

The western media's contribution to the war effort
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By Faisal Bodi

Based on presentation given at the seminar, 'Human Rights, Justice and Muslims in the Wake of September 11, 2001' organised by Islamic Human Rights Commission.

Journalists working for British newspapers have been grumbling recently about the way the British government is leaning on editors to fall behind its phony war in Afghanistan. Even staff at the left-of-centre qualities have noticed a definite reduction in the anti-war tone struck in the days immediately after September 11. It could even be said that the press, democracy's fourth estate, has become a fifth column. It happened during the Falklands, and also both Gulf wars. Just as MPs and opposition parties feel this instinctive need to get behind the country when it is at war, so do the agencies of information.

Everyone has seen the jingoistic headlines adorning the tabloids. But the warmongering has also extended to broadcasting. On Sunday October 5, the day the bombing of Afghanistan began, I phoned the BBC's complaints line. Newscasters had been referring to the bombing as a "war against terrorism": no adjectives, no qualifications, just a plain old-fashioned "war on terrorism". Hold on, I thought; isn't that what the American and British governments are calling it? My interlocutor on the other side paused for thought. Well, what would you like it to be called, he came back. There were a number of options, I said: an imperial aggression, a war against political Islam, or even a US-led war against Bin Ladin and the Taliban. But surely it was a partial position to take to call it a 'war on terrorism'. Needless to say I haven't seen any change in BBC policy: the attitude is deliberate. Decisions about sensitive editorial matters are never taken lightly, and the people who make them know full well the implications of the language they use.

By calling it a 'war against terror' those sections of the mass media are effectively aligning themselves with US policy, and the infantile choice given by George Bush (if you're not with us, you're against us). Of course such a choice is hardly a choice at all. But the media's acceptance of it is important because it tells us that the media have become a protagonist in this conflict.

The organisation Reporters without Borders has published a report that we should all read. It documents how, in this stifling atmosphere, the freedom to dissent has become the war's first casualty. The report's writers say that the tone of US coverage of the events of September 11 and their aftermath changed as soon as President Bush announced the war on terrorism (September 20), becoming immediately more patriotic and propagandist. Broadcasts became all "beating the drum and flags flying in the wind. It was no longer news," said foreign correspondent Richard Hetu, a journalist with La Presse, a Canadian daily. "Instead of news broadcasts, Americans are watching advertising spots to the glory of their country," said another journalist.

In the US the Fifth Amendment itself came under attack. America's editors were in agreement that their journalists should not "speak with the same voice as their enemy". Some heads rolled. Dan Guthrie of the Daily Courier at Grant's Pass wrote on September 15 that George Bush had "skedaddled" in the face of the attacks, accusing him of being "an embarrassment" for "hiding in a Nebraska hole" on the day of the terrorist attacks. He lost his job: according to his employer, for "personal reasons".

On "Politically Incorrect", his talkshow on ABC, Bill Maher said on September 17: "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly." In response two main sponsors, Federal Express and Sears, pulled out of their agreement with ABC; a number of television stations linked to the ABC network, mainly in New York and Washington, withdrew the Bill Maher programme after White House spokesman Ari Fleisher called his remarks "unpatriotic".

Another decision of the US administration that drew much attention was the authorities' attempt to block the broadcast at the end of September of an interview with Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, on the Congress-financed Voice of America. Then there was the absurd sight of Colin Powell asking the Emir of Qatar to rein in Arab satellite station al-Jazeera. This is another example of the kind of foreign policy and 'democracy' that George Bush now wants everybody to defend, and that America has been pushing in the Muslim world. For Muslims democracy is a bitter pill, not a sweet fruit. It means censorship and repression, not freedom and respect for human rights.

What really annoys the US is the fact that stations which serve as its own mouthpieces, like CNN, have no monopoly (or indeed even access) to coverage of this war, although this will probably change soon. What it does not realise, or refuses to accept, is that the reason al-Jazeera came about in the first place was that CNN and its like had alienated Muslim audiences with their biased coverage, especially of Palestine and its occupiers.

Has no one wondered why since September 11, despite any amount of commentary and analysis in the 'quality' press, there has been no examination of any of the root causes of this conflict? For instance those puppet regimes (especially in the Muslim world) which for 50 years have crushed every sign of dissent? On the contrary, some of the mass media have been actively doing their best to bolster the reputations of these governments, in what seems to be a calculated attempt to shore up the fragile western coalition.

I refer in particular to a report on the BBC about the recent meeting in Qatar of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. The reporter described this rubber-stamp organisation, comprised almost wholly of dictators and monarchs, as "representing 75 percent of the Muslim world". It is as if this particular report had a very clear political purpose: to assist the British government in disabusing Muslims of their strong suspicion (nay, belief) that this is really a war against Islam. If there is one thing Tony Blair is terrified of, it is the prospect of internal Muslim dissent, which will set back his attempts to hold the Muslim countries in his coalition. Now every GCSE student of politics knows that there are very few popularly-elected governments in the Muslim world, so to ask us to believe that BBC journalists don't know this is to ask for the impossible: we just can't do it.

For a fortnight or so I have been following some Pakistani newspapers and far eastern internet reports. Their picture is of a depth and breadth of opposition to this war that western coverage is not even approaching. We didn't learn from western sources that (for instance) in Rawalpindi protestors burnt a whole army barracks to the ground; nor that in some border towns of Pakistan ordinary men and women have been selling their livestock and even eggs so that they can send money to those now engaged in jihad against the US; nor that protests in Indonesia have been growing and on Friday 19 October there were tens

of thousands of people on the streets of Jakarta to demonstrate against the 'war' on Afghanistan and its people.

Non-presentation and misrepresentation are two marked features of reporting since September 11. Why, I have asked myself, has no media outlet given any significant attention to the not insignificant issue of the flimsy grounds on which this war is being prosecuted? Or to the paucity of evidence on which Usama bin Ladin stands accused? Instead there is heavy emphasis on the probable humanitarian disaster, as if that were the only major objection we should have to this war.

I also wonder why no searching questions have been asked about al-Qaeda and other Islamic movements. Is it because, if they were, westerners know that the answers would be a little too uncomfortable; that these are groups that have legitimate political aspirations and aims? On the domestic front, the partiality of the popular media has led to a disturbing development in the ways British Muslims are represented. Ever fond of creating confrontation because of its drama value after all, conflict always makes good drama, and drama always makes good news—the mass media have set up contending camps of 'moderates' and 'extremists'. The 'moderates' are those Muslims who, like the media portraying them, support the war or are not prepared to condemn it, those to whom I have referred (in the Guardian) as "the stooges who march dutifully down to Downing St every time the Prime Minister wants to convey the impression that Muslims are on side in his war." By contrast the 'extremists' are those lunatics on the fringes of the community who (allegedly) supported the September 11 attacks and now also condemn the war.

The vast space in the centre occupied by most of the Muslims in this country, who condemn both the events of September 11 and the 'war on terrorism' (at least as it is presently being waged) is ignored, or undermined by columnists such as David Aaronovitch, writing in the Independent, who are telling Muslims that they are stupid for considering this to be a war against Islam.

Back in the days when rap music had a social conscience and a message, the dissident group Public Enemy produced a hit called "Don't believe the hype". But it ignored the question of what people should believe instead. Back then, of course, we didn't have the internet. Information was controlled then to a degree it is impossible to achieve now. Today there is an alternative to the self-censored or state-controlled information that comes our way. There is now a plethora of alternative websites where we can get our news. Sites such as truthteller.com, [reportersnotebook](http://reportersnotebook.com) and [infotimes](http://infotimes.com) are ones that I recommend, as well as [Ummahnews](http://ummahnews.com). And for those of us who cannot reach the internet, there is al-Jazeera. What nobody has is any more is an excuse: a plea of ignorance will no longer do.

Faisal Bodi is a freelance journalist and commentator in the UK and editor of ummahnews.com. He presented the above at the seminar 'Human Rights, Justice and Muslims in the Wake of September 11,' organised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies, London, UK in October 2001. For a copy of the seminar video or more information, please contact IHRC on (+44) 20 8902 0888, fax (+44) 20 8902 0889, email: info@ihrc.org, web: www.ihrc.org.