

Media Manipulation and the Drums of War: How Media is used to Whip the Nation into Wartime Frenzy

Faking It: How the Media Manipulates the World into War

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As the US and Iranian governments escalate tensions in the already volatile Straits of Hormuz, and China and Russia begin openly questioning Washington's interference in their internal politics, the world remains on a knife-edge of military tension. Far from being a dispassionate observer of these developments, however, the media has in fact been central to increasing those tensions and preparing the public to expect a military confrontation. But as the online media rises to displace the traditional forms by which the public forms its understanding of the world, many are now beginning to see first hand how the media lies the public into war.



[VIDEO: Faking It: How the Media Manipulates the World into War](#)

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The centuries-long history of how media has been used to whip the nation into wartime frenzy, dehumanize the supposed enemies, and even to manipulate the public into believing in causes for war that, decades later, were admitted to be completely fictitious.

As the drums of war begin to beat once again in Iran, Syria, the South China Sea, and other potential hotspots and flashpoints around the globe, concerned citizens are asking how a world so sick of bloodshed and a population so tired of conflict could be led to this spot once again.

To understand this seeming paradox, we must first understand the centuries-long history of how media has been used to whip the nation into wartime frenzy, dehumanize the supposed enemies, and even to manipulate the public into believing in causes for war that, decades later, were admitted to be completely fictitious.

The term "yellow journalism" was coined to describe the type of sensationalistic, scandal-driven, and often erroneous style of reporting popularized by newspapers like William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal. In one of the most egregious examples of this phenomenon, Hearst's papers widely trumpeted the sinking of the Maine as the work of the Spanish. Whipped into an anti-Spanish frenzy by a daily torrent of stories depicting Spanish forces' alleged torture and rape of Cubans, and pushed over the edge by the Maine incident, the public welcomed the beginning of the US-Spanish war. Although it is now widely

believed that the explosion on the Maine was due to a fire in one of its coal bunkers, the initial lurid reports of Spanish involvement stuck and the nation was led into war.

In many ways, the phrase infamously attributed to Hearst in reply to his illustrator “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war,” apocryphal as the story may be, nevertheless perfectly encodes the method by which the public would be led to war time and again through the decades.

The US was drawn into World War I by the sinking of the Lusitania, a British ocean liner carrying American passengers that was torpedoed by German U-boats off the coast of Ireland, killing over 1,000 of its passengers. What the public was not informed about at the time, of course, was that just one week before the incident, then-First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill had written to the President of the Board of Trade that it was “most important to attract neutral shipping to our shores, in the hopes especially of embroiling the United States with Germany.” Nor did reports of the attack announce that the ship was carrying rifle ammunition and other military supplies. Instead, reports once again emphasized that the attack was an out-of-the-blue strike by a maniacal enemy, and the public was led into the war.

The US involvement in World War II was likewise the result of deliberate disinformation. Although the Honolulu Advertiser had even predicted the attack on Pearl Harbor days in advance, the Japanese Naval codes had already been deciphered by that time, and that even Henry Stimson, the US Secretary of War, had noted in his diary the week before that he had discussed in a meeting with Roosevelt “how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves,” the public were still led to believe that the Pearl Harbor attack had been completely unforeseen. Just last month, a newly-declassified memo emerged showing that FDR had been warned of an impending Japanese attack on Hawaii just three days before the events at Pearl Harbor, yet the history books still portray Pearl Harbor as an example of a surprise attack.

In August 1964, the public was told that the North Vietnamese had attacked a US Destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin on two separate occasions. The attacks were portrayed as a clear example of “communist aggression” and a resolution was soon passed in Congress authorizing President Johnson to begin deploying US forces in Vietnam. In 2005, an internal NSA study was released concluding that the second attack in fact never took place. In effect, 60000 American servicemen and as many as three million Vietnamese, let alone as many as 500,000 Cambodians and Laotians, lost their lives because of an incident that did not occur anywhere but in the imagination of the Johnson administration and the pages of the American media.

In 1991, the world was introduced to the emotional story of Nayirah, a Kuwaiti girl who testified about the atrocities committed by Iraqi forces in Kuwait.

What the world was never told was that the incident had in fact been the work of a public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, and the girl had actually been the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador. Once again, the public was whipped into a frenzy of hatred for the Hussein regime, not for the documented atrocities that it had actually committed on segments of its own population with weapons supplied to them by the United States itself, but on the basis of an imaginary story told to the public via their televisions, orchestrated by a pr firm.

In the lead-up to the war on Iraq, the American media infamously took the lead in framing the debate about the Iraqi government's weapons of mass destruction NOT as a question of whether or not they even existed, but as a question of where they had been hidden and what should be done to disarm them. The New York Times led the way with Judith Miller's now infamous reporting on the Iraqi WMD story, now known to have been based on false information from untrustworthy sources, but the rest of the media fell into line with the NBC Nightly News asking "what precise threat Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction pose to America", and Time debating whether Hussein was "making a good-faith effort to disarm Iraq's weapons of mass destruction." Reports about chemical weapons stashes were reported on before they were confirmed, although headlines boldly asserted their existence as indisputable fact. We now know that in fact the stockpiles did not exist, and the administration premeditatedly lied the country into yet another war, but the most intense opposition the Bush administration ever received over this documented war crime was some polite correction on the Sunday political talk show circuit.

Remarkably, the public at large has seemingly learned nothing from all of these documented historical manipulations. If anything, the media has become even bolder in its attempts to manipulate the public's perceptions, perhaps emboldened by the fact that so few in the audience seem willing to question the picture that is being painted for them on the evening news.

Later that year, CNN aired footage of a bombed out Tskhinvali in South Ossetia, falsely labeling it as footage of Gori, which they said had been attacked by the Russians.

In 2009, the BBC showed a cropped image of a rally in Iran which they claimed was a crowd of protesters who assembled to show their opposition to the Iranian government. An uncropped version of the same photograph displayed on the LA Times' website, however, revealed that the photo in fact came from a rally in support of Ahmedinejad.

In August of 2011, the BBC ran footage of what they claimed was a celebration in Tripoli's Green Square. When sharp-eyed viewers noticed that the flags in the footage were in fact Indian flags, the BBC was forced to admit that they had "accidentally" broadcast footage from India instead of Tripoli.

Also that month, CNN reported on a story from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claiming that eight infants in incubators had died in a hospital in Hama when Syrian authorities cut off power in the area. Some news sites even carried pictures of the infants. The images were later admitted to have been taken in Egypt and no evidence has ever emerged to back up the accusations.

As breathtaking as all of these lies, manipulations and so-called "mistakes" are, they in and of themselves don't represent the only functions of the media for the war machine. Now, the US government is taking the lead in becoming more and more directly involved with the shaping of the media message on war propaganda, and the general public is becoming even more ensnared in a false picture of the world through the Pentagon's own lens.

In 2005, the Bush White House admitted to producing videos that were designed to look like news reports from legitimate independent journalists, and then feeding those reports to media outlets as prepackaged material ready to air on the evening news. When the Government Accountability Office ruled that these fake news reports in fact constituted illegal covert propaganda, the White House simply issued a memo declaring the practice to

be legal.

In April 2008, the New York Times revealed a secret US Department of Defense program that was launched in 2002 and involved using retired military officers to implant Pentagon talking points in the media. The officers were presented as “independent analysts” on talk shows and news programs, although they had been specially briefed beforehand by the Pentagon. In December of 2011, the DoD’s own Inspector General released a report concluding that the program was in perfect compliance with government policies and regulations.

Earlier this year, it was revealed the the US government had contracted with HBGary Federal to develop software that create fake social media accounts in order to steer public opinion and promote propaganda on popular websites. The federal contract for the software sourced back to the MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

As the vehicle through which information from the outside world is captured, sorted, edited and transmitted into our homes, the mass media has the huge responsibility of shaping and informing our understanding of events to which we don’t have first-hand access. This is an awesome responsibility in even the most ideal conditions, with diligent reporters guided by trustworthy editors doing their level best to report the most important news in the most straightforward way.

But in a media landscape where a handful of companies own virtually all of the print, radio and television media in each nation, the only recourse the public has is to turn away from the mainstream media altogether. And that is precisely what is happening.

As study after study and report after report has shown, the death of the old media has accelerated in recent years, with more and more people abandoning newspapers and now even television as their main source of news. Instead, the public is increasingly turning toward online sources for their news and information, something that is necessarily worrying for the war machine itself, a system that can only truly flourish when the propaganda arm is held under monopolistic control.

But as citizens turn away from the New York Times and toward independent websites, many run and maintained by citizen journalists and amateur editors, the system that has consolidated its control over the minds of the public for generations seems to finally be showing signs that it may not be invincible.

Surely this is not to say that online media is impervious to the defects that have made the traditional media so unreliable. Quite the contrary. But the difference is that online, there is still for the time being relative freedom of choice at the individual level. While internet freedom exists, individual readers and viewers don’t have to take the word of any website or pundit or commentator on any issue. They can check the source documentation themselves, except, perhaps not coincidentally, on the websites of the traditional media bastions, which tend not to link source material and documentation in their articles.

Hence the SOPA Act, Protect IP, the US government’s attempts to seize websites at the domain name level, and all of the other concerted attacks we have seen on internet freedoms in recent years.

Because ultimately, an informed and engaged public is far less likely to go along with wars

waged for power and profit. And as the public becomes better informed about the very issues that the media has tried to lie to them about for so long, they realize that the answer to all of the mainstream media's war cheerleading and blatant manipulation is perhaps simpler than we ever suspected: All we have to do is turn them off.

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