

The Rhetoric of War

Introduction

The elements of the modern mass media have outgrown the role attributed to them a few decades before. If the media were considered as the keepers of democracy and forthrightness in the society, they have become powerful tools of business in the modern world where business empires are built or broken with their connivance. The media no more is the common man's conscience keeper. They have elevated themselves to the status of conscience makers in the modern society, and with their active support, any one can create a public image that could be far from reality. The media is increasingly becoming business oriented than society oriented, mainly because of the fact that in the modern world, the media is just another business that in turn depends on other businesses for its survival. Hence, the survival of the media actually depends on how it maintains a balance between the business interests of the forces that manipulate it, and the interests and aspirations of the consumers of information that the media organizations churn out. It remains an unfortunate fact that majority of the information that the media gives out on a daily basis is either biased or one sided, and will ultimately benefit those who pull the strings behind the scenes, to suit their whims and fancies.

Many media analysts have time and again reminded us of the ploys that the media adopt in order to generate popular opinion that benefits some vested interests in the society. It would not be wrong to say that the proactive role of the modern media can in fact create public sentiment against heavy odds. This is in contrast to the role of the media a few decades before, when it was content to limit itself to observing public sentiments. Hence, today the media can create value out of something that the consumers may totally ignore

otherwise. Conversely, the media can also destroy the prospects of something that could have potential appeal with the consumers of information. "It would be only right to say that the power of the media to create empathetic public emotion on one hand or contradictory sentiment on the other is one of its most powerful and often dangerous qualities." (De Zengotita, 2003). The Iraq war is a recent development where the power of the media was all the more evident. Although the debate on whether the war was just or unjust is beyond the scope of this paper, it may be observed that the role of the media was quite emphatic in carrying forward the pace of the war. The ethics involved in the war was discussed in many talk shows, articles and documents, each of which carried a certain amount of rhetoric to underline its respective needs.

It is very interesting to note the amount of pain that the makers of a media presentation can take to enforce their opinion on the public. There were many talk shows on TV that debated on the need of the war and the necessity for the United States to engage war with Iraq. The talk shows have covered both the gulf war and the recent Iraq war. Critical observations by De Zengotita (2003) notes that the general ambience of the show, the cast, the presenter, his presentations skills, the way in which he conducts himself and his guests in the show and even the way in which he is dressed, are important to create repetitive impact on the viewers' minds. For example, during the gulf war, the media hyped the need for the United States to upkeep democracy. The Gulf war was projected as a just war by the media and the USA was the keeper of democracy. The presenters were solemn in their analysis and the talk shows used eminent personalities to highlight why it was necessary for America to help a country that was invaded by another. In a way, the talk shows at that time helped to promote the feeling that the USA was just in

trying to help Kuwait, which was wrongly invaded by Iraq. The media tried to focus on the role of America as good Samaritans, who were trying to help the Kuwaitis in trouble. However, the focus was entirely different in the case of the recent war on Iraq. The Iraq war carried so many issues with it and since it was widely known that the war was an excuse by the Bush administration to attack Iraq, the media was also divided on the issues. Hence, discussions on the Iraq war was conspicuous by the fact that most shows were debates that featured two groups which had conflicting ideas on the issue. The presenters were more active, more inquisitive and demanded reasoning for the arguments put forward by the participants. This shows that the modern media has adopted a psychological approach to reinforcing public opinion that is beneficial to them or those who are behind them. It is indeed a matter of concern that the average viewer must be on his guard to avoid being psychologically manipulated by the media.

There are many arguments concerning the arguments for and against war, be it the most recent Iraq war or the earlier gulf war. How we perceive these arguments is directly related to what we hear, see, and read. Through books, articles and speeches we are fed a stream of information. Some of their feelings are in the book "Jarhead" by Anthony Swofford. The article "What Bodies?" by Patrick J Sloyan gives different perspectives in evaluating the war. One the one hand we have President Bush and the news article display a positive view of the war. Anthony Swofford writes about the unrefined personal struggles of the people who contributed to the war. Swofford, in his book, gives us a totally different slant on the Gulf war, based on his grotesque experience as a soldier. Speaking directly from the heart he tells American citizens what they did not know. What went on behind closed doors? Swafford is someone who possesses the ability to show us

a way through the propaganda; someone who has to live to reveal to us that waging war in the pursuit of peace leaves in its wake only victims and never winners. In *Jarhead*, Swafford talks more about the soldiers than the enemy and, of course, it comes from first hand experience. Swafford uses pathos when he identifies with the poor damned soldiers on either side who have to die in a no man's land. He also explains the ethos of the Bush administration that is trying to further its hegemony over smaller nations. On the other hand, he also talks about the Saddam regime that is trying to fool his people with empty brave talk. Swafford uses different writing techniques throughout *Jarhead*, but it only serves to drag us farther into understanding exactly what the soldiers thought and felt, and how they showed their condolences for the enemy instead of detestation for them unlike we expected by stating, "I felt sorry for these poor bastards. They didn't have a chance." He writes, adding quotes from his friend, throughout his book, that were there with him and telling first hand experiences shows us a different face to war other than what the government want us to see

Popular media and news agencies also had a role to play in the gulf war as well as the Iraq war. Unlike in the Gulf war, the major predicament of the Bush administration in Iraq War was that it has not been able to prove anything against the Iraqi dictator, which could initiate a war. The administration, ably supported by the media, tried many excuses to coax the world to unite against Saddam. Al-Qaida, oil hegemony, chemical and possible nuclear warheads, human rights violations etc, have been the common rhetoric of Bush against Saddam. However, these tools of propaganda time and again failed without registering so much as a whimper in the international forum. In fact, it is difficult to believe that the Bush administration itself would believe such fanciful stories. The

question is not whether Iraq is guilty or not guilty of these allegations, which altogether rests on a different perspective. The fact is that America has not been able to prove these allegations beyond doubt, in spite of its relentless efforts. “The allegations that the Bush administration has been putting forward regularly is either too good to be true or can be immediately discarded as framed up stories.” (Bookman, 2003). However, the media carried these stories and often played it up to focus the attention of the American citizens on the issue.

McChesney (2000) in his article ‘Rich Media, Poor Democracy’ enlightens us on the current trends of media establishments and the potential dangers that a business-oriented media can unleash on the general public. McChesney observes that in the modern world, the grip of the media over the public mind is becoming so profound that the media will one day be in a position to denounce public outcry against it. He believes that the media can implement the objective of misleading the public very easily and subtly (McChesney, 2000. p.113). In effect McChesney tries to state that an increasing violation of democratic principles will also see lack of democracy and the public good will on the part of the media. The media, according to McChesney, will denigrate moral values and will collude with covertly dictatorial powers to bring only selected information to the public. The media will be the tool of choice for modern dictators who will enforce their will with the help of the media, without the risk of violence or protests. The consumer would be duped and made to believe the manipulated information that is churned out to them from most of the media. It is ironical how the media could make a sudden turnaround within the time between the gulf war and Iraq war. During the Gulf war, writers emphasized the

need for the United States to maintain the nationality of Kuwait. However, the same media gave a clarion call to occupy Iraq a few years later.

Conclusion:

The role of rhetoric during the gulf war and the Iraq war was different. While during the gulf war, rhetoric makers concentrated on elevating the stature of the United States as a country that defended democracy and nationality, during the Iraq war, the media and associated elements projected the viciousness of Saddam Hussain who had to be eliminated.

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