

MEDIA ALERT: CRUSHING FALLUJA - PART 1

MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

April 19, 2004

On April 10, details emerged from aid agencies and hospital sources that fully 600 Iraqis had been killed and 1700 injured in Falluja, many of them civilians. From the smashed slums of the city, Aljazeera broadcast the reality: a child under five with the top of its head missing; a baby with blast burns to its face and a tube draining from its chest. None of this appeared in the UK media, which expressed no discernible outrage at the spectacle of a superpower waging war on residential areas with 70-ton main battle tanks, bombers and helicopter gunships.

Two days into the attack, ITN's Lunchtime News devoted 6 minutes to the fighting on April 7. But the focus was on the killing of 12 American Marines, US losses that were mentioned 11 times. Iraqi deaths – reported as 66 killed, including many civilians – were mentioned twice. No mention was made of the British killing of 15 people in Amara.

Three days later, the Independent reported the Iraqi toll had reached a staggering 600 dead. Nevertheless, the Independent's front page showed an Iraqi beating a corpse beside a burning convoy. On April 11, the editors wrote a leader titled merely: "Let's see some common sense and humility from the US." Reporting 450 Iraqi dead on April 10, the Guardian showed a group of Marines carrying an injured comrade. The banner quotation was from the single UK mercenary killed:

"We have to fight to a safe haven – but they are all under attack." (April 10, 2004)

Three bullet points followed:

"UK security guard killed as contractors attacked" "Six more westerners taken hostage by rebels"
"Death toll in besieged city of Falluja rises to 450"

What was so striking was not merely that the 450 recently killed in Falluja came last on the list, but the absence of outrage at the scale of the killing.

Human rights activist and trainee lawyer, Jo Wilding, describes some of the reality:

"Screaming women come in, praying, slapping their chests and faces. Maki, a consultant and acting director of the clinic, takes me to the bed where a child of about 10 is lying with a bullet wound to the head. A smaller child is being treated for a similar injury in the next bed. A US sniper hit them and their grandmother as they left their home to flee Fallujah... Snipers are causing not just carnage but also the paralysis of the ambulance and evacuation services. The biggest hospital after the main one was bombed is in US territory and cut off from the clinic by snipers. The ambulance has been repaired four times after bullet damage. Bodies are lying in the streets because nobody can go to collect them without being shot." (Wilding, 'Eyewitness in Fallujah', Sunday Herald, April 18, 2004. See also :www.wildfirejo.blogspot.com)

Blair describes this as "being firm and tough". (BBC 1 Evening News, April 17, 2004)

On April 13, the BBC Lunchtime News contained a 26-second report on the plight of Iraqi refugees, including a 10-second interview with an Iraqi teacher describing the risks faced by civilians in Falluja. Almost nothing of the true scale of the horror and tragedy was communicated.

This was followed by a deeply emotive, impassioned report lasting more than two minutes on the death of Michelle Witmer of the US National Guard. We were given details of Witmer's death, shown the family website, and shown interviews with the victim and with the victim's parents.

We wrote to BBC director of news, Richard Sambrook, and BBC reporter, Caroline Hawley, on April 12:

"When the BBC's reporters covered the atrocities in Madrid last month their horror and outrage were palpable – Stephen Sackur and others did a good job of communicating the suffering and grief. I have seen nothing comparable in BBC1 reporting on Falluja. Where is the sense of outrage and horror at the killing of 600 and wounding of 1700 Iraqis, including many women and children, by a high-tech

superpower?

As you have reported, the casualty rate is 10 Iraqi insurgents and civilians for every US soldier – your coverage has not reflected that this has essentially been a massacre.

Why are you consistently placing greater emphasis on the potential threat to a dozen or so Western hostages than on the actual mass killing of Iraqi civilians? Perhaps I missed it, but I have seen no coverage of the condemnation of the slaughter by Iraq's former Foreign Minister on BBC1, and it would be very difficult to know from BBC1's coverage that British troops killed 15 Iraqis in Amara last week.

Best wishes

David Edwards

BBC News Spokesman, Peter Roberts, responded on April 15:

“Dear David,

I’m writing in response to your email to correspondent, Caroline Hawley regarding the BBC’s coverage of recent events in Iraq. You draw parallels between our coverage of the atrocities in Madrid, and of the fierce fighting in Falluja. I am not sure that is reasonable or helpful to compare the two events in this way. The situations are different in a number of ways. The extraordinary dangers of reporting from inside Iraq at the moment have also made it very difficult to achieve the sort of vivid first-hand reporting to which we aspire. Our news teams are not operating in Falluja at the moment, and their movements overall are restricted as a result of the events of the last few days – which as you must surely appreciate, has heightened the hazards still further. It would be hard to underestimate the dangers and difficulties which all journalists are facing in Iraq, and which have already cost some of them their lives. These obstacles notwithstanding, it is certainly not true to say that we have ignored the situation in Falluja. For example, the plight of the city was clear in a BBC One report on April 11th, which captured the human cost to its inhabitants. John Simpson’s report included pictures of dead civilians and footage of a local children’s ward, and clearly referred to reports of the killing of 600 Iraqis. Secondly, you say that you may have missed condemnation of the slaughter by Iraq’s former Foreign Minister; this is indeed the case, as Adnan Pachachi was heard talking of America’s “excessive use of force” in a live report on BBC One last week. Regards,

Peter Roberts

BBC News Spokesman

We responded also on April 15:

“Dear Peter

Many thanks for your response.

I agree there are significant differences between the killings in Madrid and Falluja – I notice, by the way, that you describe the former as an “atrocity” and the latter as merely “fierce fighting”, that already makes my point – but there are also important similarities.

Both involved the mass killing of innocents – men, women and children. It became quite clear by April 9-10 that around 600 people had been killed in Falluja, many of them civilians. My point is that whereas BBC correspondents openly expressed their horror and moral outrage at the slaughter of 200 people in Madrid, there has been almost nothing comparable to communicate what was surely an American atrocity in Falluja.

The BBC did not have to be present in Falluja to communicate the outrage of Iraqis, aid agencies and others in response to this atrocity. There have also been ample opportunities to interview any number of refugees from Falluja this week. I know you will counter that you have indeed interviewed refugees – notably a woman teacher – but I simply ask you to contrast the sheer intensity of the coverage and the horror communicated by the BBC in reporting the 200 killed in Madrid with the 600 killed in Falluja. There simply is no comparison, even accounting for the differences of access and so on.

You would not guess from BBC reporting that a superpower was engaging in a high-tech massacre of Iraqis – that’s what the 10-1 casualty rate signifies – with 70-ton main battle tanks against lightly

armed insurgents. The impression given was of a conventional battle between two armies – you appeared to see it as a re-run of the 2003 conflict against the regular Iraqi army.

On Adnan Pachachi – you mentioned his condemnation of “excessive use of force”, just once, I suspect. Why did you not give an idea of the real extent of his condemnation? He said:

“We consider the action carried out by US forces illegal and totally unacceptable.”

Coming from someone the Guardian describes as “a secular moderate, who is much trusted by the Americans and stood alongside Mr Bremer at the historic press conference announcing Saddam Hussein's arrest”, these words merited considerable emphasis and in fact repetition over several days, as similar words were tirelessly repeated after the Madrid bombings, of course.

You write “it is certainly not true to say that we have ignored the situation in Falluja.” I have not suggested anything of the sort. But the slaughter of 600 people, many of them civilians, surely requires that the BBC do something more than not ignore the deaths. The real question concerns the tone and extent of coverage of the killing. It's difficult to measure I know, but I can't imagine anyone watching who can have failed to notice your greater focus on US casualties, on the threat to Western hostages, and on the ‘coalition’ point of view. There has been precious little on, or from, the people the ‘coalition’ is said to be liberating.

The impression given by BBC reporting is that the mass killing in Falluja was a relatively minor incident. Although three times as many people died in Falluja, Madrid was presented as an infinitely more important and more severe tragedy. That, I think, takes some real explaining.

Sincerely

David Edwards”

On April 10, we emailed a photograph of a dead Iraqi child from Falluja to the Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger. We considered the picture moving rather than obscene:

“Alan

Your front cover today was so wrong. This should have been the picture – no words, just this. A dead Iraqi child captures perfectly the nature of the West's relationship with Iraq over the past 15 years – war, bombing, sanctions, more war...

Who has paid the price?

Best wishes

David”

Rusbridger responded on the same day:

“You have the advantage over me.... Have been away and have not seen t[he] paper and don't know what's on the front page! Happy easter.”

We responded:

“Your paper shows US troops carrying an injured colleague. The Indy shows an Iraqi beating a dead body beside a burnt out convoy. I find the emphasis amazing given that 450 Iraqis lie dead in Falluja alone, and 10 Iraqis are dying for every 1 coalition, loss.

Sorry to bother you on your break – we all deserve those. Happy easter to you, too!

Best wishes

David”

Rusbridger responded two days later:

“But there again compare this morning's guardian (death toll hits 600) with indie (british hostage freed) or times and tel (british hostage freed in iraq). Swings and easter roundabouts....” (Email to Media Lens, April 12, 2004)

We wrote the same day:

“Yes, swings and roundabouts, but in the same ballpark. What's been staggering is the level of media

indifference to the slaughter of vast numbers of Iraqis. It's like a superpower army is waging high-tech war on city slums – so what! Amazing! The plight of a dozen or so Western hostages has been given far more, and far more emotive, coverage.

On March 12, your leader read: «It was like a modern version of the gruesome wartime images painted by Goya. A Spanish commuter train torn apart. A headless body lying on its front. A three-year-old child burned from head to foot. Amputated legs and arms scattered on station platforms, pieces of human flesh on the road...», and so on.

There's been nothing comparable to this about the far worse slaughter in Falluja. And it's not by foreign terrorists – it's by +our+ alliance.

There's a real problem here – Iraqi deaths just don't matter as much as Western deaths to even our best media; it's a horribly consistent theme. A lot of their suffering, and our suffering, is rooted in this kind of prejudicial compassion. That's the whole message of Easter, isn't it?

Best wishes

David"

Curiously, on April 17, one week after the mass killing had been reported, the Guardian published two strong pieces on Falluja covering much the same material by Jo Wilding and novelist Ronan Bennett.

Part 2 will follow shortly...

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to:

Jonathan Munro, ITN's head of newsgathering: Email: jonathan.munro@itn.co.uk

Richard Sambrook, the BBC's director of news: Email: richard.sambrook@bbc.co.uk

Simon Kelner, editor of the Independent: Email: s.kelner@independent.co.uk

Alan Rusbridger, editor of the Guardian: Email: alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk

Ian Mayes, the Guardian Reader's Editor: Email: ian.mayes@guardian.co.uk

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