TABLOID ETHICS, NEWS REPORTING ON THE IRAQ WAR & THE SIMULACRUM OF OBJECTIVITY

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Editor's note: This is a brief version of a paper originally prepared for and presented at the Oxford Round Table, Oxford University, August 5, 2004 entitled "The 'Right to Know' vs 'Knowing What's Right': Tabloid Ethics and News Reporting on the Iraq War." The editors of Progressive Librarian thank Dr. Rusciano for his willingness to allow us to publish that portion of his paper of compelling interest to our readers. The first sections of the original paper began with Russell Hardin's analysis of media ethics with his adaptation of the classic "prisoner's dilemma problem" through what he has called a "contract by convention" to uphold objective journalism. However, in recent years, the proliferation of media has changed the market for information, causing this convention to break down. In its place, a "tabloid mentality" has affected even the most respected media in the United States. This mentality relies upon deniability rather than authenticated sources, and entertainment models over the traditional conventions of news reporting. Nowhere is this change more evident than in the reporting of war news during the Iraq conflict.

If once we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly… as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.

Today abstraction is no longer of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance… The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory — precession of simulacra — that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map (Baudrillard, 1994:1).

The major effect of what we know to be the prominence of tabloid ethics in journalism is not so much to destroy the illusion of objectivity as to rob it of its meaning and existence. Objective journalism never aspired to providing the comprehensive representation of reality, as did the map in the Borges fable; that would require allowing individuals to view a subject from all angles and in real time — an impossibility, just like the map in the story.

Instead, it was assumed to represent as well as possible the facts of a situation within the constraints of its medium, just as actual maps are assumed to represent the landmasses they depict. Indeed, the best of the social constructivist literature takes the perspective that if one discovers the underlying cultural, economic, and social factors behind the reporting on a subject, one may then understand how the reality represented therein was constructed.

The notion of "objective journalism" therefore never aspired to giving a complete representation of a subject — the truth, so to speak — but rather to construct its narrative out of what was true — i.e. facts. Walter Lippmann makes clear the difference between the media reporting what is "true" as opposed to reporting "the truth":

> The more points… at which any happening can be fixed, objectified, measured, named, the more points there are at which news can occur.
>
> Wherever there is a good machinery of record, the modern news service works with great precision. There is one on the stock exchange… There is a machinery for election returns… In civilized communities, deaths, births, marriages and divorces are recorded… It exists for imports and exports because they pass through a custom house and can be directly recorded…
>
> The hypothesis, which seems to be the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light hidden facts, to set them in relation to each other, and to make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at these points, where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide (Lippmann, 1994, 38-41).

Facts are matters of record that may be used in reporting the news in an objective manner. Truth, by contrast, is a collection and organization of facts that often includes previously hidden facts that are set into relation with each other, as did the map in the Borges fable.

Tabloid journalism, however, usually has neither time nor inclination for the rigorous verification required to declare something as "fact." Instead, it substitutes a "simulation" of objectivity by "giving both sides of the story." If a claim is made on one side of a report, a counterclaim, if one exists, is given equal time and emphasis. One sees this tendency in the reporting on political campaigns as described by Patterson. News analysis takes up more space over time than the candidates' own words; news analysis, in order to be "objective" gives space to a candidate's statements and his or her

opponents' responses. By the traditional standard of objectivity, one would report what the candidates themselves said, and let the reader or viewer sort the messages out themselves.

This simulation of objectivity in tabloid journalism easily becomes a simulacrum when one "side" is stating factual information that the other side wishes to deny. The following account of a television report on a videoconference at Rider University illustrates this point:

Just prior to the beginning of the 2003 war with Iraq, a group of students were videoconferencing with the Ambassadors' Club in New York concerning the upcoming hostilities. A statewide television network featured clips from the videoconference and interviewed students about their feelings about the impending war afterwards. All of the students interviewed opposed the war. In particular, one student who was a refugee from Afghanistan who had to flee the Taliban expressed concern for what would happen to the women and children as the result of a war, since she had witnessed wars in her native land.

When the segment aired that night, it showed the misgivings about the war stated by several students. When the Afghani student appeared on screen, however, the segment went to a voiceover, and stated how she was concerned for "the women and children suffering under Saddam Hussein." The professor who organized the videoconference immediately called the student and asked if she had actually said what the voiceover described. The student replied "No," and then added "that's really interesting; they do the same thing to the news in Afghanistan."

The story illustrates what occurs when objectivity is defined as showing two sides to the story; faced with a unified opposition to the war by the students, the editors merely altered one of their statements. While it is likely that most examples are not as extreme as this one, it does illustrate how the redefined notion of objectivity defeats the very purpose it was supposed to serve. The above simulation actually contradicts objectivity, creating, in effect, a simulacrum of objectivity.

A counter-argument might be that this analysis makes the issue too complicated; the case described is merely an example of mistaken reporting. But the motivation behind this mistake illustrates the complexity of the problem. Defining objectivity as reporting

multiple sides of a story without regard for whether different sides exist robs objectivity of its meaning. In the above example, the fact was that the students did not express more than one side on the war. As a result, the actual event, like the landmass in Baudrillard's example, must crumble under the simulated objectivity of the news report. Put another way, the very act of defining objectivity in this manner negates its existence, so we are left with a representation of something that does not exist—i.e. a simulacrum.

This tendency, while problematic in the course of a political campaign, can be even more damaging to the public's right to know in wartime. Wars necessarily involve a high degree of chaos and fragmented information, which along with the oft-stated desire to support one's troops in combat, make for even greater potential distortions of objectivity. Wartime creates a situation where citizens are most vulnerable to manipulation from the administration and military spokespersons. In such an emotional context, citizens are caught between the desire to support the troops and believe their motives and techniques are just (i.e. the need to assert "we know what's right") and the desire to have the facts about the situation (i.e. our "right to know"). The likelihood that simulacra of objectivity will occur increases proportionately as the facts conflict with our emotional needs and desires. We are thereby most open to being distracted by what we wish to be true, and often openly hostile to those who wish to defend our "right to know" the facts. Three examples from reporting on the 2003 war with Iraq serve as examples of this tendency.

The Jessica Lynch Story

The story of the capture and rescue of Private Jessica Lynch of the United States Army was one that provided inspiration during one of the bloodiest days for American forces in the Iraq war. Lynch was part of a supply convoy that was separated from the rest of their troops, and was ambushed by Iraqi forces. According to the initial accounts of the incident, Lynch fought bravely until her weapon was emptied and she was captured by enemy troops. She secured stab and bullet wounds, and was taken to an Iraqi hospital where she was "slapped about on her hospital bed and was interrogated… Eight days later US special forces stormed the hospital, capturing the 'dramatic' events on a night vision camera" (BBC News, 5/15/03). The footage of her rescue was then edited by the military and broadcast over American television networks, and detailed coverage

of her homecoming, magazine covers, a book, and a made-for-TV film followed.

The problems began when BBC news ran a story contradicting the story the American media were circulating. The details of Private Lynch's capture — confirmed by Lynch herself — were different from the original story. As it occurred, her weapon jammed, and she sat hunkered down in her military vehicle until she was captured; as a supply clerk, she had had limited experience in combat before being sent to Iraq. Similarly, while there was evidence that Iraqi soldiers had abused her, she was neither stabbed nor shot. Further, she was not interrogated violently at the hospital, but rather received the best of care the Iraqi doctors and nurses could provide at the time. As Dr. Harith a-Houssona, the physician caring for her noted, "I examined her, I saw she had a broken arm, a broken thigh, and a dislocated ankle" (BBC News, 5/15/03).

When confronted with these facts, Pentagon spokespeople initially responded by saying that they never stated for sure that the story circulating about Lynch's capture was true; rather, they had simply not stated that it was false. As Bryan Whitman said, "The Pentagon never released an account of what happened to Lynch because it didn't have an account" (BBC News 5/20/03). The resulting confusion, attributable to the press's desire for a heroic story and the Pentagon's desire to present events in the most positive light, illustrate the problem of non-verification in tabloid journalism—the absence of denial is assumed equivalent to the verification of truth.

Also included in the BBC News broadcast were details that made the story even more controversial; the story claimed that the rescue was "staged" as the American forces knew there were no Iraqi soldiers in the hospital at the time. The BBC News report concluded that,

> The American strategy was to ensure the right television footage by using embedded reporters and images from their own cameras, editing the film themselves. The Pentagon had been influenced by Hollywood producers of reality TV and action movies, notably the man behind Black Hawk Down, Jerry Bruckheimer. Bruckheimer advised the Pentagon on the primetime television series "Profiles from the Front Line," that followed US forces in Afghanistan in 2001. That approach was taken on and developed on the field of battle in Iraq (BBC News, 5/15/2003).

Later, a reporter from MSNBC attempted to sort out the two versions of events. He discovered that there were "two sides to the story." According to the "Iraqi version":

> The U.S. commandos refused a key and instead broke down doors and went in with guns drawn. They carried away the prisoner in the dead of night with helicopter and armored vehicle backup—even though there was no Iraqi military presence and the hospital staff didn't resist (Faramarzi, 2004).

In response,

> Pentagon officials bristle[d] at any suggestion that Lynch's rescue was staged or that any details were exaggerated. They have never claimed that there was fighting inside the hospital, but stress that Nasiriyah was not a peaceful place… "You don't have perfect knowledge when you go in of what resistance you will face, so you prepare for the worst," [Pentagon spokesperson] Lapan said (Faramarzi, 2004).

Wars promote chaos and confusion that easily blur the facts of a situation, and while the Pentagon refused to allow the rescuers to be interviewed or the unedited tape of the rescue to be released, they could claim they did not wish to compromise the details of military procedures. The problem, though, is that many of the facts were wrong, nothing was done to correct them early on, and the result was two different "stories" of what actually occurred in Private Lynch's case. The media's rush to judgment, combined with their desire to please viewers by providing an emotionally satisfying story, left the public with two versions of the story that masquerades as a simulacrum of objectivity.

The Nightline Story: The Faces of the Fallen

On April 30, 2004, the ABC television news show "Nightline" produced a special program. Without commentary, music, or graphics, the host Ted Koppel read the names of the 721 American soldiers killed in Iraq to that date as their pictures were displayed, two at a time, on the television screen. The simple presentation was, according to the program's anchor, intended to "elevate the fallen above the politics and the daily journalism" (Elber, 2004). Its effect was just the opposite. Numerous conservative commentators decried the commemoration as an antiwar message, and the Sinclair Broadcast Group pulled the show from seven ABC affiliates around the country.

The context for this story was set in part by the Pentagon's policy, in effect since the Persian Gulf War of 1991, of not allowing the flag-draped coffins of war dead to be photographed as they arrived at Dover Air Force base before they were transported to their families. This policy, while in effect for nearly 13 years, had not often been

followed, especially during the Clinton administration when the President attended several memorial services for fallen soldiers (Stolberg, 2004). This policy became controversial as critics argued that the Bush administration was trying to hide the human costs of its Iraq policy.

David D. Smith of the Sinclair Broadcasting Group defended the decision not to air the program in the following statement:

> Despite the denials by a spokesperson for the show, the action appears motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq… Based on published reports, we are aware of [the widow of] one soldier who died in Iraq who opposes the reading of her husband's name to oppose our military action…we would ask that you first question Mr. Koppel as to why he chose to read the names of 523 troops killed in combat in Iraq, rather than the names of thousands of private citizens killed in terrorist attacks since and including the events of September 11, 2001. In his answer, we believe you will find the real motivation behind his action scheduled for this Friday (www.usnewslink. com).

Smith's justification first ascribes an unproven motivation to the news report, then reifies his argument by quoting a spouse who did not want her fallen husband's name used to this end, and finally concludes by linking the story in an emotional narrative to noncombatants killed in terrorist attacks.[1]   Here, "knowing what's right" (i.e. the "correct" way to honor the war dead) and the "right to know" (i.e. to view the pictures of the fallen) conflict in a controversy created over a seemingly straightforward depiction of the facts. Moreover, the argument is advanced in the name of objectivity, the need to tell "two sides of the story," even though the motivations ascribed to Koppel are unproven. In this case, the accusation that the mere naming and depiction of the soldiers killed in Iraq has a political motivation is sufficient to redefine objectivity from the reporting of facts to representing "two sides" of the story. But the only manner in which one can present "another side" to those who were killed is to not represent it at all. The simulacrum of objectivity ultimately demands that the story and its opposite cannot co-exist, as when two objects cannot physically occupy the same space at the same time.

The Iraqi Prisoner Abuse Story: The Use and Abuse of Objectivity

Perhaps one of the most damaging stories to emerge regarding the American occupation of Iraq concernes the abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. Such techniques as forcing the prisoners to

simulate sex with each other, or be placed in seemingly dangerous positions, were photographed and videotaped; several of the pictures were shown on the news show 60 Minutes II. The response to these photos was swift; public officials in the United States expressed their shock at the incidents, while the rest of the world condemned them. The White House, though, was slower to respond. President Bush only apologized for the incidents after several days, and even then the apologies were initially indirect.

However, two different controversies quickly arose. Some politicians and commentators argued that the photos should never have been revealed to the world (and by inference, the American public) because it undermined the United States' war effort. Many of the same individuals even began to question whether the abuses actually constituted "torture," and whether they might be justified given the treachery of the enemy, and the manner in which American prisoners and hostages were allegedly treated.[2]

In actuality, 60 Minutes II had the photographs two weeks earlier, and refrained from airing the story at the request of the military while an investigation was allegedly pending. They went ahead with the story when it began to appear in other news outlets. Further, when the military revealed that there were other photos and videotapes of prisoner abuses, only members of Congress were allowed to view them; the general public and the media were barred from their display.

One sees the pattern here described in the case of the previous two stories. The initial question is whether it is right to inform the public of the abuses, for fear of undermining the war effort — the public's "right to know" once again interfering with "knowing what's right" about the moral certainty of the U.S. occupation. Next came the response that there were "two sides to the story"; Congressman Inhofe of Oklahoma complained that the outrage was being directed against the American soldiers, while several conservative commentators argued that the abuses were minimal, that no clear physical harm was done, and that the other side committed far worse atrocities.[3] These arguments were made again in the name of providing an objective context for the abuses — and again, in this simulacrum of objectivity, the solutions were either not to inform the public at all, or to state that there were "two sides" to the abuses that should be reported. None of those making these arguments seem to consider that by this logic, no one is ever responsible for their actions; the demand to present two sides to every story assumes

that providing material for viewers to make a moral judgment is an indication of bias.

Conclusion: Can Objectivity be Regained?

"No one likes to see dead bodies on TV."
<div align="right">United States President George W. Bush,
speaking at a White House press conference</div>

In an essay on the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Bosah Ebo likened media coverage to a video game, in which participants were presented with images of destruction that distanced them from the actual casualties and damage caused by supposed "smart bombs" (Ebo, 1995). If the entertainment model in the first Gulf War was the video game, the model for the present war in Iraq is the reality show. "Reality shows" are actually simulations of interactions carried out by individuals who are conscious they are being filmed, and for whom the greatest risk involved is losing the prize at the end, even in a show with the ominous name of "Survivor."[4]   The structure of each show is the same — an artificial conflict is introduced by the producers of the show, and the contestants battle over who will emerge victorious, usually by the choice of one or more of the other contestants. But conflict assumes the creation of more than one "side to the story"; otherwise, there is no show. The main variation that these shows introduce from traditional game shows (which are, in effect more "real" than reality shows) is to remove the objective answer, skill, or lucky guess that guarantees the prize; instead, the reward is given through a selection process decided in part by the participants. In the same manner, tabloid ethics in journalism do not reward those whose reporting uncovers facts which others have been unable to find. Rather, it rewards those whose perspectives emerge victorious out of the simulated battle for "reality" in which conflicting sides are represented. Simulacrum as entertainment or simulacra in reporting both debase the very notion of objectivity in the information citizens receive.

Whether the traditional standard of objectivity can be maintained against the onslaught of tabloid ethics depends in large part upon how the rewards and punishments for different types of reporting are doled out. It is beyond the scope of this essay to prescribe means to redesign the matrix to these ends. However, there are several possibilities to consider. First, the Internet is a double-edged sword in the battle for objectivity; in nations where only one side of the story is presented due to government censorship, it can provide

alternative venues for individuals to speak truth to power. The challenge is to direct the Net to the same purposes in open societies. Second, citizens are not just passive participants in this process; the new technologies do socialize individuals to different expectations of where and how to find information. But it also allows them to place demands on the type of information they require in an open society. When citizens "vote with their mouses" for substance on the Net, substance will be provided. Finally, simulated objectivity need not chase out traditional objectivity. Citizens can learn that bias is not the only enemy to objectivity; reporting that chooses to remain "neutral" by generating opposing sides is, in its own way, even more dangerous. Media were never meant to be mere spectators in the battle of ideas; they also "referee" and "score" the opposing sides for fact in the traditional sense of objectivity, and the true spirit of unbiased reporting.

An open society must find a means to restructure rewards for traditional, as opposed to simulated, objectivity. The stakes are high at this juncture. The competition among media was supposed to prevent dictatorial or totalitarian manipulation of media messages by the government. A free and open media, unfettered by obligations to any power, was a major weapon against tyranny. It would be tragically ironic if a trend towards "tabloid objectivity" created a citizenry as uninformed as those in closed societies.

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Footnotes

1. Another relevant observation is that the individuals killed on September 11, 2001 had already been memorialized individually on television, first by having their names scrolled down the screen at the 2002 Super Bowl Game; and second, by having the names read at a memorial on September 11, 2002.

2. It should be noted that certain factions in Iraq and Saudi Arabia helped muddy the issue of moral equivalency here by executing American and other foreign hostages captured in these countries in supposed "retaliation" for the abuses.

3. Conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh stated that the pictures merely reflected the need for the soldiers to "blow off steam" and likened their activities to a fraternity initiation at college, prompting another commentator, Chris Matthews, to ask "what college did he attend?"

4. One of the more ironic aspects of this particular show is to observe individuals eating insects for food while the crew filming them is consuming catered meals.