

When Journalists Act as State Propagandists

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In advance of the invasion of Iraq 20 years ago, the UK media parroted government lies and fabrications uncritically and became an enthusiastic part of the state's propaganda machine. An inquiry into British reporting of the Iraq war is well past due.

Twenty years ago, Tony Blair provided the British public with false information about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction in order to make the case for the illegal invasion of Iraq.

Sir Tony has never gone on trial. He has suffered no personal consequences. Nor have his spy chiefs and advisers. He was recently awarded the Order of the Garter, the highest honour in British public life.

Not one of the British journalists who published Sir Tony's lies and falsehoods about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction has suffered professionally. Many have gone on to greater things.

Meanwhile, those who revealed the illegality and barbarism of the war have suffered. Julian Assange, who revealed so many of the war crimes committed by US forces, now languishes in jail.

In the United States there have been agonised [inquests](#) into the misreporting of Iraq. Not so in Britain, where much of the press and broadcasting media became an enthusiastic part of the state propaganda machine.

Britain's most senior and respected journalists passed on government lies uncritically, very often adding fresh fabrications of their own.

Guardians of the establishment

Take the *Guardian*. It swallowed the Blair government's false claim that Saddam Hussein's agents were scouring Africa for uranium to buy a nuclear bomb – and went much further.

Under the [headline](#): 'Iraq dossier: African gangs offer route to Uranium – Nuclear suspicion falls on Congo and South Africa', the paper claimed to have seen secret documents proving contacts between African militia groups and Baghdad.

The *Observer* was ever more agile and creative in the pro-war cause, seeking ever more sensational angles to demonstrate Saddam Hussein's actual or alleged malevolence, such as a 1,560 word [interview](#) with a woman claiming to be a former lover of Saddam Hussein.

She claimed to have been with Osama Bin Laden as a guest at one of Saddam's palaces, and that Hussein had funded Osama.

Meanwhile the newspaper echoed false claims made by Tony Blair as a post-facto justification for war. "Thousands have died in this war", [thundered](#) the paper's political columnist Andrew Rawnsley, "millions have died at the hands of Saddam."

The *Sunday Telegraph*, meanwhile, pumped out oceans of state propaganda, floating sensational but insubstantial reports which inflamed the mood of public alarm on the eve of war.

On 19 January 2003 it [claimed](#) that United Nations weapons inspectors "have uncovered evidence that proves Saddam Hussein is trying to develop an arsenal of nuclear weapons." In fact when the weapons inspectors produced their verdict a few days later, they concluded nothing of the sort.

The *Sun* [splashed](#) 'Brits 45 minutes from doom' – nonsense. It later told readers that chemical weapons were being "handed to Iraqis on front line" [sic] in an article headlined 'Fiend to unleash poisons', warning readers that "Saddam's vile cousin" Chemical Ali was in charge of the operation.

Blair the hero

Meanwhile, critics of the war were marginalised or smeared. Scott Ritter, the United Nations weapons inspector repeatedly questioned British and United States claims about Saddam's WMD. His well-informed interventions, amply justified as it turned out, were downplayed, while attack stories were boosted.

After Saddam was toppled, No.10 milked the apparent success of the war for political gain. The prime minister authorised carefully selected personal friends to give special interviews with the *Financial Times*' political editor casting light on his state of mind as the decision was made to go to war.

The prime minister was duly portrayed as an heroic figure driven by religious conviction, all accompanied by a series of rare posed photographs portraying Tony Blair as a wizened international statesman who had been to hell and back.

The *Sun* did something similar. Meanwhile it emerged that the *Times* editor, Sir Peter Stothard, had been embedded in Downing Street for the duration of the war writing a narrative of events, *Thirty Days: An Inside Account of Tony Blair at War*, later published by Rupert Murdoch-owned Harper Collins.

Andrew Marr, political editor of the BBC, joined in, [telling](#) TV viewers that Tony Blair "stands

as a larger man and a stronger prime minister” as a consequence of the war. In this way he gave the imprimatur of objective comment to Downing Street’s reinvention of Blair in the aftermath of the war.

There were exceptions, above all the *Daily Mirror* under the editorship of Piers Morgan. In general there is no denying that the great majority of British media became an enthusiastic part of the state propaganda machine.

Cultivated by MI6

One journalist, David Rose, has written with integrity and considerable moral courage about his role in placing false stories into the public domain. As far as I know he is the only journalist to have done so.

In an [article](#) for the *New Statesman* published four years after the invasion, Rose wrote in detail about how he (and other newspaper journalists) had long been cultivated by MI6. In an article which pays revisiting, he wrote:

“To my everlasting regret, I strongly supported the Iraq invasion, in person and in print. I had become a recipient of what we now know to have been sheer disinformation about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and his purported ‘links’ with al-Qaeda – claims put out by [opposition figure] Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress. I took these stories seriously because they were corroborated by ‘off-the-record’ intelligence sources on both sides of the Atlantic.”

He added: “I am certain that those to whom I spoke at MI6 acted then in good faith,” giving as proof his conversation with an intelligence source shortly after the war who reassured him about the existence of Iraqi WMDs in the aftermath of the invasion.

“Don’t worry,” my source said soothingly. “We’ll find them. We’re certain they’re there. It’s just taking longer than we expected. Keep your nerve.”

Share of the blame

The Rose article is suggestive that the role of the intelligence services in disseminating false information about Saddam Hussein’s Iraq went much wider than the discredited September 2002 dossier of Sir John Scarlett, the then head of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

This factor never emerged in either the Hutton Enquiry shortly after the invasion or the Chilcot Report into the war.

To be fair to the late Sir John Chilcot, he did a scrupulous (if too long delayed) job in holding British politicians to account for the conduct of the Iraq invasion. No similar examination has been carried out of British journalists, though independent organisations, above all Media Lens, forensically [exposed](#) the complicity of mainstream media with the state machine right from the start.

Few paid attention. There is an unspoken understanding in the mainstream British press that we do not hold each other to account. Yet journalists and newspaper editors banged the drum for war and thus mobilised public opinion.

We must bear our share of the blame, alongside politicians and intelligence bosses, for the

calamity that followed. Twenty years on, we need a Chilcot report into British reporting of the Iraq war.

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