

Fiction or News?

A Quest for Multidisciplinary Research on the Entertainment Industry and Its Effect on Journalism

RUNE OTTOSEN

Michael Moore used the stage at the Academy Awards this year for a political manifestation against President Bush. When receiving the award for his film “Bowling for Columbine” his opening remark was: “We are living in a fictitious society”. Moore’s point was that it is increasingly difficult to identify the borderline between fiction and reality. His claim in the book “Stupid White Men” was that even the more recent presidential election was fiction, because the actual winner, Al Gore, is not in the White House (Moore 2001). As Astrid Söderbergh Widding showed us in her interesting paper, an obvious consequence of the increased influence of the entertainment and film industry was the election of a B-actor like Ronald Reagan to the office of President of the United States. In that respect, Reagan created a trend of which Arnold Schwarzenegger is the most recent example. Schwarzenegger made the conversion from the screen to public office by announcing his candidacy for the office of Governor of California – the very place Ronald Reagan started his political carrier. Or is it correct to call it a conversion? Can we see a trend in which actors are successful in politics because acting and media performance are more important than politics itself? The list of actors turned politicians is growing: Jerry Springer, the famous talk show host, became Mayor of Cincinnati in 1977; Clint Eastwood became Mayor of Carmel California in 1986; Sony Bono became Mayor of Palm Springs and senator from California; not to mention TV-wrestler Jesse Ventura, Governor of Minnesota since 1998 (*Aftenposten* 8.8. 2003).

Returning to Ronald Reagan, it is a fact that he was the first president to systematically use PR agencies to ensure that he got his message through to the public (Schiller et al. 1992). As we all know, the purpose of PR agencies is to drive home the opinion on whatever message their clients want to sell – whether the message contains truth or lies is of less importance. This point was highlighted recently during the hearing in Great Britain after the tragic suicide of David Kelly and the testimonies indicating that the Blair government partly used fiction to make the threat from Saddam Hussein look more “sexy” – whatever that might actually mean.

I have never understood why a threat and the potential existence of weapons of mass destruction should be considered “sexy”. To fully understand this, I think we should look to the field of gender research. In one of her studies, Berit von der Lippe identified the linkage between male dominance and the heavy use of sex-related metaphor within the field of

security police and defence studies (von der Lippe: 1999:163). As we have seen the past few weeks, the core of the campaign to persuade the world to go to war against Iraq seems to have been partly based on fiction. Because there is thus far no evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein, it seems apparent that world opinion was led to believe that these non-existent weapons constituted an immediate threat to the world. I have been asked to follow up Astrid Söderberg Widding's paper using my background from research on war coverage in news media to highlight the borderline between fiction and reality in war propaganda. I find this an interesting challenge, and after thinking about it during the summer, I am convinced that there is a need for more collaboration and multidisciplinary research between scholars working with film and those like myself working mostly with the news media.

New York Times revealed, in January 2002, that the US Minister of Defence, Donald Rumsfeldt, had created the "Office of strategic Influence" – authorized to manipulate media with lies if necessary to rally the media behind the war against terrorism. It was apparently closed down after this exposure, but the operation continued under the name "Operation for Special plans" and was under the direct control of Central Command at the headquarters in Qatar during the war against Iraq (Arkin 2003). At the press centre in Qatar, the stage was designed by Hollywood consultants to make the "performance" of the military spokesmen more convincing. Philip Knightley, in a quite frightening essay entitled "Turning the tanks on the reporter", claimed that the Pentagon's actual policy during the Iraq war was to target those journalists and media reporting "from the side of the enemy", whether it was Al Jazeera or critical reporters from Europe. Knightley pointed out that "The Pentagon made it clear from the beginning of the Iraq war that there would be no censorship. What it failed to say was that war correspondents might find themselves in a situation similar to that in Korea in 1950. This was described by one American correspondent as the military saying: 'You can write what you like – but if we don't like it we'll shoot you.' Up to now (mid-August), seventeen media people are dead. The war in Iraq was the most dangerous war for journalists ever, if you consider how short the campaign was. Knightley also pointed out the connection between this danger and the performance on the Hollywood-created scene in Qatar. When New York magazine writer Michael Wolff broke ranks at the coalition's daily press conference at Qatar and asked General Brooks: 'Why are we here? Why should we stay? What's the value of what we're learning at this million-dollar press centre?' Fox TV attacked him for lack of patriotism, and right-wing commentator Rush Limbaugh gave out Wolff's email address. In one day, Wolff received 3,000 hate emails. One day a mysterious civilian in army uniform took him aside and told him: 'This is a fucking war, asshole. No more questions for you.' As Knightley put it: "Wolff realised that the press conferences were not for the benefit of correspondents. The correspondents were extras in a piece of theatre" (quoted from Knightley 2003). I will use the opportunity here to credit Sigrun Slapgard, correspondent from the Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK) at the press centre in Qatar during the Iraqi war. Several times during her stay, she made a point of how little information they received at the press centre.

This is, of course, not the first time Hollywood consultants were used to polish up the Pentagon's information strategy. After the terrible attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, the Pentagon consulted Hollywood in order to understand the new situation for US society (VG 9.10. 2001). Among those called in to assist were screenwriter Steven E. DeSouza (responsible for the movie *Die Hard*), director Joseph Zito (creator of "Delta Force One Missing in Action") and the TV writer David Engelbach (responsible

for the MacGyver series). The irony of this is that makers of fiction were consulted to help the US administration face reality (Grossberg 2001).

It is no news that the Pentagon has professionalized its information strategy since the Vietnam War when the military lost its grip on public opinion (Ottosen 1994). The Pentagon-Hollywood relationship is one part of the new strategy. The magazine "Brills content" revealed in 1999 that the Pentagon has its own officers whose job it is to be consultants on media scripts and to decide whether or not the Pentagon will take part in a production. Once the decision on cooperation is made, their job is to be helpful in providing military personnel and technical assistance in the form of equipment, planes and naval ships. An example: The script of the movie "Asteroid" included a story about an American space-shuttle sent into space to use nuclear weapons to shoot down and an asteroid approaching the earth. The problem at the time was that the Pentagon felt obliged to respect the treaty banning deployment of nuclear weapons in space. The Pentagon consultants then suggested an alternative. If the manuscript were changed, the Pentagon would put at the movie crew's disposal the newest model of the F-16 airplane, air base and flying time free of charge. This was an opportunity to show off their latest equipment and heroic pilots. So the deal was done.

The Pentagon gets about 100 movie manuscript in their hands every year and decides to cooperate in about one third of the cases. Many times negotiations and compromises are necessary in order to satisfy the Pentagon. There is also competition between the different branches of the military in this field. A liaison officer from the Air Force is working full-time to "sell" the Air Force to Hollywood. Before the major movie "Air Force One", the US Air Force lent six F-158 planes free of charge (Gunn 1999).

For me, the most interesting cases are, of course, movies based on real wars. The most recent example is "Black Hawk Down", based on the failed "Operation Restore Hope" in Somalia in 1992, in which 18 American soldiers died. I myself have written an essay about this entitled "Rambo in Somalia" (Ottosen 1997). In this case, the Pentagon liked the script because the heroic images of the soldiers dying in battle helped to rewrite the image of a failure operation. And the film got their support, but at what price? "If you want to use the military's toys you've got to play by their rules", said military technical adviser John Lovett (AP 2001). The military historian Lawrence Suid explained in detail how this system works in the book *Guts & Glory*. Suid called it a "system for mutual exploitations" (Ibid.).

If the Pentagon dislikes the manuscript, they turn down any suggestion of cooperation. They provided no help for the movie "Apocalypse Now" about an officer during the Vietnam War who was dispatched to kill another officers. This was not good advertising to boost the image of the just and heroic soldier. For the Gulf War film "Courage under fire", negotiations for support failed because there was no clear "good guy" in Meg Ryan's crew (Ibid.).

Commercial television is of course the link between the entertainment and the news industry. The television series "The Agency" produced by CBS was sponsored by the CIA. This series, in which heroic CIA agents save the world from Arabic terrorists and villains, is produced in close cooperation with the CIA. The CIA had consultants working on the manuscript and the agency put their locations and manpower at the disposal of the series. According to *The New York Times*, the CIA explained this by claiming that it was a part of the agency's strategy to get through to the public with "the truth about the CIA" and persuaded the sceptics to increase the funding for a budget of 30 billion dollars. Interestingly enough, the Norwegian commercial channel TV2 bought the rights

to the series in Norway, according to the newspaper *Dagens Næringsliv*, without knowledge of the CIA's role in the making of the series (Kibar 2002). Johan Roppen has given other examples of series like *Pensacola – Wings of God*, created to boost the image of the Pentagon, the CIA and other government agencies (Roppen 2001).

This is, of course, also an issue of globalization. These series, like *Jack Bauer* and *24 hours*, are now running all over the world (including Norway). It is part of the competition in a global market. As Edward Herman and Robert McChesney showed in their excellent book "The Global Media. The new missionaries of global capitalism," motion pictures and radio technology were among the first industries to compete on a global market. As early as in 1914, 85 per cent of the world's film audience was watching American movies (Herman & McChesney: 13-14). One of the early players in this market in broadcasting was CBS – just mentioned in connection with the series "The Agency". They started their global career in radio and helped create *Voice of America* as a propaganda tool for the US government during the Second World War. The experience with film, broadcasting and propaganda in general elevated the importance of communication in the minds of policy-makers during the interwar years and has continued to do so to this very day. As a result, US-based film companies still have commercial and political global hegemony. The global film industry was controlled by a few US companies like Columbia, Twentieth Century-Fox, United Artists, MCA (Universal), Warner Brothers, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount (Herman & McChesney:19).

Historically, under US broadcasting regulations (subsequently partly eliminated and under constant pressure), the US networks NBC, CBS and ABC have been restricted in what they are allowed to produce for domestic broadcast. Thus, the major US program producers, and therefore the major global TV production studios, were actually the film studios of Hollywood (Herman & McChesney:21).

The present global market is dominated by the studios owned by Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, Universal, Sony Polygram and News Corporation.

The introduction of global satellite television – with 24 hours news and CNN as the first big player on the news market, with the Gulf War in 1991 as its commercial breakthrough – changed the news industry forever. In an international comparative study, my Swedish colleague Stig Arne Nohrstedt and I have documented how television coverage of the Gulf War constituted the distribution of US perspectives to a global audience (Nohrstedt & Ottosen 1991). The existence of Al Jazeera and other Arab channels, however, has made it more difficult to spread simplified US propaganda to a global television audience through the news.

The merging of the entertainment and film industry and the news industry was evident when Time Warner bought CNN and when Disney bought the television network ABC. Robert Murdoch had his breakthrough in the British media market (primarily newspapers) in the 1960s. When he became big in the US market in the 1980s, his company News Corporation purchased Twentieth Century Fox, which led to creation of the Fox Television Network.

Fox Television is an interesting phenomenon in this borderline between entertainment and news. Its news program created history during the first phase of the war against terror when a so-called reporter sat on top of a US tank during the war in Afghanistan, shooting his own pistol into the air to prove his patriotic position. During the new atmosphere of patriotic reporting after September 11, Murdoch himself broke new barriers in the discussion on the line between enterprise control and editorial autonomy when he ordered his editors, on a global basis, to support the US-led war in Iraq.

I will end my comment with some perspectives on the “soap opera” known as the Jessica Lynch Story. The positive aspect of this is that it was the BBC, with their critical journalism, that revealed the disinformation campaign surrounding the story. There is still hope for journalism. The following is based on BBC reporter John Kampfner’s version, as it was told through the BBC documentary “War Spin”. According to Kampfner, Private Jessica Lynch became a propaganda icon of the war. The story of her capture by the Iraqis and her rescue by US Special Forces became one of the great patriotic moments of the conflict. But this story, according to Kampfner, “is one of the most stunning pieces of news management ever conceived”. Jessica Lynch, a 19-year-old army clerk from Palestine, West Virginia, was captured when her company took a wrong turn just outside Nasiriya. The car was ambushed and nine of her comrades were killed. Jessica Lynch was taken to the local hospital, which at the time was full of Iraqi soldiers. Eight days later, US Special Forces stormed the hospital, capturing the “dramatic” events on a night vision camera.

The propaganda version was that they had to come under fire from the hospital, but still they made it to Lynch and rescued her in a dramatic helicopter escape. We were told that she had stab and bullet wounds, and that she had been physically harmed during interrogations.

But Iraqi doctors in Nasiriya said they provided the best treatment they could for her in the midst of war. She was assigned the only specialist bed in the hospital, and one of only two nurses on the floor took care of her. “I examined her, I saw she had a broken arm, a broken thigh and a dislocated ankle,” said Dr Harith a-Houssona, who looked after her and was interviewed by BBC. The doctor said he saw no sign of shooting, no bullet inside her body, no stab wound – only signs of the traffic accident. Witnesses told BBC that the Special Forces knew that the Iraqi military had fled a day before they swooped down on the hospital. “We were surprised. Why do this? There was no military, there were no soldiers in the hospital,” said Dr Anmar Uday, who worked there at the time. The next remark by Dr. Uday in the BBC interview is interesting:

“It was like a Hollywood film. They cried ‘go, go, go’, with guns and blanks without bullets, blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show for the American attack on the hospital action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.” said Dr. Uday.

Two days before the snatch squad arrived, Dr. Harith had arranged to deliver Jessica to the Americans in an ambulance. So there seems to have been no justification for this operation at all.

When footage of the rescue was released, General Vincent Brooks, US spokesman in Doha, said: “Some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know that they’ll never leave a fallen comrade” (quoted from Kampfner).

The American strategy was to ensure the right television footage by using embedded reporters and images from their own cameras, editing the film themselves.

According to Kampfner, the Pentagon had been influenced by Hollywood producers of reality TV and action movies, notably the man behind *Black Hawk Down*, Jerry Bruckheimer.

Bruckheimer advised the Pentagon on the primetime television series “Profiles from the Front Line” that followed US forces in Afghanistan in 2001. That approach was adopted and developed on the field of battle in Iraq and manifested itself in the story of Jessica Lynch. But doctors now say she has no recollection of the whole episode and probably never will (quoted Kampfner 2003).

Now the hunt is on for Jessica's version, and it is worth millions. The networks, film companies and publishing houses are lining up with their million dollar contracts.

According to the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen*, CBS offered the Lynch family a multimedia package. CBS is owned by Viacom and also controls Paramount, the video rental chain Blockbuster, MTV and other entertainment companies. Officially, there is no editorial linkage between the companies just mentioned, but in the letter from CBS, the family was promised a great deal of money for exposure in different media. It should all begin with a journalistic interview on CBS, which they, according to their code of ethics, could not pay for. But the family was offered money for recirculation of the story by other Viacom companies, including a two-hour documentary, a special MTV program, and a televised welcome home concert in her hometown. Included in the package were talks with the Viacom publishing company Simon & Schuster on a book based on her story (Kulås 2003). A few days ago, I read in the Norwegian newspaper *Verdens Gang* that the family has turned down all the offers for an interview and decided to publish her story in a book they can control themselves (price tag for the rights unknown). NBC, which tried to offer an even better deal than CBS, has not been stopped by a "no" from the Lynch family. They will now make an unauthorized movie on the story of Jessica Lynch with Laure Regan in the role as Jessica (VG NETT 11.8. 2003).

There is an interesting footnote to the Jessica Lynch story. Earlier this year, the journalist Jason Blair was fired from the *New York Times* after it was revealed that he had made up many of the stories he had written for the newspaper. The story that finally revealed his fraudulent behaviour was an alleged portrait of Jessica's family. It was stolen from a Texas newspaper, which recognized the essential part in the article, reproduced by Blair in his New York apartment.

There is some irony to this. The American public is getting high on a patriotic story based partly on fiction. A journalist rightfully lost his job, and the most prestigious newspaper in the US had to engage in humiliating self-criticism before its readers because of a comparably small fraud – small compared to the big fraud of the story on Jessica Lynch, which lives on and on and is constantly being reproduced as propaganda. Unlike with Jason Blair, nobody seems to hold anybody in the US media industry or in the Pentagon's propaganda machinery accountable for this fiction presented as facts. Thank you for the attention.

References

- AP (Associated Press) (2001) "Pentagon Provides for Hollywood" (unsigned news story published May 29 2001).
- Arkin (2003) United States: Media Principles Killed by Friendly Fire. *Index of Censorship* no 1 2003.
- Grossberg, Josh (2001) Hollywood Helping Out Pentagon?! *Eonline* July 02 2003. <http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,18936,00.html>
- Gunn, Benn (1999) Pentagon Runs Hollywood. Translation from Swedish newspaper *Hallandsposten* <http://www.illumati-news.com/pentagon-hollywood.htm>
- Kampfner, John (2003) The Truth about Jessica, *The Guardian* May 15, 2003
- Kibar, Osman (2002) Sender CIA-sonset Serie, *Dagens Næringsliv* 13. september
- Knightley, Turning the Tanks at the Reporter, *The Observer* June 15. (2003) <http://www.observer.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4691474,00.html>
- Kulås, Guri (2003) Slagsmål om menig Lynch, *Klassekampen* 2. juli 2003.
- Lippe, Berit von (1999) Metaforens potens. Essays. Oslo: Oktober.
- Herman, Edward S. & McChesney, Robert W. (1997) *The Global Media. The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*. London: Cassell.
- Moore, Michael (2001) *Stupid White Men*. London: Penguin books.

- Nohrstedt, Stig A. & Ottosen, Rune (2000) *Journalism and the New World Order: Gulf War, National News Discourse and Globalisation*. Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Ottosen, Rune (1994) *Mediestrategier og fiendebilder i internasjonale konflikter: Norske medier i skyggen av Pentagon*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Ottosen, Rune (1997) Rambo in Somalia? A Critical Look at Media Coverage of Operation Restore Hope. In Kaarle Nordenstreng & Michael Griffin (eds.): *International News Monitoring*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ.
- Roppen, Johan (2001) Fjernsyn i krigens tjeneste, *Dagbladet* (kronikk) 20.12. 2001.
- Schiller, Herbert (1992) *The Ideology of International Communications*, New York: Institute for Media analyses, Inc. *Monograph Series* 4.

