

The Media Ignore Credible Poll Revealing 1.2 Million Violent Deaths In Iraq

By [Media Lens](#)
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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#)
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We Can't Talk About Oil

The media are not, as is commonly supposed, windows on the world; they are more like paintings or sketches of windows on the world – both the ‘window’ and the ‘reality’ beyond are manufactured corporate products.

The problem is that the manufacturers selling their wares, while portraying themselves as disinterested, are anything but. They are profit-seeking media corporations that have a very clear interest in highlighting certain issues and in burying others out of sight.

Economist Alan Greenspan – former Chairman of the US Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve – writes in a single sentence of his new 531-page memoir:

“I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.” (Leader, ‘Power, not oil, Mr Greenspan,’ Sunday Times, September 16, 2007)

A Sunday Times leader briefly waved away this curious outburst:

“Many free market economists, like their Marxist opponents, fall into the fallacy of believing that everything in politics hinges on financial self-interest. True, oil has always been an important factor in Middle Eastern strategy but even countries opposed to the war believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The real reason for the war was Saddam’s defiance and the projection of US power after 9/11.” (Ibid)

Asked to explain his remark, Greenspan said:

“From a rational point of view, I cannot understand why we don’t name what is evident and indeed a wholly defensible pre-emptive position.” (Richard Adams, ‘Invasion of Iraq was driven by oil, says Greenspan,’ The Guardian, September 17, 2007)

Greenspan noted that he made his “pre-emptive” economic case for war to White House officials and that one lower-level official told him: “Well, unfortunately, we can’t talk about oil.” (Bob Woodward, ‘Greenspan: Ouster Of Hussein Crucial For Oil Security,’ Washington

Post, September 17, 2007)

Greenspan's comment was too important to be completely ignored by the media, but far too dangerous to be seriously discussed (the three sentences from the Sunday Times, above, constitute the most in-depth discussion to appear in the UK press). We can be sure that honest and open analysis of this absolutely central issue will not be forthcoming. Indeed, Greenspan has quickly "clarified" that, in arguing that "the Iraq war is largely about oil", he of course didn't mean that oil was the motivation for the war:

"I was not saying that that's the administration's motive. I'm just saying that if somebody asked me, 'Are we fortunate in taking out Saddam?' I would say it was essential." (Ibid)

1.2 Million Iraqis Have Been Murdered

Another aspect of reality that has no place in the corporate media's painted window was highlighted last Friday with the release (September 14) of a new report by the British polling organisation, Opinion Research Business (ORB). ORB is no dissident, anti-war outfit; it is a respected polling company that has conducted studies for customers as mainstream as the BBC and the Conservative Party.

The latest poll revealed that 1.2 million Iraqi citizens "have been murdered" since the March 2003 US-UK invasion. (www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=78)

In February, Les Roberts, co-author of the 2004 and 2006 Lancet reports, argued that Britain and America might by then have triggered in Iraq "an episode more deadly than the Rwandan genocide", in which 800,000 people were killed. (Roberts, 'Iraq's death toll is far worse than our leaders admit,' The Independent, February 14, 2007; <http://comment.independent.co.uk/commentators/article2268067.ece>)

The key importance of the new poll is that it provides strong evidence for this claim, and strong support for the findings of the 2006 Lancet study, which reported 655,000 deaths. Roberts sent this email in response to the ORB poll:

"The poll is 14 months later with deaths escalating over time. That alone accounts for most of the difference [between the October 2006 Lancet paper and the ORB poll]. There are confidence interval issues, there are reasons to assume the Lancet estimate is too low but the same motives for under-reporting should apply to ORB. Overall they seem very much to align. (e.g. both conclude that: most commonly violent deaths are from gunshot wounds [in contradiction to IBC and the MOH*], most deaths are outside of Baghdad [in contradiction to the other passive monitoring sources which tallied ~3/4th of deaths in the first 4 years in Baghdad and have only recently attributed even 1/2 as being elsewhere], Diyala worse than Anbar....)."

[* MOH = Iraqi Ministry of Health] (Email to Media Lens and others, September 14, 2007)

And yet, despite its obvious significance, the ORB study has been almost entirely blanked by the US-UK media. At time of writing, four days after the findings were announced, the poll has been mentioned in just one national UK newspaper – ironically, the pro-war Observer. It

has been ignored by the Guardian and the Independent.

The BBC's Newsnight may have been alone in providing TV broadcast coverage. The programme devoted the first 28 minutes of its September 14 edition to the financial crisis at Northern Rock bank. At 28:53 anchor Gavin Esler said:

"More than a million Iraqis have been killed since the invasion in 2003, according to the British polling company ORB. The study's likely to fuel controversy over the true, human cost of the war. It's significantly up on the previous highest estimate of 650,000 deaths published by the Lancet last October. At the time, the Iraqi government described +that+ figure as 'ridiculously high'. The independent Iraqi [sic] Body Count group puts the current total at closer to 75,000." (Newsnight, September 14, 2007)

Esler's contribution ended after 34 seconds at 29:27.

Could it be that journalists are just too ill-informed to understand the importance of the ORB study? Not according to news presenter Jon Snow, who responded to one emailer asking why Channel 4 had not covered the new study:

"... anyone who reports Iraq is bound to be aware of every death toll assessment. alas no one has the slightest idea exactly how many people have died..we are all certain that a very greta many have. Obviously those of us who find the war most heinous want to pin the largest possible number on the people who did this. it is an un fulfilling excercise because by definition it is unprovable and therefore pointless. What we do try to do is to report the known deaths whenever they happen. Iraq Body count, the Lancet extrapolated survey, the Red crescent are all estimates that help to give us a sense of numbers, but we shall never know for sure. What we also do is to report the four million poeple (minimum) who have been displaced by the war. the one and a half million in Jordan and in Syria respectively are largely counted numbers and reliable." (www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=8904#8904)

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We are to believe, then, that highly trained professional journalists have a solid grasp of these issues – members of the public need not worry on that score! But what is so striking is that journalists consistently exhibit an inability to grasp even the basic meaning of the figures involved. Consider Esler's comment above:

"The independent Iraqi [sic] Body Count group puts the current total at closer to 75,000."

Iraq Body Count (IBC) does not at all offer a "total" figure to be compared with the Lancet and ORB studies. IBC only collects records of violent civilian deaths reported by two different (mainly Western) media sources operating in Iraq. Epidemiologists report that this type of

study typically captures around 5 per cent of deaths during high levels of violence, such as exists in Iraq. By contrast, the Lancet studies provide figures for all deaths – violent and non-violent, civilian and military, reported and unreported.

The response we received from the Newsnight editor, Peter Barron, is a further case in point:

“I certainly think it was right to report the ORB findings, and to put them in context. The IBC figure is of course not offering a comprehensive estimate of the total number of deaths, but it has the virtue of being real data and therefore provides one end of the spectrum.” (Email to Media Lens, September 17, 2007)

The suggestion that the Lancet reports are not based on “real data” is remarkable. It is also wrong to suggest that IBC provides a different “end of the spectrum” to the Lancet reports. Talk of a “spectrum” presupposes that the same quantity is being measured in each case. But that is simply false.

Snow also comments:

“... alas no one has the slightest idea exactly how many people have died”.

In fact we do have a good idea of how many have died – the issue of exactness is a red herring. The point about the ORB study is that it provides strong supportive evidence for the findings of the earlier, far more detailed and rigorous 2006 Lancet study. The Lancet authors have been calling for exactly this kind of follow up study to help confirm or refute their findings. It seems clear that the Lancet figure of 655,000 deaths, although now a year out of date, was accurate.

For the media to ignore the ORB study is an authentic scandal. Doubtless the failure is in part rooted in simple ignorance of its significance. If so, this amounts to a form of criminal negligence in the face of vast war crimes. But, as discussed above, structural realities continue to apply – the media system is an integrated component of a system that benefits from the subordination of people and truth to profit and power.

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