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21.03.2023

20 years since the invasion of Iraq

The lessons of the Iraq War and journalism



Sources: El Diario [Photo: U.S. bombing of Baghdad in March 2003]

The invasion of Iraq twenty years ago took place under premises accepted by a significant part of the American and European media. Thousands of journalistic voices in 2003 accepted the lie of Washington and London – sustained in Spain by the Aznar government – that assured the existence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The United States had concocted a convoluted thesis with the which accused Iraq of being a threat to the world and even of weaving alliances with Al Qaeda. It mattered little that the Iraqi regime was secular and enemy of Islamists or alleged evidence on weapons of mass destruction were gross and inconsistent. A large part of The Western media failed to fulfill the main duty of his office: doubt, ask questions, investigate and avoid assuming as unique valid information that comes from large offices.

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Not only that. Some contributed to the pointing out and stigmatization of those journalists who questioned the theses of Washington. Question the official discourse and warn of the risks of the invasion of Iraq was presented in the US as equivalent to support Saddam Hussein's regime. Those who reported the lack of consistency of the Bush administration's accusations or warned of The possible dire consequences of the war were discredited or Indifference on the part of the *mainstream*.

I was able to live that year 2003 first reporting on the events since Baghdad and subsequently, following the invasion of the country, of American political movements from New York. The Contrast between those two worlds was evident. Iraq, recently invaded and occupied, traumatized by the intense bombardment and massacres of civilians were suffering a new phase of the war. The United States, still affected by the attacks of 11S, he experienced a context of fear with which they tried to justify everything.

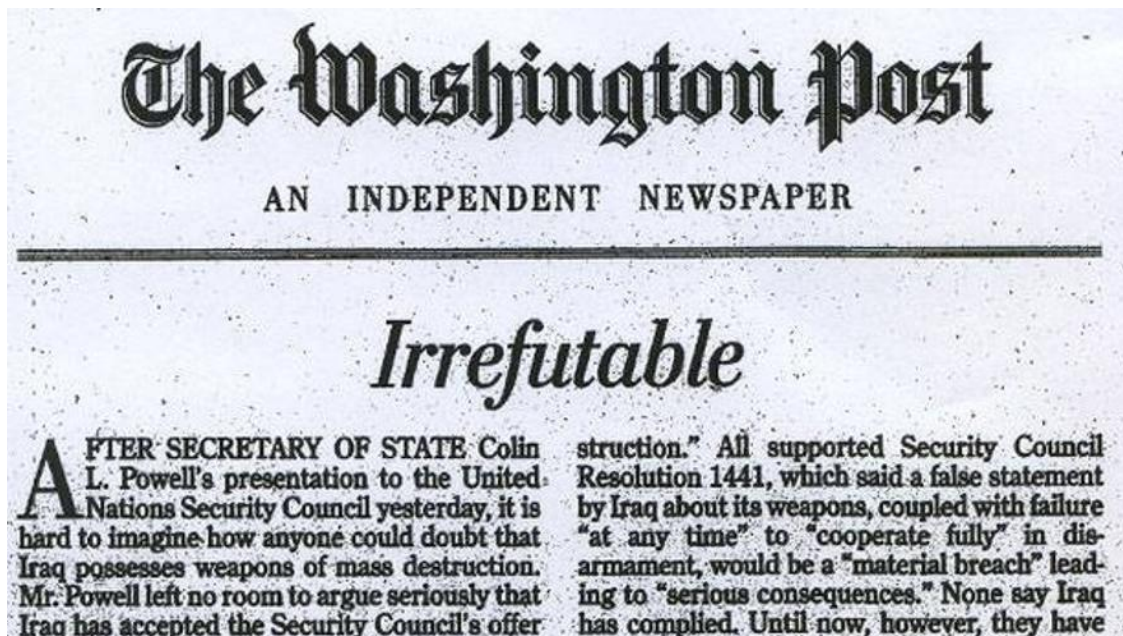


Photo: Washington Post editorial supporting Colin Powell's false evidence: "Irrefutable."

In 2004 the newspaper would apologize for it.

Propaganda against the invasion

In pre-invasion Iraq, reporters reporting From the Iraqi capital we followed daily the comings and goings of UN workers in Baghdad, whose mission was to check whether there were or were not weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. "How to test the lack of something?" some inspectors asked at meetings. informal with the press.

On February 5, 2003, in a ramshackle room of the information from Baghdad, dozens of Western journalists listened to the Secretary of State Colin Powell, at the that ensured the

existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Editorials of much of the press the next day gave for Good his statements, which would later be proven false.



Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell claimed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction as justification for the invasion.

When days before the first bombings the inspectors of the UN left the country – regardless of its verdict – the Pentagon telephoned the executives of some major media of The United States to indicate that the press would be better embedded with the US military and not in the Iraqi capital working for its account.

ABC and NBC immediately accepted and removed from Iraq. to their reporters stationed in Baghdad, who lived that with a Huge professional frustration. In some cases, they were replaced by *freelancers*; In others, they simply opted to report with their journalists. embedded in the U.S. military, often without Possibility to observe the consequences of bombings in neighborhoods residential, hospitals or morgues.

Control attempts

The 'embedded press' in the army was forced to sign contracts in which he undertook not to report on the unit military, their missions, their weapons or location. Lieutenant Colonel Rick Long, of the U.S. Marine Corps, explained the role of that Model of "[embedded journalism](#)": "Frankly, our job is to win the war. Part of that is the information warfare. So let's try to dominate the environment of information."

Three weeks after the start of the invasion, the Army of The United States fired in the same morning against three headquarters of the press not embedded in Baghdad, killing José Couso and Taras Prosyuk in the hotel Palestine – an attack witnessed by dozens of journalists – and another more reporter at Al Jazeera headquarters.

In the United States, most of the profession conformed to the thesis of the Bush administration. Some were fired from their media for being skeptical of the official positions – [Phil Donahue](#) or Peter Arnett – and the main television networks filled their Programming of interlocutors defending the military operation.

According to data from *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, during the two weeks prior to the invasion the vast majority of the interviewed on ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS were supporters of the governmental position and only 3 – out of 393 – belonged to anti-war collectives.

Who made the difference

Many television professionals in the U.S. They chose to place a pin with the American flag on the lapel of their jackets. Those who did not were criticized for Press and audiovisual media commentators.

There were exceptions to the coverage, most notably [four journalists](#) who then worked for the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain – today disappeared- and who reported the lack of evidence on the existence of weapons banned in Iraq. They also proved the falsity of Information attributing the identity of an Iraqi spy to one of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks.

One of those journalists, [John Walcott](#), former editor of Homeland Security and Foreign Affairs at Reuters and Bloomberg News, currently a professor in the School of Service, is currently a professor in the School of Service. Exterior of Georgetown University. Walcott recently pointed out that "the lessons reporters should have learned from after the Failures in coverage of Iraq are:

1. Journalists have an obligation to investigate whether Government, corporate, or other statements are True.
2. The value of a font is often inversely proportional to its rank or celebrity."

The other three Knight-Ridder journalists who marked the differences were Jonathan S. Landay, Joe Galloway -now deceased- and Warren Strobel, currently at the *Wall Street Journal*. [Landay](#) has He explained on several occasions that his way of acting was to put in Practice the essence of journalism, that is, ask questions:

"We approached our work by always doing the same Question: 'Is this true?' It's the basic question that every journalist It must be done every time a government, any government, makes a affirmation."

However, following the occupation of Iraq, as the Disastrous consequences grew and lies were discovered, a An important part of journalism did not act by developing tools to

Avoid coverage so poorly adjusted to reality – and that only tolerated prospects in favor of war – to be repeated in the future. In His place was readapting rewriting the story and creating new arguments to justify the military operation.

Most journalists who published "exclusives" on the existence of weapons of mass destruction and that cheered that invasion continued – and continue – in their posts or have experienced promotions, except for *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller, who was fired from the paper.

"There was no reporting, there was shorthand," Walcott said. "It was very difficult to play the role of watchman of the American mission in Iraq. An accountability report was missing," he said. The veteran [Dan Rather](#), former host of *60 Minutes*, He reflected in 2010: "If we had done journalism Our work, I think it could be argued forcefully that maybe America would not have gone to war."

In the years following the invasion, it continued to be Complicated to bet on another type of coverage. The then reporter of ABC Jeffrey Kofman was one of many examples. He suffered a Campaign of attacks from various media - they defined him as gay and Canadian, as if that diminished his ability - for having given voice from Baghdad to some Iraqis and a critical U.S. soldier with Washington.

Journalism's reliance on military channels

The disaster in Iraq began to be evident, but what many Journalists received from their superiors was the slogan that It was not news, which no longer deserved attention. Meanwhile, violence, militarization and pain were spreading in the country.

Some reporters began to hear testimonies from victims of tortures released from secret prisons with physical sequelae and psychological. Some reports were published about it, but the Most chose to ignore them. The voices of dark-skinned Arabs do not They were worth enough in the face of the white leaders' claims. American. It didn't matter if we had been lied to repeatedly. Occasions. The confidence of much of journalism in officialdom it remained. It is maintained.

Visual tests, photographs of prisoners were necessary tortured, so that the big international media would give credence to the complaints of the victims and will boost the coverage of the call Abu Ghraib scandal. Still, some of the journalism went on—and continues to draw confidently and almost exclusively from sources government, dispensing with research and questions Relevant.

In the words of Andrew Cockburn, currently editor in Washington of *Harper's magazine* (as a curiosity, he was co-producer of the film *The Peacemaker*, starring George Clooney):

"The [American] press has learned that while keep very close to the official line of the US Government does not run no danger or face the possibility of a negative consequence or Sanction, no matter how badly he does his journalistic work. The most important lesson Important learned by a whole new generation of journalists was that war is good for the journalistic career, no matter how Bad you are to report it."

Collectively follow official narratives, however far apart That they are of the facts, does not take its toll. The opposite, yes. They know it. well some journalists who in our country suffered reprisals for try to do honest coverage of the Iraq war.

In the face of later war contexts, a good part of the Media again defended that war is inevitable, that diplomacy It is useless before even making use of it and being against the Military route is, at best, unpatriotic.



Photo: Paradise Square in 2011, in a Baghdad still marked by war. (Olga Rodriguez)

Repeated errors

As with Iraq, the risks of intervention Military in Libya were not sufficiently valued before the operation, which involved the introduction of weapons - some currently in hands of uncontrolled groups-, the fragmentation of the country and the increase of violence in the region. An important part of journalism returned to look the other way when those consequences became known. Or when members of international organizations warned of the corruption in Afghanistan and the dangers of collapse of the government of Kabul. Or when arms sales to countries like Saudi Arabia skyrocketed. Or when the money sent to Iraq or Afghanistan was lost track.

As the mechanisms of work, several newspapers, radios and televisions offered without contrast U.S. government information pointing to the death of suspected terrorists – under US drone strikes – who had already died years ago or in other countries. As *the organization Reprieve* warned, in some cases these individuals had died two, three or even four times.

Today radio studios and television sets are still invited to television to interlocutors who defended the Iraq war as allegedly legitimate and impartial commentators, "which distorts actively the information that reaches the average viewer," according to the foreign policy columnist Kate Kizer.

The disastrous consequences of that invasion continue to this day. But in the so-called first world almost no one remembers how many people helped to promote it, who enriched themselves with it, what were the crimes and what journalistic practices should not be repeated anymore.

Source: https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/lecciones-guerra-irak-periodismo_129_10039837.html

Rebellion 20.03.2023