that progressive and liberal public interest groups provided a total of just 4 percent of “NewsHour” guests (93 out of 2,433). The pro-war source imbalance was “more than 10-to-1.” However, Lehrer remains executive editor and anchor of “NewsHour,” Kirk still creates “documentaries” for “Frontline,” and Fanning remains executive producer for the series.

Out Damned Spot?

In a 2007 interview, author Studs Terkel said about the invasion of Iraq, “it destroyed one thing—this notion that we are an exceptional people, that we can never do wrong.” Therefore, it is incumbent upon Americans to build a sufficient levee against further media catastrophe; we have little choice. In addition to attending to other important media reform and media justice issues, we must make public media a 100 percent commerce-free zone for ourselves, for our children, forever. We require an expansive, vibrant commons including public media Internet portals that include citizen participation and access, that combine, enhance, and fund collectively run media including public TV, public radio, daily print, and other independent media.

The consensus necessary can be reached through a planned national series of forums on public media reform. We need a clever, new arrangement for the direct local and national control of public media by people of color, women, youth, the economically disadvantaged, and other underserved groups. The funding reform discussion should start with this: in January 2009, our old analog TV channels are scheduled to be returned to us as broadcasting goes fully over to digital broadcasting frequencies. The proceeds from the licensing of that \$20-30

billion worth of publicly owned analog broadcasting spectrum is currently marked for deficit reduction. Freed up (perhaps through tax increases on the rich), this revenue would permanently fund U.S. public media at two to three times current levels—a start.

A permanent, public media trust, directly controlled by the public, could prevent imperial, trillion dollar, genocidal, end-times tragedies waiting in the wings. It could involve alienated audiences and bring different and diverse people together. It would pay for itself soon enough through immeasurable human savings at home and abroad. More vibrant public media systems than ours serve Scandinavia, the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany, where some effort or appearance of effort is made to evolve beyond world-grasping, plundering pasts.

Adjusted for population, the BBC’s funding is around 40 times greater than PBS/NPR. Yet both countries foolishly leapt into the debacle of Iraq—Britain for the second time in 100 years. Of the many outlets studied by the nonpartisan Media Tenor, the worst case was the vaunted BBC, which gave just 2 percent of its coverage to opposition views on Iraq—views that represented those of the majority of the British people. A 2003 study by Cardiff University came to the same conclusion. The BBC, it said, had “displayed the most pro-war agenda of any [British] broadcaster.” So it is not simply a question of funding lots of public media. We also must examine and correct the fatal deficits of accountability and democratic structure within the system.

The small Pacifica Radio, after much tumult, legal pressure, and discussion, functions under a system of local and national boards determined mostly by its membership. What are the other useful structural examples in community radio, community TV, and other media? We’d better find out fast; most all of public TV’s “fleet” and “flagships” have sunk or are listing severely, its bosses and self-appointed trustees often busy managing investments or perhaps playing polo.

A public media trust is possible—activist infrastructure, timing, and events seem to be aligning. But although large numbers of citizens have been mobilized on media issues lately, it remains to be seen if such concern can be translated into an offensive campaign aimed at a public takeover and wholecloth remake of public media. In the previously mentioned C-SPAN interview, PBS head Paula Kerger argued public TV’s funding and structure “works somehow through a little alchemy.” Occasionally it does work, but neither magicians nor all the perfumes of Arabia will likely ever be able to remove or mask the sullyng stains from the continuing hemorrhages spilling upon PBS. **Z**

Scott Sanders is an independent documentarian and librarian. He’s also helped organize public forums on media issues, media reform coalitions, an unusual batch of FCC filings, and more, to help hold accountable corporate—and especially public—media.

contact: themediastucturefailed@yahoo.com