

## **News Media Coverage of the Iraq War in Basra, Fall 2007: A case study in “spinning” news for the state**

KURT LANCASTER  
Northern Arizona University

“When we're dealing with Iraq, there's no amount of spin from Washington, or from the U.S. military, or from anyone else that actually matters — [their spin only] helps us feel well, feel good about what's going on in Iraq.”

— Scott Peterson, *The Christian Science Monitor*

By examining several mainstream press stories from *The New York Times*, *CNN.com* and the *Associated Press* during the fall of 2007, the author argues how mainstream news media have mostly failed to examine and put into headlines one of the devastating side effects of the occupation of Iraq: armed militias exerting harsh conditions on the citizens of Iraq, especially in the city of Basra, the site of one of the largest untapped oil reserves in the world. This failure stems from the fact that most of the media appear compliant and complicit in adhering to the government's presentation of conditions in Basra – that it appears to be improving under “regime change.” News sources not beholden to this influence, the alternative news sites of *Salon.com*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *BBC News*, and Juan Cole's *Informed Comment* blog published stories challenging the views presented by the state, sourcing news outside official government channels. By doing so, readers find that the rise of armed militias in Basra caused corruption in the election process, resulting in a stagnation and decay of Basra's infrastructure, the loss of jobs, and the rise of Taliban-like religious edicts taking away women's freedom, as well as music from the public places of the city, which was once considered the Venice of the East.

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Kurt Lancaster: [kurt.lancaster@nau.edu](mailto:kurt.lancaster@nau.edu)

Date submitted: 2008-04-16

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### **Introduction**

If the Iraq War was designed to overthrow an oppressive dictator, or the so-called "regime change" of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, with the purpose of instilling democracy in the region, then one of the failures of the American-led military occupation stems from armed militias exerting harsh Taliban-type rule in various regions of Iraq, including the city of Basra.

### **Argument**

By examining several press stories from *The New York Times*, *CNN.com*, and the *Associated Press* during the fall of 2007, I will argue that much of the mainstream news media have mostly failed to examine and headline one of the devastating side effects of the Iraq occupation: armed militias exerting harsh conditions on the citizens of Iraq, especially in Iraq's second largest city, Basra, the site of one of the largest untapped oil reserves in the world. This failure stems from the fact that most of the news media appear compliant and complicit in adhering to the government's presentation of conditions in Basra, which aids it in becoming "official truth," that Basra appears to be improving under "regime change."

Several news sources not beholden to this influence, the alternative news sites of *Salon.com*, *BBC News*<sup>1</sup>, and *The Christian Science Monitor* (*csmonitor.com*), as well as Juan Cole's news blog site, *Informed Comment* (*juancole.com*), published stories challenging the views presented by the state, sourcing news outside official government channels. Indeed, *Salon*, *Comment*<sup>2</sup>, the *Monitor*, and the *BBC* revealed elements not covered in the mainstream corporate press: The rise of armed militias in Basra caused corruption in the election process, resulting in a stagnation and decay of Basra's infrastructure, the loss of jobs, and the rise of Taliban-like religious edicts taking away women's freedom, as well as music from the public places of the city, which was once considered the Venice of the East.

Seen from this view, it appears that much of the mainstream press's coverage of Basra in 2007 falls under the guise of state propaganda, as defined by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*. In this work, they present a theory of how five core elements evolve a "propaganda model" between corporate media and government: ". . . a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests" (2002, p. 35). These five forces include a profit factor in media ownership, influence of advertisers, political and governmental news sourcing, media

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<sup>1</sup> *BBC News*, although popular in Europe, is not mainstream in the United States. Most Americans may consider it an alternative or a "second read" to *CNN* and *The New York Times*, for example.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Cole's comments and cited news sources on his blog site became the basis of the article he authored for *Salon*. Furthermore, unlike the typical mainstream media reporter, Cole "is a professor of modern Middle Eastern and South Asian history at the University of Michigan" (as stated in his bio at the end of the *Salon* article). The strength of Cole's blog is in his summaries offering a breadth of mainstream and independent articles which include hyperlinks to the sources, as well as his contextualized commentaries on those articles.

harassment, and antipatriotic vilification. In the case of government and corporate media news coverage of Basra — especially in the fall of 2007 — the predominant propaganda interest includes mainstream media sourcing governmental and military news briefs. “The White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, in Washington, D.C., are central nodes of such news activity,” Herman and Chomsky write, because “[e]conomics dictates that they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs” (2002, pp. 18-19). This is similar to Stuart Hall’s argument in “Social Production of News” (2000) — that primary definers set the tone and argument of a news story.

I will argue that the mainstream press, as selectively represented in the examples from 2007 below<sup>3</sup>, adhere mainly to official news sources — spokespeople for the government — and leave out not only the stories effecting the daily lives of Basra’s citizens (the first-hand voices of the dispossessed who are living the reality in the streets), but also the voices that provide intellectual context and depth. By doing so, the mainstream press becomes the outlet for the state’s propaganda “spin” of Basra.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Summary of Mainstream Press***

In the winter of 2007, the British declared that they were pulling out of Iraq’s second largest city, Basra. Holding about 20% of the Middle East’s oil reserves, this strategic port city becomes — in the view of the United States’ Vice President Dick Cheney (one of the principle architects of the Iraq invasion) — “an affirmation of the fact that there are parts of Iraq where things are going pretty well,” a statement he made in response to the British pullout from Basra (Cole, 2007b). In the fall of the same year, as the last of the British troops pulled out of the city and set up a garrison at the airport, armed militias challenged the military presence of the official Iraqi state, bringing hardship to the citizens living in the city.<sup>5</sup> It would not be until the following year that the United States’ backed Iraqi military would attempt to quell the Basra militias.

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<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, this is not a quantitative survey, but a qualitative examination of several examples of news stories about the Iraq war focused primarily on Basra as determined by a Google key word search and key word searches in selected news sites. The representative items come from one of the most respected print dailies, *The New York Times*; one of the most popular broadcast and Web news sources, *CNN*; and the news company, the *Associated Press* in 2007. Furthermore, the alternative news source of *Salon.com* was included, since it is one of the very few presses in the United States that challenges governmental news sourcing. In addition, *The Christian Science Monitor* was chosen as one of the most respected voices in international journalism. And lastly, *BBC News* was a logical choice, since British troops invaded Iraq — and had the responsibility of taking and holding Basra.

<sup>4</sup> It would take until the winter of 2008 — especially during the Iraqi military’s attack against militia in Basra — that widespread news coverage would begin to mention some of the material previously covered in the *Monitor*, *Informed Comment*, *Salon*, and *BBC News* months before.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Cole predicted this result when the British announced the pullout in February in his Feb. 23 *Salon* article.

Indeed, *The New York Times* reported on Nov. 10, 2007, that presidential candidate John McCain wanted to increase troop levels. McCain is summarized as saying that he knew "America was off course [after attending] a trip to Basra in the summer of 2003, when a British colonel warned him that the situation, unchanged, was headed for disaster. He said that when he raised those concerns with [Secretary of Defense] Mr. Rumsfeld, he was ignored" (Santora, 2007). *The New York Times* printed this story because McCain is a presidential candidate and contextualized the story not around the current state of affairs in Basra (Fall 2007, as compared to McCain's visit in 2003), nor through investigation of what is causing Basra to "head for disaster," but by discussing the presidential candidacy of McCain.

Furthermore, *The New York Times* printed an article a few weeks earlier based on a report published by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. The report examined how reconstruction teams led by Americans had "failed to show significant progress in nearly every one of the nation's provincial regions and in the capital" in an attempt "to forge political reconciliation, foster economic growth, and build an effective police force and court system in Iraq" (Glanz, 2007). Again, *The New York Times*, rather than investigating the failure of the progress, quotes an official report and cites those attending an official state hearing (a Congressional oversight committee). Admittedly, the article did cite part of the report that in "Basra, the small- and medium-sized businesses which flourished before the 2003 invasion have since withered" (Glanz, 2007), but it did not follow up as to why and what the conditions were really like (as we'll see later in reports done for *The Christian Science Monitor* and *BBC News*). Ironically, *The New York Times* discussed the militia infiltration of the police department in Basra in October 2005, but this information was never referenced in stories that would appear in *The Times* two years later (Oppel, 2005).

*CNN* published a news article on Nov. 1, 2007, presenting a press conference by Army Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, the second in command in Iraq who spoke on the importance of Bush's troop "surge" in helping to quell the insurgency in various areas, including providing "an oversight role in places such as Basra . . ." (*CNN*, 2007a). Furthermore, he implied that the insurgency was rooted in al Qaeda by stating that "there has been a 'clear rejection of al Qaeda in Iraq by large sections of the population,' including Sunni Arabs." *CNN* quotes the general, but fails to investigate evidence of the way al Qaeda is being rejected, nor does the article examine the Islamic religious edicts that have taken away freedoms in Basra and elsewhere.

An article published on *CNN.com* (Sept. 3, 2007), stated that British troops had pulled out of their base in Basra. "During their time in Basra, British forces have helped the Iraqis take more responsibility for governing the area, [British Embassy spokeswoman Rosie Tapper] said" (*CNN*, 2007b). The article cites a British Embassy official, but gives no report as to what the citizens of Basra think about the pullout.

The *Associated Press* reported that the violence against British troops subsided 90% after the British pulled out of Basra — having set up a garrison outside the city and no longer patrolling the streets — and handed over the patrolling duties to the Iraqi military, who have since become the target of attacks: "'They're increasingly in the frame — more at risk — as they take over more responsibility,' [Maj. Gen.] Binns said of his Iraqi counterparts" (*Associated Press*, 2007). Again, although the reporter sources

a general who would know the statistics of how violence against the British had dramatically lessened, the article does not discuss the side effect of the British pullout — the rise of militias who enforce clerical edicts that reflect the type of control found in Afghanistan's Taliban. Additionally, it indicates that the attacks against the Iraqi military are better in comparison to attacks against the British, who were part of the invasion force that created the conditions in the first place.

### ***Alternative Sources***

Rather than rely solely on official news sources of the state, as seen above, alternative news sites such as *Salon.com*, Juan Cole's *Informed Comment*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and some of the reports by Andrew North of the *BBC News* utilized analyses and sources outside the official faces of the state's authority in presenting evidence of how the British pullout would cause — and continue to cause — serious problems for the citizens of Basra. In addition, *nytimes.com* would publish a video story around the same time as the *csmonitor.com*'s audio slideshow in exploring the effects of the troop surge in Iraq.

Juan Cole, writing for *Salon.com* on Feb. 23, 2007, reported Tony Blair's declaration that he would be pulling troops out of Basra. Cole cited Vice President Dick Cheney (who responded to the British Prime Minister's pullout announcement): "What I see [. . .] is an affirmation of the fact that there are parts of Iraq where things are going pretty well" (Cole, 2007b). Furthermore, Cole challenged the government's view by describing how "provincial elections held in January 2005" brought in "[t]wenty of the 41 seats [which] went to the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, a party close to Iran that seeks an Islamic state and wishes to see Basra part of a Shiite super-province in the south. The Virtue Party of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Ya'qubi put together a coalition that controlled the other 21 seats, giving it a majority and allowing it to appoint the governor and police chief" (Cole, 2007b). Following the elections, the

Virtue Party infiltrated its supporters into the Basra police force, as did SCIRI. Both parties fielded their militias to patrol neighborhoods and impose a puritanical moralizing on the population, destroying liquor and video stores and forcing girls to veil. The militias are accused of engaging in turf wars for rights to petroleum smuggling. They compete with each other, with the Mahdi army, and with Marsh Arab tribesmen, who often function as mafias or militias themselves. (Cole, 2007b)

This information was not found in any of the fall 2007 mainstream press articles cited above, a failure of journalists relying solely on official state news sources.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Two days before the publication of Cole's *Salon* article, he would write on his blog about the British pullout: "This is a rout, there should be no mistake. The fractious Shiite militias and tribes of Iraq's South have made it impossible for the British to stay. They already left Dhi Qar province, as well as sleepy Muthanna. They moved the British consulate to the airport because they couldn't protect it in Basra. They are taking mortar and rocket fire at their bases every night. Raiding militia HQs has not resulted in any permanent change in the situation. Basra is dominated by four paramilitaries, who are

Furthermore, nearly a year before this article, on May 27, 2006, Cole would summarize (and congratulate) reporter Mariam Karouny — writing for *Reuters* — about her article on the local politicization of the authority over oil in Basra and the Iraqi government: lessening exports of oil as a “protest [of] the federal government’s refusal to appoint a member of Virtue as Minister of Petroleum” (Cole, 2006: Karouny, 2006). Although the on-the-ground politics is discussed in this article, Karouny does not mention the harsh conditions of the policies of the Virtual Party. Neither was Karouny’s article, as far as the author could find, published in any of the mainstream press publications.

*The Christian Science Monitor* reported on Sept. 19, 2007, that after the British pullout, armed militias competed for Basra’s oil reserves. A senior official of South Oil Company is quoted as saying, “There is an invasion by parties and militias . . . we are a mouthwatering prize,” he says, adding that recently 8,000 people, most of them illiterate, were pushed on to the company’s payrolls” (Dagher, 2007a). A resident of Basra confirmed the militia’s grip on power: “You can only work at the port if you join a militia. I thought about it, but then my two cousins who had joined were badly wounded in a clash. So now we just sit home and shut up,” says resident Jalal Ali” (Dagher, 2007a). The journalist, Sam Dagher, cites a nongovernmental news source, and by doing so, gives the readers a view not found in much of the mainstream press. We now begin to understand why the smaller businesses in Basra have “withered,” as asserted above in James Glanz’s article for *The New York Times* — who revolved his story around a governmental report.

In addition to his print story, Sam Dagher also presented an audio slideshow report for *csmonitor.com* on Basra, describing how this city — once considered “the Venice of the East” — contained “a massive waste dump with smoldering garbage, [. . .] the stench of raw sewage [is] everywhere in the city — there are pools and canals of it everywhere” (2007b). Dagher also noted how feuding between political parties and militias forced the government to turn its attention away from rebuilding the infrastructure. In addition, the lack of jobs is a prevalent problem. Furthermore, the reporter noticed how black paint had been sprayed on the picture of a woman on a billboard advertising cell phone service, along with the graffiti, “No, no to unveiled women” (2007b). Other billboards and signs stated that women had to wear headscarves and dress modestly, backed by a religious edict by a local Muslim cleric. “If a woman is not wearing a veil, she will be murdered,” one Basra woman told Dagher, who also reported how music had been banned throughout Basra by the militias, because it was considered “unIslamic” (Dagher, 2007b). None of this information was reported in the other mainstream press stories surveyed for this article.

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fighting turf wars with one another and with the Iraqi government over oil smuggling rights. Blair is not leaving Basra because the British mission has been accomplished. He is leaving because he has concluded that it cannot be, and that if he tries any further, it will completely sink the Labor Party, perhaps for decades to come” (Cole, 2007a).



**Scenes of Basra: 'Venice of the East' revisited, a correspondent returns three years later**  
 Click on image for audio slideshow which examines the deteriorating conditions in Basra. Here, a billboard shows a woman's face spray-painted out, warning that women need to wear *hijab*. Photo by Sam Dagher, courtesy of *The Christian Science Monitor* [www.csmonitor.com/slideshows/2007/scenesbasra](http://www.csmonitor.com/slideshows/2007/scenesbasra)

Earlier in the same month as Dagher's report, *nytimes.com* published a video story examining the result of the troop surge in Iraq (Sept. 9, 2007). The filmmakers explored the conditions in Baghdad that echo in some ways the conditions in Basra, specifically, "in the absence of a functioning government, the militia [Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army] runs this middle class neighborhood like a mafia . . ." (Cave, 2007). Indeed, Damien and Diana Oliva Cave report that, in certain parts of the city, "the influence of religious parties — like Sadr's — has grown. Liquor stores have closed. And even secular women now wear hijab out of fear. The American surge has done little to affect this. The cultural life of Baghdad remains highly restricted." Thus, it appears the surge in Iraq — and the troop pullout in Basra — may result in less overall violence, but the rise of religious extremism is allowing fewer Western-style freedoms, the presumed purpose of Bush's "regime change" in the first place. The report concludes that it is safer, but "Shiite militias and Sunni insurgents still rule the streets. Iraqis have electricity for only a few hours a day . . . Trash is everywhere" (Cave & Cave, 2007) — the very conditions that *The Christian Science Monitor's* Sam Dagher found in Basra.



***Baghdad: Assessing the 'Surge'***

[Click on image](http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=2fc2eb0e78a6363a5b706d4e2d43159d4f0ef403) to view video documentary from *nytimes.com* which examines the failing conditions of life in Baghdad. Documentary by Diana Oliva Cave and Damian Cave, courtesy of *The New York Times*.  
[http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr\\_story=2fc2eb0e78a6363a5b706d4e2d43159d4f0ef403](http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=2fc2eb0e78a6363a5b706d4e2d43159d4f0ef403)

Furthermore, Damien Cave, co-credited on the video with his wife, videographer Diana Oliva Cave, co-authored a print article for *The New York Times*, published on the same day as the video. This is one of the few times mainstream media offered an alternative viewpoint to the state-spun news sourcing found in the other *Times'* articles in the fall, and this article does not cover Basra, but Baghdad. (Since the conditions were similar, it is included in this case study.) It shows the strength of on-the-ground reporting by *The Times*, when it's not just sourcing state officials. In it, Cave and Farrell (2007) write about the civil war conflict in and around Baghdad (the reporters visited 20 neighborhoods and interviewed 150 residents). They found that

Families in Huriya depend on the Sadr organization for gas, medicine, and other necessities. In return, many Shiites say they live in constant fear of a knock on the door: Sometimes the gunmen come to borrow a car or a house; sometimes they demand help at a checkpoint, or for a mission to kill or displace Sunnis from another neighborhood. Whatever the militia demands, it gets: 'You have to prove your loyalty to them, otherwise you won't be safe,' said Lamyia al-Saedi, 31, a Shiite government employee who moved to Huriya eight months ago after being expelled from neighboring Adel, a Sunni stronghold. (Cave & Farrell, 2007)

After *The New York Times'* article and video, and Sam Dagher's work for the *Monitor* in September, Mona Mahmoud and Mike Lanchin of *BBC World Service* and Andrew North of *BBC News* wrote about the religiously motivated violence against Basra's women in November and December 2007. North, interviewing residents in Basra, discussed how "Shia militias, including the Mehdi army of Moqtada Sadr, [instigated] a campaign of intimidation and violence, particularly against women." One woman told North that she did not "feel safe even going to the market. [. . .] We could be shot by the militias at any time. I cannot go out without a hijab." Furthermore, similar to the photos and audio slideshow by the *Monitor's* Dagher, North observed "stenciled warnings, in red paint, [. . .] on walls across the city — threatening any women who go out without hijab, or Islamic headscarf. 'Whoever violates this will be punished,' the anonymous notice reads. 'God is our witness that we warned them'" (North, 2007).

Although Mahmoud and Lanchin sourced the police chief of Basra, Major General Abdul Jalil Khalaf, in this case the state authority wasn't "spinning" the news, but stating facts: "[Religious extremists] kill women, leave a piece of paper on her or dress her in indecent clothes so as to justify their horrible crimes'" (2007). Moreover, the journalists interviewed women in Basra and did not solely interview a state figure (unlike the pattern followed by most of the corporate mainstream press in the articles cited above). One of these women, a lawyer, told the *BBC* that "a group of men" confronted her, exclaiming how "she should be at home and get married instead of working." The lawyer felt that they were intimidated by her: "When they see a woman going out to work and being successful, I'm sorry, but they feel inferior to her'" (Mahmoud & Lanchin, 2007).

### ***Mainstream vs. Alternative***

Even with just a handful of random newspaper articles (selected by doing a word search of "Basra" in each newspaper's respective search engine and using stories that had something significant to say about Basra in fall of 2007), it is clear that popular, mainstream news sites in the United States — like *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and the *Associated Press* (used by many news organizations) — present news stories depicting the government's message, with little coverage of alternative views or sources outside the state's authority structure (with the exception of *nytimes.com's* video documentary and article published Sept. 9, 2007).

Returning to Chomsky and Herman's "propaganda model" in *Manufacturing Consent*, they believe that mainstream press adheres to governmental contacts, press conferences, and reports as trusted news sources, because it saves money (2002, p. 22). However, it results in a form of propaganda, a filter

wherein “powerful sources regularly take advantage of media routines [such as deadline schedules] and dependency to ‘manage’ the media, to manipulate them into following a special agenda and framework” (2002, p. 23). At the very least, this process creates a complicit and compliant press that adheres to government sources without question, accepting their performances as truth — what gets reported as “news” worthy of their audience’s attention.

In all of the mainstream examples provided above, all of the sources were governmental officials — the newsworthy sources Chomsky and Herman warn could lead to propaganda:

1. *The New York Times* (Santora, 2007) sources Republican Presidential candidate John McCain. If McCain were not a candidate and just a gas station worker in Arizona, for example, his views of the war would have never have been published.
2. *The New York Times* (Glanz, 2007) utilized a report by a federal oversight committee. As the article states: “The release of the report was linked to testimony on Thursday by the special inspector general, Stuart W. Bowen, Jr., before the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee.” The article revolves around the testimony in front of this subcommittee, including testimony by Philip T. Reeker, the “counselor for public affairs at the United States Embassy in Baghdad.” In addition to the testimony, the article cites passages from the government report. Notice, in contrast to the Basra report done for *The Christian Science Monitor*, where the reporter interviewed citizens living in Basra and took photos of the failing infrastructure in Basra, *The New York Times* utilized the government report for their news source:

Even in Anbar, where the tribes have joined with the United States to fight militants associated with Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a homegrown Sunni extremist group that American intelligence agencies say is foreign-led, a lack of fuel and reliable electricity is hindering economic development, *the report found* (Emphasis added).

3. *CNN* (2007a) wrote their report summarizing the key points of a press conference by Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno in Baghdad. There’s a “clear rejection of al Qaeda in Iraq by large sections of the population,” but what is not said is how the warlord militias support the edicts of clerics who instill fear in citizens and have subverted democracy.
4. *CNN* (2007b) sourced the British Ministry of Defense. At the same time, retired British Major General Tim Cross, criticized former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for failing to have a cohesive postwar plan. Other sources included Rear Admiral Mark Fox who defended the U.S. strategy, and British Embassy spokeswoman Rosie Tapper, who told *CNN* that, “During their time in Basra, British forces have helped the Iraqis take more responsibility for governing the area . . . .” Furthermore, *CNN* explains how the British Ministry of Defense covers the disagreement with Rumsfeld by relying on a “statement saying the generals are both ‘private individuals expressing private views, and we respect that. They are entitled to their opinions.’” The reporters failed to quote any citizens living in Basra on what they felt about the British

pullout. Challenges to American authority remained at a collegial level — war leaders have “differences of opinion” — but *CNN* did not critique the policy nor delve into the deeper issues, as explored by *Salon.com*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *BBC News*, especially on how the British power vacuum brought in competing militias and Taliban-like religious edicts against the citizens (notably the effects of such policies against women).

5. The *Associated Press* (2007) relied on a general for its article about the drop in violence in Basra. However, the article fails to mention the conditions of Basra and the presence of religious edicts.

It can be seen in these few examples how mainstream media, by sourcing governmental personnel, reports, and other resources, failed to present their audiences the context and depth of reporting that was found in the alternative news sources, which tend to examine issues in depth that include interviews with citizens affected by the decisions of the policy makers, who are also often victims of those in power. If mainstream presses continue to rely on government sources and elide the kind of primary information found in alternative sources, then a majority of the population who rely on mainstream presses fail to receive any other truth than the one provided by the state.

Indeed, Professor Cole, writing for *Salon*, used Mr. Cheney as a news source in the opening of his article, citing his assertion that he felt the British pullout from Basra was “an affirmation of the fact that there are parts of Iraq where things are going pretty well.” However, rather than utilizing other governmental sources to support this opinion or cite another government source that was contrary without actually critiquing policy, as in *CNN*'s report (2007b) of the “differences of opinion” between Cross's critique of Rumsfeld's failed postwar strategy without going into the effects of the British pullout, Cole, in his *Salon* article, purposely gathers and presents evidence that Cheney's assertion is Orwellian in nature. The subtitle hook states: “Vice President Cheney says the British are leaving southern Iraq because things are going so well. In the real world, Basra is a mess.” In addition, Cole quoted a news source that challenged the official public spin that Cheney put on the issue, citing U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as saying that he would prefer the British to stay longer. Cole would even attribute this assertion to Cheney:

He was certainly speaking on behalf of Cheney, even if the vice president, confronted with the actual departure of America's most important ally, now chooses to feign optimism. Cheney's sunny misdirection obscures the dangers of a British withdrawal in the absence of any sign of reconciliation by Iraq's warring factions. (Cole, 2007b)

The differences of the presentation of the news in Basra between the mainstream press and other news sources in 2007 presents an alarming trend. (Perhaps this should act as a case study warning journalists, editors, and students at journalism schools what happens when government sources are utilized solely in news articles.) Relying on government sources that support the government's spin on the Iraq war as a positive force and/or relying on government reports without providing the depth found in on-site investigative reporting is misleading. It tends to leave out the citizen's points of view, as we can see in the report given in *The Christian Science Monitor*, in the documentary and article given in *The New York Times*, and several articles published by *BBC News*. At the very least, it is ironic that the reporters for

*The Times* didn't reference the first-hand accounts provided in their paper's video section and the article by Cave and Farrell. Furthermore, it seems interesting to note the difference in the breadth of sources found in Juan Cole's *Informed Comment* ([www.juancole.com](http://www.juancole.com)) — a site created by a Middle Eastern scholar — and the limited government-based sources found in the mainstream press.

On the surface, it may seem surprising how a state-owned media outlet, such as the *BBC* (where one would expect to see more state-influenced sourcing of news), would indeed present more in-field reporting and critique of the government than the private corporate media in the United States. But, perhaps it is not so surprising after all, since the *BBC* is not necessarily beholden to corporate interests and therefore fall outside the profit motive form of propaganda as explored by Herman and Chomsky. And indeed, a perusal of the *BBC News* Web site reveals such articles as Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's deputy leader, stating how the UK withdrawal was a retreat and the "U.S.-led coalition was 'defeated and looking for a way out' of Iraq" (*BBC News*, 2007b) and an article published on Sept. 3, 2007, presents two interviews of Basra residents who supported the British pullout (*BBC News*, 2007a). These two samples alone show the breadth of coverage offered by *BBC News* in the fall of 2007 — important stories not readily found in some of the mainstream press in the United States during the same time period.

### ***Journalism Subsumed in State Performance***

Utilizing government sources as the source of the news, journalists writing for mainstream news outlets become subsumed into the views of the government. And they end up writing stories — narratives — that dominate the readership, thus fulfilling the government's desires that news organizations become an outlet for its own legitimacy in the eyes of most of its citizens, as argued by Herman and Chomsky (2002).

On the other hand, Scott Peterson, a veteran reporter for the *Monitor*, mentioned the importance of journalists who refuse to spin for government new sources:

I want to see the world through [my subject's] eyes. It's easy enough to sit there and go to every press conference, listening to officials saying this and that. But in the end, really, what I've come to realize is that you need to understand the human voice, the people behind it, and what *their* perceptions are. In fact, when we're dealing with Iraq, there's no amount of spin from Washington, or from the U.S. military, or from anyone else that actually matters — [their spin only] helps *us* feel well, feel good about what's going on in Iraq. (Peterson, 2008)

Narrative power, as Lyotard suggests in *The Postmodern Condition*, legitimizes the state by narrative's ability to "determine criteria of competence . . . They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question . . ." (1984, [1979], p. 23). By adhering to the state as the source of knowledge and by instilling and publishing the state's narratives, the press legitimizes the government as a competent power even when the government lies about, or at the very least, elides the truth. Yet this power isn't just comprised of politicians, the "traditional political class," as Lyotard puts it, but rather, it is

"a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations" (p. 14), most of whom become tapped by news organizations for their authoritative truth knowledge.

Mainstream media's desire to source from this "composite layer" — generals, embassy spokespeople, presidential candidates, ministry members, and their attendant reports were all sourced in news of Basra in fall 2007 — resulting in narratives of power that engaged its reality by means of performance.

Most of the mainstream press's presentations of their core narratives of Basra were culled from staged public pronouncements by government officials, whether from news releases, press conferences, or some other form of public presentation. These events become a specialized form of political theater with its own narrative designs. David Apter, professor emeritus at Yale University, writes in his essay, "Politics as theater: An alternative view on the rationalities of power," that narratives are designed to draw "spectators together, constituting followers of audiences, mobilizing understanding to form a dramaturgy of power. The drama, when successfully played and re-enacted, builds up those continuities of language and performance that anchor, by means of the events of the drama, the storyline of retrieved history, and the logic of a projected future, a reconstitution of the body politic" (2006, p. 233).

Consider the Basra reports in the press as an extension of state power — and the presentation of a particular point of view by the state to its citizens is the communication of state power, especially when the state is attempting to exert compliance ("mobilizing understanding" of its policies and political acts, its "dramaturgy of power"). This form of political theater is designed to "anchor" the audience into the state's own history, creating citizens who become the body of political power — especially when those citizens pay taxes that allow the state to present its show, its justification of power, which in this case, is the Iraq war.

The official narratives presented by the state, as conveyed by the mainstream press, become the performances by which information is conveyed. These narratives, comprised of actors — the spokespeople of the state drama — convey a Basra of subsiding violence or present vague problematical conditions without detail or first-hand knowledge. One of the main characters in this state drama, Major General Graham Binns, speaks his lines: "We thought, 'If 90% of the violence is directed at us [the British military presence in Basra], what would happen if we stepped back?'" The dramatic action against them subsided (a 90% drop in violence), and the audience becomes relieved as the *mise en scène* evolves from a script accounting continual violence to a plot finally reaching some form of resolution.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, in "Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy," argues how performances, as a kind of ritual, are designed to create a connection between performers and audiences. This is a process of "fusion" that makes the performance successful — the audience "gets it." In complex societies, where audiences are more segmented ("de-fused") in their views, the performers have a more difficult time in "re-fusing" the audience to the performance. "To the degree they achieve re-fusion, social performances become convincing and effective — more ritual like. To the degree social performances remain de-fused, they seem artificial and contrived . . ." (2006, p. 32).

The government of the state utilizes the press in order to "re-fuse" its citizens into its drama of necessity, its desire to remain in power. And as the Iraq war has become increasingly unpopular with a majority of its audience, the state has realized how important it is to present success stories, narratives that show how "we" are winning, as can be seen in a Nov. 25 article from *The New York Times*:

As violence declines in Baghdad, the leading Democratic presidential candidates are undertaking a new and challenging balancing act on Iraq: acknowledging that success, trying to shift the focus to the lack of political progress there, and highlighting more domestic concerns like health care and the economy. (Healy 2007)

The fact that this paper of record reports the positive spin of the government on decreasing violence — presumably against allied troops — without acknowledging the failure of Basra, for example, reveals to what extent and the process by which state reality is propagandized by the media. Indeed, *The New York Times'* documentary video<sup>7</sup> and the article by Cave and Farrell appear to provide the kinds of alternative news sourcing not found in the other *Times'* stories outlined above.

### **Conclusion**

Since the beginning of the Iraq War, the mainstream press in the United States has conveyed the wishes of the state with little questioning of its exertion of power, creating a compliant citizenry who fail to question their own government, because the narrative tool of expression, the mainstream press, often remains a mouthpiece for the state. As the war becomes increasingly unpopular, as the mainstream press tends to reveal more of the downside of the war, the state tries to present a performance of competence on the public stage. Yet, if the press had questioned the government's assertions for the need to invade Iraq in the first place, its desire to go to war may have been subsumed in the population's desire to avoid war, and Congress may have failed to support the invasion of Iraq, thus providing a proper check against the unprecedented power of an imperial presidency.

It is mainly within the alternative press that citizens can find stories that reveal a different kind of truth than the one presented by the state through the mainstream news media, which often continues to source government officials as the conveyor of its news. As this habit continues, it appears that a majority of citizens, who rely on the mainstream press to receive the news of their government, remain blind to other views and other narratives being expressed that show a different side to the one the government continually presents. These alternative narratives, if presented in the mainstream, would challenge, and perhaps change, the policies of the government.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it may be that certain video journalists, such as Travis Fox from *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/photo/bestofthepost/foxtravis/>) and Kevin Sites (<http://hotzone.yahoo.com/>), may be in the best position to avoid government news sources, since they tend to avoid the official channels by their very nature of being on the ground, interviewing locals, and shooting action footage in order to create documentary-style news packages for the Web.

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