



## Discussion Papers

# IRAQ: Broadening the Agenda

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For anyone who believes in the value of news as a public service, there has been plenty of encouragement in journalists' response to the war-on-Iraq story, especially over the last few weeks. There have been some fine examples, both in newspapers and on radio and television, of coverage which have lived up to the great liberal idea of journalism as an essential civic tool in a democracy, equipping us to reach informed assessments of what is being done or proposed in our names.

But there are some persistent problems – areas where those clear waters are muddied by received conventions of the industry, which are now, in practice, impeding efforts to hold power to account on behalf of the public.

Perhaps one of the most highly developed statements of public service, as a concept in journalism, comes in the BBC Producer Guidelines. It says the aim of BBC News is to 'offer viewers and listeners an intelligent and informed account of issues that enables them to form their own views'.

To achieve this, the Guidelines refer several times to the need to 'ensure that a full range of significant views and perspectives are heard' especially in dealing with 'major matters of controversy' – like war on Iraq, in fact. They explicitly state that 'there are generally more than two sides to any issue' and that 'no significant strand of thought should go unreflected or under-represented'.

These guidelines arise from the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster. The Independent Television Commission (ITC) Programme Code sets out very similar guidelines for journalists in commercial television news organisations. But they're aspirations many journalists in unregulated sectors also share – as the series of discussions organised over the last couple of years by Reporting the World has made clear.

### Oil

One indication that something might be interfering with efforts to carry out these aspirations was perhaps rather cruelly summed up in a phrase used by Robert Fisk – "it's fine to mention the war, just don't mention the oil".

Actually that's slightly misleading. Oil is being mentioned, but not generally in a way likely to help readers or audiences in forming their own views of its significance as part of the explanation for the build-up to war.

In the first five weeks or so of 2003, using the Lexis-Nexis internet search engine shows the number of articles in UK newspapers in which the words Iraq, war and either Bush or Blair – or both of course – appear together. A hefty 4,657, or about 130 a day. Of those, just over one in five – 967 – also contain the word, oil.

Put a hundred of those under the microscope, as a sample, and we can get a more detailed picture. 41 made just glancing references either to oil prices or to the UN oil-for-food programme, leaving 59. Of those 59, nine referred to calculations over future oil contracts as motivating factors in diplomatic manoeuvrings by France and Russia, not the United States or United Kingdom – leaving 50.

Of those 50, 13 – more than one in four – were not pieces by journalists but readers' letters, far higher than the average, leaving 37. Of those 37, 12 were accounted for by the allegation from Saddam Hussein in reports of his interview with Tony Benn, leaving 25.

Of those 25, seven raised the idea that oil might have something to do with US or UK policy, only to dismiss it – leaving 18. Of those 18, none contained anything more than a reference to the fact that – to use a phrase that crops up in several of them – 'many people think it's all about oil'. It's an analytical factor used, in other words, more for support than for illumination.

### **Oil and broadcast news**

Is it any different on television or radio? Some efforts have been made to open up the issue, notably, in the BBC's 'Iraq Day'. But from a combination of scanning broadcasters' websites, my own experience as a listener and viewer and talking to one or two editors, I can identify only a tiny handful of pieces from BBC output – or those of commercial broadcasters – which have come to grips with any aspect of the oil agenda.

There was one good television piece in October of last year, a special report by Graham Satchell for BBC Breakfast, followed by a studio discussion involving Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn, and former US under-Secretary of State, James Rubin. It was slightly undermined by announcing at the start that it was 'a conspiracy theory' but the piece and the discussion did an effective job of raising the question - is it really 'all about oil'?

What is almost entirely absent is any attempt to follow the story – not by examining *whether* it is a story but to report developments *as if* it is a story.

There is a 'disconnect' here. The governed have become disconnected from the government. Opinion polls suggest large numbers of people in Britain believe that oil has at least some part to play in setting an agenda for war. The Pew Research Centre, in one of its global opinion surveys, late last year, put the proportion of Britons taking that view at 44%.

A couple of months earlier, Channel 4 commissioned a poll to go with one of their programmes that presented respondents with a menu of options as to what they thought George W Bush was really up to. Taking action to snuff out a threat to global security – the official explanation – came top with 22%, but a grab for Iraq's oil was close behind with 21%.

But with one or two exceptions, like Ken Livingstone at the Hyde Park anti-war rally, Britain's political class have not broken step with the official line.

### **Conventions**

This is where the conventions impede journalists from doing the job we aspire to do, in particular the convention known as 'indexing'. Issues and controversies are projected onto differences among various branches of 'officialdom'.

Party political or inter-governmental exchanges, critical reports from a select group of think-tanks and non-governmental organisations, finding former or (rarer) serving police or army chiefs to take issue with government policy – these are all familiar examples of 'indexing'.

But if no-one from within those circles cares to challenge some aspect of the official line, how can it be put to the test? If it is acknowledged, that to equip readers and audiences to reach their own informed view of important questions, a full range of perspectives is required, then we must on occasion be prepared to suspend or sidestep the conventions.

So what are the missing oil stories? There have been a number of leads, which could have been followed up, but were not, at least not to any great extent. A few examples:

The Lord Browne story. Lord Browne, Chairman of BP and one of New Labour's favourite industrialists, said in October of last year, when presenting his company's half-year results, that he feared war in Iraq would see UK oil companies squeezed out in favour of US majors. He appealed to the Government to use whatever influence it could bring to bear, to ensure "a level playing field". His remarks found their way into just one report – in the following day's Guardian.

The Oil Depletion story. Back in November, the Centre for Oil Depletion Analysis released a study saying the world's oil supplies were running out faster than had previously been thought. This would make the relative importance of Iraqi oil – cheap, plentiful and of proven high quality – greater than generally appreciated. This development made the basis for two opinion pieces, one in the Guardian and one in the Sunday Times. The latter, by John Humphrys, was the only time a broadcast journalist touched the story.

The SUV (Sports Utility Vehicle) story. The Detroit Centre, a pressure group headed by Arianna Huffington, launched a national TV advertising campaign earlier this year, aimed at linking Americans' insatiable appetite for Middle East oil, to burn in their SUVs, and the terrorist threat to the US. The fact that Americans were being invited to connect oil and security in this way made the initiative highly unusual. Here, it found its way into a handful of downpage items in newspapers, and nothing on radio or television.

None of these would have been an earth-shattering story in its own right, but they are similar in form, if not content, to many that make an entirely respectable showing, as an inside page lead in print or as, say, the fourth or fifth story in TV and radio news bulletins.

The point is, these were opportunities to explore part of the agenda which is currently under-represented, thanks to conventions of newsgathering which have turned out to be unhelpful in doing the job we aspire to do. Each could have triggered a number of follow-ups.

What would reporters have found, had they pursued these leads? Is there a story here? Professor Paul Rogers of Bradford University, in his guise as Security Columnist for the Open Democracy website is one of very few journalists to have traced the influence of oil on the development of US strategic and military thinking.

"The crisis with Iraq which now seems to be coming to a head," he wrote, in his last column of last year, "is part of a much larger game-plan concerning long-term influence over oil supplies." Rogers goes on to explain how the US Military Posture Statement of 1982 - the first of the Reagan era - sketched out a security scenario in which US oil supplies were jeopardised by developments including the recent Iranian revolution. The strategic priority was to ensure a more biddable political settlement in the crucial oil-producing region of the Middle East.

Furthermore, "many of the security hawks in the Reagan era of the 1980s are back in power with Bush, often in positions of greater influence." There was "a deep and pervading recognition at the heart of the Bush administration that the most significant future vulnerability for the United States is its steadily growing dependence on Gulf oil."

## **Control**

It is not for journalists to *adjudicate* between competing explanations for the policies or behaviour of governments or individuals. One would not, as a reporter, set out to 'prove' or 'disprove' the saloon-bar claim that 'it's all about oil', if only because we can surely allow that human motivations are more complex than that.

But to ignore it is to occlude a real 'major matter of controversy' raised by the war-on-Iraq story, about which the public really do need an 'intelligent, informed account' to help them reach their own view.

At stake is whether security, for comparatively wealthy inhabitants of comparatively wealthy countries – a global elite of perhaps a billion people – can any longer be delivered by continuing to consume more than our fair share of the world's now dwindling resources, with the use of various forms of coercion, up to and including military force, to keep any show of dissent from within the 'majority world' - the poor and dispossessed – under control.

This is where the SUV story might attain particular resonance. Nineteen years on from the Pentagon paper, in 2001, another report, sponsored by the US Council on Foreign Relations and the Baker Institute for Public Policy, spelt out some of the links between energy and security policies. "The American people," it noted, "continue to demand plentiful and cheap energy without sacrifice or inconvenience."

"The world," it went on, "is currently precariously close to utilising all of its available global oil production capacity" with Iraq playing the role of a "swing producer, turning its taps on and off when it has felt such action was in its strategic interest." This amounted to a crisis, the report argued, which in turn required "a reassessment of the role of energy in American foreign policy."

The connections here? Well, the 'Baker' is James A Baker III, Secretary of State in the first Bush Administration. And there are clear rhetorical similarities with early attempts by the current Bush Administration to convince Americans that they face an 'energy crisis' - requiring, for instance, squeamishness about environmental damage to be set aside in favour of drilling for oil in the Alaskan wilderness.

Do Britons, for example, wish to join Americans in demanding plentiful and cheap resources – including energy – without sacrifice or inconvenience? Or would they rather assess their real needs, in a context of scarcity, and try to secure them as part of a system of global governance marked by enhanced international cooperation?

A system capable of fostering a shared sense of justice and fairness in the way resources are allocated and conflicts handled – based on global institutions and forms of cooperation, from arms control regimes and the International Criminal Court to agreements to limit fuel consumption in order to slow or prevent climate change?

What did September 11 and the emergence of an international terrorist threat tell us about the relative costs of those two approaches? There is a need here – now, given the timing, an urgent need - for journalists to explore and illuminate these questions, to trace the connections and investigate the political antecedents of present policy, if we are to enjoy the benefits a free press can bring to the health of our democracy.

## **Alternatives**

The other major under-developed aspect of this story has been the lack of any alternatives being put before us, which we could use to assess the relative merits of what we are being told.

The proposition from the Prime Minister, for instance, has remained unaltered, in form if not in content, since it was launched at his Sedgefield news conference in September of last year. We can 'deal with' Saddam Hussein, meaning war, or we can 'turn a blind eye'.

There is, in fact, no shortage of suggestions for alternative ways in which the international community could deal with the present dangerous situation. As with the oil agenda, though, few, if any official sources have an interest in drawing attention to them. What is needed is a positive agenda by journalists, realizing the limitations imposed by existing conventions, to reach out to new sources and new ways of reporting, if they are to live up to the aspirations embodied in either the BBC guidelines, or the broader liberal ideals shared by so many editors and reporters.

There are at least two examples of initiatives that have been under-reported. First, Mary Kaldor has suggested a UN resolution demanding the right for Opposition parties to open offices inside Iraq and requiring an account to be made of the fate of political prisoners. In short, applying pressure through 'human rights inspectors' to join the UNMOVIC team in Iraq.

Second, following the visit to Baghdad by Scilla Elworthy of the Oxford Research Group, she has put forward a platform of ideas, including lifting sanctions to allow greater oil sales, with the proceeds going to build a fund held in trust by the UN which could in turn be released in exchange for verifiable democratic reforms. The UN could also oversee the return of Iraqi exiles, Dr Elworthy suggests, in particular those with skills the country needs for reconstruction, with an electronic 'tagging' system to enable inspectors to keep tabs on their movements and ensure their safety.

These two suggestions were marshalled in a skilful op-ed piece by Jonathan Freedland in the Guardian this week, but there has generally been far too little ventilation of alternative ideas to equip us to make an informed assessment of the different cases Blair has been putting forward – that war is the only feasible solution to problems as diverse as clandestine weapons programmes, shadowy links with terrorist groups and human rights violations visited on the Iraqi people.

On too many occasions, journalists automatically disqualify such ideas from their attention because they do not emanate from official sources – the question, 'who's saying this?' is one of the biggest impediments in trying to carry out the job of ensuring that a full range of significant views and perspectives are heard.

In one case, it is reported, the International Herald Tribune spent two months deliberating, then finally rejected a piece from the former UN coordinator in Iraq, Hans von Sponeck, on the grounds that its suggestions, for an EU role in mediating the crisis, were 'unrealistic'.

Newspapers are not being neutral when they apply these criteria. Quite the opposite, in fact. By taking such action editors ensure that such ideas remain unrealistic because they cannot enter the public realm. There is no pressure in the system on anyone to explain why they are unrealistic – a situation the present reporting conventions help to perpetuate.

We are blessed with large numbers of editors, reporters and producers determined to apply their considerable intellectual energies to providing a genuinely useful public service, as the Reporting the World discussions have shown.

In order to close the gap, between aspiration and delivery, however, certain conventions must be set aside, in favour of a positive agenda to seek out stories and sources from beyond the 'usual suspects'. Only then can readers and audiences be equipped to reach their own informed views of what is at stake for them in the themes currently dominating our news.

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