Problems of news culture and truth: The BBC’s Representation of the Invasion of Iraq

Introduction

Forty years ago Hannah Arendt wrote of a shift in the political culture of Western states, and in particular the US. For Arendt, modern political culture had become perverted by the ‘modern political lie’. She argued that ‘modern political lies’ are ‘so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture – the making of another reality into which they will fit without seam, crack or fissure… modern political lies… offer a full-fledged substitute for’ reality (Arendt, 1993: 253). For Arendt the modern political lie was the cause of the disastrous invasion of Vietnam and was well illustrated in the ‘Pentagon Papers’ otherwise known as the ‘History of the US Decision-Making Process of Vietnam Policy’ by the US state. Arendt (1971) argued that policy in Vietnam was set by ‘self-deceivers’ who manipulated reality to fit with their theories of what was wrong and how it could be fixed. Today’s statespersons in the West – particularly in the Anglo-American world – share this political culture, and share the propensity to rearrange factual texture to fit with a particular worldview.

This notion of “modern political lies” as much deeper than the notion of “untruth” is instructive for understanding how journalists can misread events so spectacularly, as so many did during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was not that particular untruths were circulated by politicians and diplomats, but that a new reality was created within which those untruths camouflaged – hidden in plain sight.

This paper develops Arendt’s notion of the modern political lie in the context of the critical theory that she moved towards as she began to focus on political issues. It then applies this theoretical insight to an analysis of the reporting of the invasion of Iraq. The focus here is not on the question of simple facts and lies, accuracy or inaccuracy. On this analysis it is too simplistic to consider the straightforward question of whether journalists accurately represented the truth. Nor is it the intention to consider, through discourse analysis, how linguistic and discursive mechanisms alone may prejudice reporting. Most scholarly and critical attention on Iraq has been directed to accuracy and balance (Tumber and Palmer 2004), spin and information management on the part of governments (Kamalipour and Snow 2004; Kumar 2006), the impact of embedding (Aday et al 2005), the issue of weapons of mass destruction was dealt with (Allan 2005) and an overarching ‘war on truth’ (Dezin 2004).

In contrast, here I am interested in the construction of a ‘factual texture’, or ‘facts on the ground’, which allows journalists to report accurately and truthfully but only within a deeply problematic
framework of interpretation of Iraq. This is to say in that whilst the more blatant propaganda
techniques, inaccuracies and bias may lead to scepticism among journalists and leave audiences with
doubts, in the more banal aspects of reporting (Billig, 1995, Sonwalkar, 2005) facts are reported with
little sense of ambiguity, as Billig (1995: 8) puts it, they ‘pass by unnoticed’.

It is in this sense of banal reporting that I will try to illustrate how facts about the situation in
Iraq were routinely reported, shared between many sites of discourse, and how their truth-value shifted
as the facts on the ground changed. The particular example I will draw to illustrate this is the
establishment of authority in Iraq and the subsequent positioning of combatants, especially those
designated by the BBC as “insurgents”. The focus here is on the BBC, rather, say, than
more obviously propagandistic organs such as the Sun or Fox News, or due to its commitment to
accuracy.

Objectivity and Factual Truth

For Arendt, it is the role of independent journalists and news media to counter the modern political lie
by presenting the factual truth just as it is. However, Arendt did not appreciate the limits that journalists
face in terms of their own cultural and epistemological context, particularly in terms of presenting the
simple ‘factual truths’ that are supposed to expose modern political lies.

Perhaps Arendt may have seen the BBC as perfectly positioned to expose these factual truths. Indeed, the UK state’s “Agreement” on which the BBC’s existence is based stipulates that the BBC
Trust should ‘seek to ensure that the BBC gives information about, and increases understanding of, the
world through accurate and impartial news, other information, and analysis of current events and ideas’
(Department for Media, Culture and Sport, 2006: 3). The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines make this
commitment more thoroughly. According to the Guidelines, BBC news should ‘strive to be accurate
and establish the truth of what has happened’, ‘weigh all relevant facts and information to get at the
truth’. BBC news should be ‘be honest and open about what we don’t know and avoid unfounded
speculation’. BBC news should also ‘strive to be fair and open minded and reflect all significant
strands of opinion by exploring the range and conflict of views’. Furthermore it commits BBC news to
being ‘objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments
where appropriate, but we will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public
policy, or political or industrial controversy’. Finally it asserts the BBC news’s independence from
‘both state and partisan interests’ (BBC, 2005: 7).
However, journalists and news organisations are always already caught up in a nexus of power relations that stymies the ability to make such a clean distinction as Arendt advocates. Thus their ability to objectively mediate is stymied. There are some, such as Lichtenberg (2000), who make a philosophical defence of journalistic objectivity, but whilst theoretically desirable in a power-infested world, it is unlikely. As Borersma (2010: 21) articulates, ‘Though the impossibility of a mimetic and purely objective representation of reality is commonly accepted, it is striking that journalism's claim to truth and authenticity is still so vivid in journalism and in public discourse’.

Some critical journalists criticise attempts to neutrally or objectively report ‘facts’. As John Pilger notes, objectivity can be so easily abused ‘as a cover for official lies’ (Pilger, 2005: xiv). Norman Solomon (2006), explains in response to an Associate Press item that ‘objectively’ reported that ‘Poor nutrition contributes to the deaths of some 5.6 million children every year,’

We’re encouraged to see high-quality journalism as dispassionate, so that professionals do their jobs without advocating. But passive acceptance of murderous priorities in our midst is a form of de facto advocacy.

Indeed, the objective journalist reporting decontextualised appearances can so easily replicate and reinforce dominant power relations. Herbert Marcuse put it,

the facts are never given immediately and never accessible immediately; they are established, ‘mediated’ by those who made them; the truth, ‘the whole truth’ surpasses these facts and requires rupture with their appearance (Marcuse, 1969: 99)

So, for Marcuse,

if a newscaster reports the torture and murder of civil rights workers in the same unemotional tone he uses to describes the stock-market or the weather… then such objectivity is spurious - more, it offends against humanity and truth by… refraining from accusation where accusation is in the facts themselves (Marcuse, 1969: 98)

Marcuse’s point here is simple but crucially important – facts are made. Consequently facts can also be manufactured to create a situation that corresponds to a particular need. For example, if one were to renege on a commitment to assist a friend by falsely reporting that one has a conflicting appointment
with a doctor, this is a straightforward lie. However, if one were to arrange an appointment with a doctor so that when one reports the conflicting appointment one is telling the truth. In this instance the factual statement is true, though there is deception; it is the act that is deceptive though the reporting of it is truthful. Nevertheless, the disinterested and passive reporting of the fact contributes to the deceit.

So the problem is not only the distortion or elimination of factual truth, but also the creation of factual truth or ‘facts on the ground’. The point here is that facts are not things that simply exist only to be either cleanly communicated or perverted by politics; rather many facts are created in the first place by political powers. This problem can be illustrated, for example, in the struggle over the occupied parts of Palestine. Here we see a deliberate strategy of the Israeli state to undertake the ‘unilateral establishment of “facts on the ground”’, which has been ‘systematic and methodical’ in its establishment of an Israeli population in the Palestinian territories (Christian Aid, 2004: 5-7). These facts then become the basis for negotiation, which is made possible by excluding the history of those facts. If we are to understand ‘factual truth’ we must understand how facts got there, we must understand them historically. Indeed, the work of the Glasgow Media Group (Philo and Berry, 2004) has clearly illustrated how the British news media’s reporting of Israel has depended upon dehistoricised and decontextualised “facts”, such as the scope of Israeli territory and so-called “settlements”, or more accurately, colonies.

In the first instance, there is at the heart of journalism a dominant positivist epistemology. It is no surprise that the “art” of observation, of bearing witness, in journalism arose during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the scientific method was popularised. Whilst there are clearly a number of different journalistic traditions, positivistic journalism as the dominant mode of mainstream news reporting. As Bird and Dardenne (2009: 205) put it, ‘journalistic ideals of objectivity differ from those of positivistic social science but the philosophic approach is similar’. This philosophic approach has become the basis of journalistic training programmes, and has permeated what Allan (2004) calls ‘news culture’.

The institutionalisation of this culture has resulted in the dominance of particular worldviews and interpretive frameworks within which journalists work. An ‘institutional interface’ with the ‘dominant institutional order’ (Salter, 2006), becomes ingrained into journalistic culture. On this analysis, liberal-democratic understandings of politics pervade the general outlook of mainstream news organisations and the orientation of individual journalists. It is accepted as ‘common sense’ that legitimate sovereign power is invested in the institutions of state, and as such they should be subject to journalistic scrutiny, assisting a voting public to which the political system responds. Such institutional
interfaces enable dominant sources and primary definers (Hall et al, 1978) – key government figures, experts and ‘authorities’ – to set the agenda, especially when their communications are pre-fabricated for journalists and therefore fit into shared discursive frameworks, presupposing conceptual schema into which the facts fit. To this end, accounts are discursively ordered – through lexical choices, stereotype, metaphor, framing, sequencing of sources and so on (Herman and Chomsky, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Glasgow Media Group, 1976/1980/1985). Furthermore, in times of war there are a number of other techniques by which journalists can be tied to a very particular perspective, such as by embedding reporters with military units (see Miller, 2004: 90-91).

Of course, the assumed audience share discursive frameworks and conceptual schema that dominate political and news culture – they are internalised and hegemonic, not imposed. This sharing is supposed by journalists, and influences the stylistic elements of journalistic copy – the need to be “understood” leads to the rejection of a dynamic lexicon, and increases the propensity to just touch the surface, to report ‘facts on the ground’ without the context and history that may remove these facts from their innocent status. The audience is unable to understand through news discourse the full complexity of reality, which is replaced with a simplified, superficial and dichotomised world.

To further explore the suggestion that the capacity of journalists to access factual truth is problematically limited I turn to consider elements of the BBC’s reporting of the invasion of Iraq. As so much of our understanding depends on the mediation of facts through the language of news, it is important to consider the naming of those who fought against the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. To this end the paper will recount some of the major events that have taken place before and during the invasion, how they developed and changed, how they were reported and whether or not the development of events and the reporting of them interceded. It is reasonably well known that many news organisations (such as The Sun newspaper in the UK or Fox News in the US – both owned by Rupert Murdoch) clearly lost any pretence of professional impartiality in the build up to, and during, the invasion, and the interest is not in the propagandistic functions of such organisations. Rather, the attempts to report decontextualised “facts” – in particular the status of combatants – by those who rely an ‘occupational ideology’ (Deuze, 2005) or ‘news culture’ (Allan, 2004) that draws on observed facts, can help sustain forms of domination, with real legal and political consequences.

Background: The Invasion of Iraq
In the first part of 2003 the citizens of the USA and the UK were subject to a range of claims about the behaviour of the Iraqi government. President George Bush of the USA and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the UK had agreed to overthrow President Saddam Hussein of Iraq as early as 2002 (The Times, 1st May 2005: p.1), but then needed to persuade their publics and the leaders of other states that this was the right course of action. Presuming that their respective publics would not agree to invade another country on the basis of ‘regime change’, a programme of ‘public diplomacy’ was initiated by both governments. Though US citizens were perhaps more ready than UK citizens to accept regime change as a rationale, tenuous – and unlikely – links between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda asserted by the US government must have contributed to some 70% of Americans believing, against ‘factual truth’, that the Iraqi government had something to do with the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 (Washington Post 6th September 2003: p. A01. Even by 2005 47% of Americans believed that former President Hussein ‘helped plan and support the hijackers’ [Harris Poll #14, 18th February 2005], which was largely inferred in President Bush’s speeches [Christian Science Monitor, 14th March, 2003] and the utterances of other US Government officials – see Rampton and Stauber, 2003: 94-95 for a list of these utterances). These fears were the hooks to which alleged threats from Iraq were attached. The British government on the other hand had no such reference points. Instead, though ‘Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran’, it was thought that ‘it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors’ (Iraq: Prime Minister’s Meeting, 23rd July 2002, cited in The Times, 1st May 2005: p.1; see also Curtis, 2003: 12). It seems that British government policy was to create a situation in which President Hussein would be seen to defy the UN, and thereby justify the real objective of regime change. Both governments sought to manipulate public fears – about terrorist links and weapons of mass destruction respectively – in order to manufacture consent for their intended actions.

On 19th March 2003, war was declared on Iraq and the invasion began. By 1st May 2003 President Bush had declared an end to ‘major combat operations’ – the declared war was over and the Iraqi government had been defeated. Whether or not a result of distorted intelligence given to the US by disgruntled Iraqis, the expected streets-paved-with-flowers to welcome the invading forces did not materialise at any significant rate, despite attempts by mainstream media in the UK and US to make it appear so. Instead, the invasion forces were met with stiff resistance after the end to ‘major combat operations’. Accordingly, what plans there were for a post-invasion Iraq were uncertain and constantly changed. The initial invasion was followed by the setting up of a Coalition Provisional Authority
(CPA) headed by a US-appointed foreign ‘civilian administrator’, Paul Bremer. To many in Iraq, the installation of a foreign ‘administrator’ seemed to resemble a colonial occupation, which imposed a secular neo-liberal reform agenda that intended to shape Iraq in the interests of the US state. As a consequence, it intensified the resolve of those Iraqis opposed to the invasion. In June 2003 all self-rule in towns and cities was ended by the US-led occupying forces and in July of that year the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council was formed. By 14th November 2003, in the face of increasing levels of violence against the occupiers, the Bush Administration had decided to transfer power to an interim government by early 2004. In March 2004 the Iraqi Governing Council signed an interim constitution, and on 28th June 2004 all authority was passed to the Iraqi Interim Government and the CPA was dissolved. All through this period violent campaigns raged against the occupying powers and despite the attempt to legitimise the invasion, in a poll conducted by the Coalition Provisional Authority in May 2004, 92% of Iraqis saw the U.S. as ‘occupiers’, 3% saw them as ‘peacekeepers’ and only 2% Iraqis viewed them as ‘liberators’ (CPA web site June 17th 2004). On 3rd May 2005 the ‘democratically elected’ Iraqi Government proper replaced the Iraqi Interim Government.

Saying What Is: The BBC on Iraq.

As we have seen, the BBC may be considered to be in a good position to break through modern political lies in the way in which Arendt charged journalists. One may suspect that the requirement of the BBC to ‘strive to be accurate and establish the truth of what has happened’ would require penetrating analysis and insight, to go beyond and even challenge the merely apparent and attempt to establish truths.

The accuracy and impartiality of BBC News’ is constantly reflected upon by its journalists and editors, whose decisions are open to scrutiny from viewers. This scrutiny is intended to ensure that the BBC’s reporting represents ‘factual truth’ as accurately and disinterestedly as possible, and its reporting on the invasion of Iraq did not escape such scrutiny with journalists and editors struggling to find the right words to describe the events and facts as they appeared. That is to say, the reflexivity of BBC journalists and editors was stymied by the BBC’s positivist and institutionalised news culture.

One such difficulty related to the definition of the Iraqis who fought against the invasion and occupation, who the BBC named, since June 2003 until at least the middle of 2010, ‘insurgents’. In response to questions about the choice of words BBC editor Helen Boaden argued that,
This term was decided upon because it describes people who are ‘rising in active revolt’. It is the best word to use in situations of rebellion or conquest when there is no free-standing government. (Boaden, 2004)

To assess the BBC’s account of the invasion, and in particular its use of the term ‘insurgent’, a number of factors need to be considered: firstly, it has to be determined whether the BBC’s definition of the word acceptable in ordinary English; secondly, it must be considered whether the use of a dynamic lexicon reflects the changing conditions of the invasion and occupation – whether reflects the creation of facts on the ground; thirdly, the history and current uses of the term outside the reporting of Iraq can be used to illustrate the connotations of the term; and finally, the consideration of possible alternative terms may illuminate the deficiencies of existing terms as well as pointing to possible reasons for the choice of one term over another.

**Insurgency in ordinary language**

Whilst the BBC claims that ‘insurgent’ ‘describes people who are ‘rising in active revolt’’, in ‘situations of rebellion or conquest where there is no free-standing government’, this does not tally with most dictionary definitions. Most dictionary definitions are similar to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary’s definition, which does suggest that the term refers to ‘a person who rebels or rises in revolt’, but in a revolt ‘against an authority’, and usually a government (emphasis added). This is to say that all dictionary definitions that the writer has encountered relate the insurgent to an authority, and usually a government. Therefore there is little justification for the application of the term to situations in which there is no ‘free-standing government’. This point is reinforced by the fact that it is difficult to ‘rise in active revolt’ when there is no ‘free standing government’ to rise against. To turn to an authority on ‘subversion, insurgency and peacekeeping’, General Sir Frank Kitson (1971: 6) describes insurgency as ‘the use of armed force by a section of the people against the government’ with the intention of overthrowing it.

**Changing facts and static lexicon**

So, the BBC’s definition of the term seems to have been quite straightforwardly wrong. It was, however, wrong in another sense. Where ‘facts on the ground’ were rearranged, a single continuously
employed term may have proved inadequate, especially if such rearrangement was a politically motivated act intended to alter the roles of protagonists. To illustrate this point requires us to return to the chronology of the invasion.

As outlined above, we might consider the invasion of Iraq in stages. In the first stage, between March and May 2003, the initial invasion took place. On 1st May 2003 the end to ‘major combat operations’ was declared. Soon after this, the second stage began with the setting up of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). This was the stage at which the BBC began to refer to insurgents in Iraq (from June 2003). The CPA period lasted from 16th May 2003 until 28th June 2004. From 28th June 2004 until 3rd May 2005 the Iraqi Interim Government was in power in the third stage. Finally, in the fourth stage, an ‘elected government’ was formed. In each of these stages the force against which the ‘insurgents’ acted was different.

In the first stage the only authority in Iraq was the Iraqi government, which had a right to defend itself under international law. In the second period a foreign power ruled over Iraq and in the third period what might be referred to as a ‘puppet regime’ (the Shorter OED describes a puppet state or country as one that is ‘nominally independent but actually under the control of another power’) was installed. At best, in the first and second periods an occupying power dominated Iraq and in the third and fourth a puppet authority had been established. We might consider, then, that in the first and second periods resistance to an invasion took place in which, in the first instance soldiers fought against an invading army, and in the second instance resistance took place against an occupying army. In the third and fourth periods, the resistance was perhaps replaced by an insurgency against a puppet government. We might expect, then, that the telling of ‘what is’ would reflect these changing circumstances. What is more, we might expect that ‘what is’ cannot be told without giving some idea of ‘why is’ and therefore raising the possibility of challenging the status of the authority.

Despite these events, BBC News reports do not tend to use a dynamic lexicon and nor do they tend to explain why present reality is so (for example, Philo and Berry [2004] found a significant problem in the BBC’s reporting of the Israeli-Palestine conflict to be the lack of background as to how and why the present facts came about), and therefore why the protagonists do what they do. Whilst perhaps the term ‘insurgency’ might be appropriate under the third and fourth periods, under the first and second periods it cannot be considered to be an accurate representation of factual truth. One possible reason for the lack of a dynamic lexicon in BBC reports is its news conventions – stories must be relatively short, economic, impartial and ‘to-the-point’. The concern for audience ‘understanding’ is such that a dynamic lexicon may well be considered a confusing barrier to that understanding.
Traditional uses of insurgent outside Iraq

Though there may be good reasons for the continuous use of a term, it is interesting to see that the BBC does not consistently apply it to situations in which there is ‘no free-standing government’. A brief survey of BBC News Online’s use of the term shows that it has been used to refer to situations in Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yeman, India, Algeria, Rwanda, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Uganda, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Macedonia, Columbia, Liberia, wherein there are people who are ‘rising in revolt’ and in ‘situations of rebellion’, but almost always against an a ‘free-standing government’. It is also interesting to see that the term is used almost exclusively to refer to ‘third world’, or very poor, states. From my brief survey I have not found the term to be used to describe resistance to an invasion. Nor was the term used to describe people ‘in active revolt’ against the internationally recognised governments of Ukraine, Georgia and Zimbabwe. Instead these insurgents are referred to as ‘protestors’, ‘the opposition’, ‘demonstrators’, their leaders are ‘firebrands’ (BBC 2004, 2005a, 2005b), and their actions were ‘celebrated’.

If a single term were to be used over time, perhaps there are better choices available? Perhaps, if journalists are to act with ‘due accuracy and impartiality’, then they ought not to impose a particular definition of the situation. Rather comprehension of factual truth might only be achieved if one takes an intersubjective position, that is, if one understands the different sides from their own perspectives. In this case, we might see the US-UK ‘armed forces’ confronting Iraqi and Islamic ‘freedom fighters’, for it is clear that their lives are dedicated to being free from US and UK influence. Certainly, there are many British and Americans who would fight foreign occupation for their own ‘freedom’, and many Christians who would agree with Islamists that to be truly free is to be subject to the will of God, and this is how at least a reasonably large contingent of those fighting the occupation wish to be.

Alternatively, perhaps there are more similarities between the Iraqis fighting the US-led invasion and the circumstances and tactics of the French resistance, who initially fought against the invasion of their state by another, and who then waged an underground guerrilla war of bombings and assassinations to prevent the invaders and their indigenous collaborators from settling.

Should then, the Iraqis who fight the invasion and occupation have been understood intersubjectively and referred to as Iraqi freedom fighters or the Iraqi resistance? This is unlikely primarily given the tradition of referring only to ‘friends’ as freedom fighters or resistance (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Perhaps, though, there is a simpler reason for not using the term ‘resistance’?
Perhaps the static dictionary definition will show that the term is an inaccurate description of what is taking place in Iraq? To return, then, to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary we see that ‘resistance’ simply means ‘the action or act of resisting, opposing or withstanding’, the ‘power or capacity of resisting’. Perhaps the dictionary definition of ‘resistance’ was therefore more appropriate to describe the protagonists in Iraq?

On the other hand, perhaps neither term is appropriate, insofar as they not only dichotomise ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also homogenous ‘them’. ‘They’ are made up of a very wide range of groups united only in their opposition to occupation. Sunni militants, Shi’ite militants, Iraqi nationalists, Baathists, al Qaeda, ‘foreign Islamists’, and Ansar al-Islam share few beliefs other than their resistance to the occupation, have very different reasons for and ends of their activities, and will stand down under very different conditions. Therefore, to understand what the occupying armies face and how peace might be made, we must understand who is doing what and with what aim. Again, news report discourses do not allow such sophistication.

Implications: legitimate and illegitimate actors

Although President Bush was ridiculed in some quarters for calling an end to ‘major combat operations’ so soon after the initial stages of the invasion, it was not a ridiculous act. On the contrary, the effective ending of the war meant that those opposing the invasion were no longer legitimate state actors and, in a sense, were no longer fighting legally. The formation of the CPA served to set up an authority that, on the ‘factual texture’ within which the US state was working, would represent and serve Iraqis. As such it was perceived as having de facto authority. It is unclear, however, as to exactly why the CPA was formed. As the Congressional Research Service (CRS) stated in 2007,

Some executive branch documents supported the notion that it was created by the President, possibly as the result of a National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD). (This document, if it exists, has not been made available to the public.) Another possibility is that the authority was created by, or pursuant to, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1483 (2003). Finally, two years after CPA was established, a Justice Department brief asserted that the then-Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) had created CPA (Congressional Research Service, 2007: summary).

Nevertheless, the effect was clear. The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) noted that,
The CPA exercises powers of government temporarily in order to provide for the effective administration of Iraq, to restore conditions of security and stability, to create conditions in which the Iraqi people can freely determine their own political future, ... and facilitating economic recovery, sustainable reconstruction and development.

The CPA is vested by the President with all executive, legislative and judicial authority necessary to achieve its objectives, exercised consistent with relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions, including [U.N. Security Council] Resolution 148, and the laws and usages of war. The CPA Administrator has primary responsibility for exercising this authority CPA (cited in Congressional Research Service, 2007: 6).

So the CPA was created in part with if not the intention, then the effect, of creating an authority that would rob Iraqi resistance organisations of legitimacy. Indeed, it was the CPA against which insurgents were insurging. However, some descriptions of insurgency imply that it is an act against a legitimate government. For example, Webster’s New International Dictionary describes insurgency as a revolt ‘against a legitimate government’. It is generally accepted by the theory and practice of liberal government (Locke, 1689). For example, Thomas Jefferson (1903/3) was very clear by simply stating that it is ‘to the people that all authority belongs’. It is quite clear from the US and UK traditions of liberal ideology (abstracted from its imperialist reality) that such a foreign imposition would not be considered a legitimate authority if an authority at all.

Indeed, as noted in the CPA poll above, the objection to the US-led occupation was almost total. This necessitated a change in tactic and speeded up the establishment of the puppet government. This latter strategy was, then, aimed at quelling the resistance to the objectives of the US government by creating the illusion of a self-selected form of government. Accordingly there can no longer be a resistance to a US-led occupation. Rather, there begins an insurgency against a legitimate government, its police and army, which the US army was invited to help subdue. This enabled then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, on the 29th November 2005, to ask reporters to cease referring to ‘insurgents’ and start referring to ‘enemies of the legitimate Iraqi Government’, the new ‘facts on the ground’. Rumsfeld argued that ‘insurgent’ legitimises the resistance. Though Rumsfeld missed the point, of course, that ‘insurgent’ also legitimises the authority against which the insurgents are acting.

Certainly the lexical choice matters. If we might move beyond ‘official’ news agencies such as the BBC whilst retaining the lexicon, our chances of finding things out in the less-controlled

Moreover, the positioning of a fighter as insurgent is not just a positioning in media discourse, but also a legal positioning. Human Rights Watch (2004) argued that the status of insurgent means that such fighters are not part of the Iraqi armed forces, and so under IHL (international humanitarian law) they are thus not entitled to the so-called combatant's privilege. The combatant's privilege permits soldiers to fire on enemy troops during an armed conflict without being prosecuted. That is, insurgents in Iraq have no lawful right to take part in armed conflict and may be legally prosecuted under domestic law for taking up arms and conducting armed attacks.

Accordingly, insurgents cannot be afforded prisoner of war status. If one considers the process of invasion and occupation, one can see that Bush’s declaration of the end of the war and establishment of an authority served to illegalise resistance to the occupation, and to remove the legal right of Iraqis to self-defence as enshrined in international law. The BBC’s use of the term ‘insurgent’ reinforces the establishment of such facts-on-the-ground.

Despite the attempts to justify it, the reason for the choice of the term ‘insurgency’ by BBC News is unclear. The BBC justification cited above seems to be simply wrong, certainly as far as it relates to the use of the term prior to the third stage. Perhaps the choice could be explained by drawing on Stuart Hall’s (Hall et al, 1978) concept of primary definers to which mainstream media are too often in subservient relation. There is some evidence for this. For instance, the UK Parliament Select Committee on Foreign Affairs Second Report cites various experts referring to the insurgency in Iraq in 2003, and in the Minutes of Evidence for the Committee, Jonathan Stevenson of the International Institute for Strategic Studies refers to an insurgency having taken place as early as 1st May 2003 (Stevenson, 2004). At the same hearings, Dr Toby Dodge (2004) also referred to the insurgency that he had witnessed in May 2003. In addition, Lewis and Brookes’ (2004) content analysis of the BBC’s
coverage of the build up to the invasion and the invasion itself found that 56% of sources used came from the UK and US government and military. Of course, this is the instance at which we consider primary definers not as individual agents who exert undue influence on language use, but as particular discourses – in this instance, military discourse.

Conclusion

Perhaps the difficulty in naming active opponents to the occupation of Iraq stems from a political culture in which ‘modern political lies’ dominates. There is certainly an element of Arendt’s concept of the modern political lie that tallies with the case of Iraq. Indeed, Kwiatkowski (2004) has written of the need for ‘new Pentagon Papers’ to be written.

To be sure, the ‘factual texture’ in Iraq had been rearranged – or perhaps just arranged – and the words used to describe actors, whether they are ‘terrorist’ or ‘foreign fighter’ in the US or ‘insurgent’ in the UK, did fit without seam into the wider discourse. However, the BBC was reporting ‘truthfully’, and their reports were ‘factually accurate’ in many respects, but this is only the case from within the UK governmental and military discourse. In a sense the reality and the facts have themselves been changed in Iraq to bring about a new situation to which a discourse corresponds. To say ‘what is’ in this situation would involve the continual recognition that the use of the term ‘insurgent’ becomes nearly adequate in the third and fourth period only due to the political manoeuvring that changed the reality of the situation before it is mediated.

In effect the US government sought to set up the conditions in which the resistance to the invasion and occupation was delegitimized, in contrast to the increasingly ‘legitimate’ organs of ‘government’. The reason that the fighters became ‘insurgents’, the reason that the same adjective has moved from false to true, is because of the actions of US planners in establishing a new reality. The BBC’s reporting both reflected and actively reinforced this discourse. The governmental and military discourse became the primary discourse in which protagonists are situated. The stating of what is happening by the governmental and military sources can then be truthfully and accurately reported. Indeed, this ‘neutral’ reporting of factual truth allows itself to presuppose and reinforce the conceptual scheme of those with the power of definition, allowing the latter to frame all subsequent events and factual truths.

This framing then goes on to prompt audience comprehension, future expectations, and therefore future frames of reference and so on. However, even if it were the case that in the third and
fourth period the BBC’s reporting was accurate, then it would still reinforce the UK-US actions and the corresponding discourse. That is, it would not be how those fighting the occupation see themselves.

If the representation of ‘factual truths’ removes them from historical context, and ignores activity at the same time at which it positions those mere facts within already existing discursive relations, then there is little chance of citizens comprehending the truth of the situation, with all of the consequences that entails. As I have tried to show, facts are not mere facts, they are the results of action. The claim to neutrality in certain modes of representing reality masks the subjective, dialectical, activity that lies behind factual truth. If factual truths are not neutral or abstract, but power-ridden and political, then journalists must take a critically intersubjective stance to fully understand them. This would surely be unpopular with chauvinistic presumed audiences, and therefore difficult for most commercial news operations; its rejection of siding with ‘us’ may also mean that state broadcasters, such as the BBC, would come under pressure from governments. The rejection of military and government frames is of course not the only option open to journalists but it is perhaps the one that most effectively enables them to fulfil their obligation to a democratic public.

---

1 The point has been made to me that there is something of an irony in the use of news sources when I am of them. My point, however, is not that news sources can tell us nothing, but that they must be treated cautiously, especially in their plainest form.
2 One can deduce this from the fact that regime change was occasionally stated as a reason for intervention by White House staff, and support for the invasion was consistently higher in the US than in the UK.
3 I thank Tarak Barkawi of the Centre of International Studies, University of Cambridge, for clarifying this point.
Bibliography


Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2006) ‘An Agreement Between Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation’


