Battling over the ‘truth’

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Controversy surrounded the legitimacy of the US/UK-led invasion of Iraq and the apparent deception of Congress and Parliament. Crucial to this controversy are two debates which touch on the relationship between the media and society. First, the management of the narratives of war raises questions about the ‘truth claims’ of news and documentary programme making. Second, the accusations of ‘spin’ allude to the role of the media in the creation and maintenance of an informed citizenry. The reporting of the rescue of Jessica Lynch, and the marginalisation of dissenting and ‘other’ voices, suggests that partial coverage of events threatens the very values of citizenship and democracy.

In his introduction to an extraordinary book narrating the experiences of international aid workers,¹ the novelist John Le Carré claims that

Instead of telling us what they see and hear, journalists in harness to the competing armies of the entertainment industry have become torturers' accomplices, mouthing phrases like ‘collateral damage’ when they mean civilians blown to bits, blotting out the screams and sweeping over the traces in their rush to present their nations’ heroes in a pleasing light. In an era of supposedly unlimited communication, it is the truth-benders and manipulators, not the public, who are the winners. The truth is another country – the one that is inhabited by those brave enough to visit life’s hells on foot instead of on the television screens.²

In that quote Le Carré captures a few of the main issues explored in this essay, those relating to news, truth, and conflict. Basing its main argument on the ‘saving Jessica Lynch’ story of the recent Gulf war, this essay will examine the textual aspects of news as a non-fiction television format, especially the paradox between its truth claims and its narrative logic; and attempt to take a critical look at the role of news programmes in the formation of an informed citizenship. What the Lynch story exemplifies, it will be argued, is the attack on the credibility of
news, brought on by a distinctly and politically biased representation of an event whose textual characteristics share more with the Hollywood narrative than with ‘objective’ news. By merging the narrative of conventional news with that of mainstream Hollywood, the Lynch story, as it was initially depicted, borrowed from mainstream film the tropes of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’, in a simplistic Manichean dichotomy. As it was originally reported, the story had less to do with reporting the event than with reproducing a distinctly Hollywood myth in which a helpless but heroic young woman is rescued by highly trained professional specialist American soldiers. We have all seen the films, and now the same story has been told as ‘news’.

The making and unmaking of the Lynch myth

One bright spring morning in early April 2003, the community of Palestine, a small town in West Virginia, was mobilising itself to welcome home a hero. There was an air of the carnival and of celebration as men, women and children busily prepared the town for the returning wounded warrior. Yellow ribbons, the pre-eminently American symbol of welcome, redolent with military significance, evocative of a thousand acts of heroism, shone brightly against dark tree trunks and fluttered from poles. In a sense they formed a bright link between the town and the dreaded 9/11, the Gulf War, the two World Wars, all the way back to conflicts in which Americans had fought for ‘freedom’. Television crew set up their cameras, lights and microphones, and journalists were everywhere, interviewing, photographing. The people of Palestine, West Virginia were proud to be interviewed – after all, it was part of the celebration. Their small, largely rural town had suddenly been placed on the global media map; all the news networks had sent journalists to the town; folk in Washington, including the President himself, had mentioned Palestine, West Virginia. Around the world Palestine, West Virginia would have a special meaning. The story, as it was initially told, symbolised valour, all-American bravery, loyalty to comrades. There was serious talk of a two-hour documentary, a made-for-TV film, a book, an MTV special, even a Hollywood film on Private Lynch. The incident had quickly become a media event, had been elevated to THE narrative that displayed a particularly Hollywood twist to the story. And all because of a nineteen-year-old aspiring school teacher, a young woman with blonde hair and a photogenic face, who had been ‘rescued’ from an Iraqi hospital following a typically ‘daring’ operation by the US Special Forces. That was the version that was reported when the Washington Post newspaper broke the story on 1 April 2003.

This particular version of events gained a wider audience through its depiction in other media reports. The Evening Times Online is typical: accompanied by a close-up photograph of a smiling Lynch in camouflage battle dress against the
background of the American flag (the same photograph appeared on the cover of \textit{Newsweek}), captioned ‘NO SURRENDER: Pt Lynch did not want to be taken alive’, the report stated that she had

\begin{quote}
 fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after her unit was ambushed, it was reported yesterday. [She] fired her weapon until she ran out of bullets, an official said ... Pt Lynch continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained gunshot and knife wounds and watched several soldiers in her unit die around her, the official said. He added “She was fighting to the death. She did not want to be taken alive.” ... The teenager was rescued by US Special Forces who slipped behind enemy lines to seize her from hospital in Nasiriyah yesterday.\footnote{3}
\end{quote}

As the language indicates, this account of Lynch’s last stance became emblematic of the type of heroism embodied by Hollywood actors in the genre of war films – the ‘never-say-die attitude’ underlying many a cinematic mission into enemy territories. Lynch had gained iconic status as the young ‘Miss Congeniality’, heroic, intrepid, above all American, whose face launched a thousand t-shirts. One television reporter stated, ‘This young woman has changed the face of the war.’

We shall return to the blurring of truth and fiction later in this essay, but it is worth noting here that a crucial component of this blurring of the veridical and the fictional in this instance was the supposedly ‘live’ coverage of Lynch’s night-time ‘rescue’ by the special forces in Nasiriyah, captured on night-vision camera and edited into a five-minute film by the Pentagon for release to the networks. This footage was later included in the television news coverage of the event on networks watched by global audiences, rapidly making it part of the American folklore on the war. In a particularly stunning piece of action filming, the military cameraman captured a ‘live’ event that was largely staged for the viewers at home. As one of the doctors in the Nasiriyah hospital tellingly commented later, ‘It was like a Hollywood film. They cried “Go, go, go”, with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show – an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking open doors’ while the cameras were rolling.\footnote{4}

A few days later, the \textit{Post} ran a different version of the story in its inside pages which undermined many of the claims of the initial report, especially those relating to the heroics of Private Lynch prior to her ‘capture’ by the Iraqis, and her subsequent ‘rescue’ by the US Special Forces. The initial account was shown to be at best an exaggeration, at worst a complete fabrication. According to the amended version, she had suffered an accident involving the vehicle she had been travelling in, and had been cared for by Iraqi doctors in the Nasiriyah hospital. Far from launching a ‘daring’ raid the US soldiers could walk into an unguarded hospital and simply remove Lynch. The BBC’s \textit{Correspondent} programme, which
included interviews with doctors working at that hospital, supported this revised version of events.

The ambiguous poetics of television non-fiction

One story, two accounts. But why does it matter? How significant is the relatively unimportant story of a young American soldier in Nasiriyah? It is significant, broadly, for two reasons: firstly, there is the importance of the time in which the event occurred, a period during the war with Iraq when the ‘coalition’ realised that the war might take longer than they had initially hoped; and secondly, it is indicative of the role of the media in formation of nationalistic discourses in times of conflict. In her documentary entitled *How to Tell Lies and Win Wars*, made soon after the ‘first’ Persian Gulf War, the journalist Maggie O’Kane claimed that the US government had hired a prominent PR company in order to ‘educate’ the citizens. The director of the company unrepentantly argued that the spurious allegations that had been made (with the help of a tearful daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US) about Iraqi soldiers wilfully destroying incubators in a Kuwaiti children’s hospital was a necessary ploy to get the American public behind the war effort. That was a perfect instance of the media being used to ‘sell’ government policy. Truth was a casualty worth sacrificing in the interests of the higher good of a nation united behind the war effort. The Lynch story, while arguably not playing as prominent a role as the incubator story in the first Gulf war in mobilising the support of the US Congress, appealed to the American psyche through its use of the Hollywood argot, displaying in its narrative tropes from films such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as other films depicting the rescue of American POWs missing in action in South East Asia. Significantly, it was reported that mainstream film-makers such as Jerry Bruckheimer were invited to advise the Pentagon on the packaging of news stories. As Kampfner argues in the article mentioned above, Lynch’s ‘rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management ever conceived. It provides a remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon’s media managers, and has produced a template from which America hopes to present its future wars.’ Even more than a simple case of truth and falsehood, what this demonstrates is the blurring of boundaries between fictional and non-fictional genres. The ‘rescue’ footage, deliberately echoing numerous action films in the war genre, allowed the transgression of the claims of non-fiction. The case of Jessica Lynch – including the event itself, the struggle over different versions of it, the attempts to manage its reporting, and its links with prominent Hollywood genres and narratives – thus admirably typifies several issues and debates regarding media and representation. The apparent ‘liveness’ of the footage, amplified by the impression of having been ‘caught on the run’,
added to its alleged credibility, adding the ‘bravery’ of the camera crew to that of the soldiers. In her impassioned critique of the acceptance of documentary as speaking the truth, Minh-ha (1993) challenges the aesthetic of objectivity that props up documentary’s raison d’être as a purveyor of real life situations and lived histories, and remonstrates that:

Truth, even when ‘caught on the run’, does not yield itself either in names or in (filmic) frames; and meaning should be prevented from coming to closure at what is said and what is shown. Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning’ (p92; emphasis in the original).

At the simplest, Minh-ha is here questioning the truth-revealing claims of photographs or the documentary genre, of ‘recording’ events as they occur. From this perspective, the assertion that ‘the camera never lies’ is at best an exaggeration. What is often presented as objective truth is to Minh-ha a partial angle, or one point of view. In the Lynch story, as it was originally reported on television, the gap between truth and meaning is even wider. In terms of recording an event ‘on the run’, what it captured was an alleged rescue, whereas in the revised reports which appeared subsequently, the ‘rescue’ was unnecessary.

And yet, in purely textual terms, the ‘liveness’ conformed to the characteristics of the news genre, while simultaneously echoing the central theme of several Hollywood films. Two significant elements relating to the poetics and politics of representation need to be examined in this context: the narrative element in news and documentary genres; and cinema and ideology. The story of Jessica Lynch, as we shall see, problematises these two issues further, making explicit the ways in which the enduring virility of the Hollywood narrative and myth violates the truth-claims of the news and current affairs genres. By collapsing the textual differences between the two forms of representation, and through the active construction of the ‘rescue’ footage, the Lynch episode undermines the news genre’s claim to objective truth. Narrative becomes the driving logic, with its beginning, middle and end, a climax and a denouement, and finally a happy closure in the form of her rescue. In presenting Lynch as an all-American heroine captured by the evil enemy, the narrative sets up a conflict which is subsequently resolved in the fashion of established generic conventions of war films. Crucially, the initial report on television news blended together the modalities of fiction and non-fiction, mingling thereby the referents of the elements of the report. In other words, in constructing the news report along the lines of a mainstream film narrative, the extra-textual references (that is, the relationship between what was being depicted and its relationship to the outside world) were mingled in particular ways.
Let us digress for a moment in order to assess the specific characteristics of non-fiction genres. The status of non-fiction television genres, such as documentary, current affairs, and news programmes, elevates them above narrative fiction in the hierarchy of truth in televisual representation. The truth-claims of these genres – in other words their fundamental difference with fiction in terms of their relationship with the world they represent – ride on a basic assumption that what they depict is the ‘real’. Corner and Richardson’s (1986) point about documentaries, that ‘they have regularly sought to present audiences with accounts in which the viewed is to be taken as effectively indistinguishable from the real’ (p141), also covers the news. The authority of non-fiction formats derives from this transparency: while certain expository devices make them recognisable as non-fiction, their credibility is dependent on their successful mimesis, that is, their ability to ‘mirror’ or mimic the external reality which they claim to represent. Conversely, the viewer, responding to the textual cues and conventions of news and documentaries which mark them as different from fictional genres such as soaps or feature films, willingly responds to the collapse of the distance between the sign and the referent that contributes to the literalism of non-fiction discourse. In accepting their claims to truth, the world of the documentary and the news is taken to be the ‘real’ world. With regard to our particular case study, the ‘rescue’ footage filmed with night-vision cameras, replicating the textual strategies of several night-time rescues in feature films, is presented as ‘live’ footage from a war zone, thereby assuming the status of non-fiction, a real event captured by a television news crew.

Theoretical discussions on the ambivalence of the documentary genre are, to a large extent, applicable to news programmes, particularly with regard to the differences between fiction and non-fiction. As Silverstone (1986) demonstrates, the mythic and the mimetic elements of documentary discourse interweave argument and story, reason and emotion, and contain the rhetoric of persuasion as well as expressions of the film-maker’s reality. Such a conception of documentary incorporates the ‘truth claims’ as well as the ineluctable fictive elements in non-fiction. Wilson (1993) similarly argues for a case for documentary as primarily mimetic. His identification of drama as ‘diegetic’ and documentary as ‘mimetic’, a distinction with which he seeks to oppose narrative and non-narrative, is predicated on the assumption that:

drama and documentary television assume different relationships between the text and the non-textual. Drama is first and foremost the production of diegetic space and time constructed around narrative. Documentary, however, foregrounds a space and time employed in mimesis, a copying of the pre-textual’ (p118).
The selection of representational images in drama is therefore driven by narrative logic: ‘in dramatic narratives the construction of the discursive precedes and determines the selective appropriation of the non-discursive’ (p119). Drama is construction, and dramatic discourse creative, imaginary, full of artifice. Documentary, on the other hand, privileges the real: it is description and showing rather than narration, in which images are functional, not to the ‘requirements of narrative’, but to facilitate the viewer to get acquainted with historical reality: ‘Here [in documentary] the non-discursive precedes and determines the discursive’ (p120). Pre-textual reality is paramount, while the actual processes of exposition and narration are geared towards appropriating and conveying this reality.

The severity of Wilson’s demarcation of dramaturgical and documentary spaces, while useful in highlighting some of the specific features of the genre, does not take into account the ambivalence of non-fiction discourse. The discourse of documentary straddles two domains: in its ontological claims it privileges the ‘truth’, while its aesthetic is strongly narrative in character. Documentaries are in this sense ‘true stories’, and their poetics resonate with the ambiguities contained in that oxymoron. Conceiving narrative as a cognitive schema, Gripsrud (2002) approaches this apparent paradox from a different direction:

since the narrative is a way of thinking, a cognitive schema, it is also evident that it need not be fictional. The minimal definition of a narrative … will therefore apply to many news items in papers, and on radio and television. News items are, in English, also often referred to precisely as stories. There are reasons to emphasise this: narratives are not necessarily fictions’ (p194; emphasis in the original).

Fiction derives its logic from its internal consistencies of plot, narrative and character, whereas documentary’s existence is dependent upon the accuracy of its representation of the historical world. The distinction to be made here is between credibility and authenticity: although the plot and narrative have to be credible, the issue of authenticity does not arise in the world of fiction, whereas in non-fiction there is an actual, historical world against which its images can be checked. The measure of the authenticity of documentaries and news programmes lies in their approximation to historical reality; and their credibility derives its force not just from the ‘created world’ of the text, but also, and more significantly, from their association with the world they represent. Despite its inevitable fictional elements, non-fiction stands apart from fictional representation through its avowed appropriation and reflection of the real world, and consequently, its social relevance. The Lynch story exemplifies the ways in which this relationship between the textual and the extra-textual can be exploited in order to present a particular ideological stance.
Hollywood narratives, ideology, and democracy

Armes (1974) presents a convincing argument on the role television played in revising cinema’s appropriation of realism: ‘One of the central preoccupations of twentieth century art’, he claims, ‘has been to redefine the boundaries of the actual and the illusory.’ But while cinema contributed to this by successfully exploiting the link between photographic reproduction and ‘reality’, the advent of television changed the nature of realistic representation in the cinema: ‘In particular, those directors who have sought to combine the naturalistic potential of the television form with the greater flexibility that film-making methods afford have modified our view of what a realist film is’ (pp76-77). The first version of the Jessica Lynch story reversed this, since, as we saw earlier, the textual aspects of the footage clearly reproduced dominant Hollywood narratives and themes. But why does it matter? In order to explore that we will have to go beyond the merely textual and examine the ideological elements of the story.

In his analysis of war films produced in Hollywood, Kellner (1995) makes a crucial connection between mainstream narrative and American policy:

…the popularity of the film Rambo and the Stallone, Chuck Norris, and other ‘action-adventure’ vehicles suggests that the Hollywood President and large segments of the country had assimilated the Manichean worldview from Hollywood whereby ‘the enemy’ is so evil and ‘we’ are so good that only violence can eliminate threats to our well-being. Thus Reagan’s most ‘popular’ acts were his invasion of Grenada and the bombing of Libya – precisely the sort of ‘action’ celebrated in Rambo, Top Gun, Iron Eagle, and the other militarist epics of the Reagan era (p74).

Even more tellingly: ‘Hollywood films therefore provided iconography which helped mobilise support for conservative and militarist political agendas’ (p74). His argument about Hollywood iconography is particularly significant to our discussion: if, as he notes, shots of helicopters landing in Grenada reproduced the excitement and emotional charge of Hollywood films, the consequent positive reception of ‘real’ news footage containing such iconography set the tone for the filming and presentation of the alleged rescue of Jessica Lynch. In the latter case, the complimentarity that we noted of the truth-claims of non-fiction television genres and the restatement of well-known Hollywood tropes is particularly resonant as it chimes closely with the prevalent post-9/11 political climate in the United States.

Analysing the discursive aspects of the television coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, Kellner argues that: ‘the mainstream media became a conduit for the Bush Administration and Pentagon policies and rarely allowed criticism of its positions, disinformation, and atrocities during the war’ (p210). The media, he claims, presented the war as an exciting adventure, ‘a nightly miniseries with
dramatic conflict, action and adventure, danger to allied troops and civilians, evil perpetuated by the evil Iraqis, and heroics performed by American military planners, technology, and troops’ (p210). The parallels are so stark that he could have written these lines about the 2003 Gulf War. By echoing the dominant narrative techniques and forms of Hollywood, the original footage covering the ‘rescue’ of Private Lynch reproduced the ideology of dominant cinematic representations of war, ranging from Vietnam films to more recent films with Afghans and Muslims as villains. The Manichean dichotomy persists, whereby the ‘good’ Americans are victorious over the ‘evil’ Russian/German/Vietcong/Afghan/Iraqi. On the most overt level, this reflects the political rhetoric that reduces conflicts to those between the forces of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, which figured so prominently in various speeches by American leaders. If the Rambo series of films dovetailed American foreign policy at the time of the first President Bush, the more recent ones mirror and support the policies of the current US administration. The ideological role of popular forms of the moving image thus lends weight to stories of Hollywood producers being hired by the administration to help them with the management of the media.

In the case of the Lynch story, this is further compounded and complicated by the fact that this was not merely a feature film or drama which was revealed as an ideological vehicle. The staging of the ‘rescue’, which contributed to the footage, made use of visuals and imagery borrowed from feature films and television dramas depicting night time rescues of wounded soldiers and ‘comrades’ behind enemy lines. In doing so it neatly reversed Armes’s argument about television’s influence on film realism mentioned earlier: in this case television borrowed various features from feature film to augment a genre (news) usually associated with, and claiming, objectivity, neutrality, and ‘truth’. In doing so it also presented the news (falsely, as it turned out) as an adventure narrative, thus extending the ideological character of numerous war films. News as information was as a result combined with television as entertainment, contributing to a powerful process of mythologising of the conflict. The ideological potency of this mixture becomes clear if we employ Zizek’s (1989) format for the criticism of ideology: that it has two complementary procedures, ‘discursive, the “symptomal reading” of the ideological text’; and extracting the kernel of enjoyment, that is, ‘articulating the way in which – beyond meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy’ (p125; emphasis in the original). While Zizek attempts to bring in Lacanian psychoanalysis to ideology critique, we can clearly see the usefulness of his complementary procedures in the Lynch case, particularly the link between ideology and enjoyment.

The unsettling, and increasingly overt, links between the state and the media
threaten to undermine (some would claim has already undermined) the ideals of democratic society. If, from the 60s until the late 80s, the US administration used the threat of communism to its society as a way of controlling the media, as Herman (1995) argues, in the 21st century communism has been replaced by terrorism. Indeed, replacing ‘communism’ with ‘terrorism’ in Herman’s argument brings it up to date as a commentary on contemporary media and society:

The ongoing conflicts and well-publicized abuses of communist states contributed for decades to elevating opposition to communism to a first principle of U.S. ideology and politics. This ideology has helped mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept of ‘communism’ is fuzzy, it can be used against anybody advocating policies threatening property interests or supportive of accommodation with communist states, or any kind of radicalism (p88).

The ability to engineer ‘necessary illusions’ in democratic societies as identified by Chomsky (1989) is concentrated in the hands of the social and political elite, an oligarchy whose power and presence undermines democratic ideals. Moreover, the collapsing of the fiction/non-fiction divide, and the consequent blurring of the modalities of representation, removes from news stories such as that of Lynch, and by extension the coverage of the war itself, their claim to truth, thereby threatening the unspoken contract between the media and the public, especially the role of the media as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of objective information. The balance of the relationship between the ‘three key players in media-society relations … the journalist (media), the politician (government) and the citizen (people)’ (Nordenstreng, 1995, p118) in a democracy becomes skewed.

It is important to note at this point that what has been presented here as an illustration of the abuse of state and media power should not be read as blind support for the ‘other side’. Manipulation of media representations and policies is very much part of contemporary conflicts, in which every side is guilty of attempting to doctor ‘reality’. The cliché is right: truth IS a casualty in war. As Hamelink (1995) notes, ‘the forces behind the new world order and their fundamentalist opponents divide our planet in endless repetitions of “us” and “them” conflicts’ (p35). What this requires is unceasing vigilance from us, the public, against being ‘taken in’ by either of the opposing accounts. Furthermore, as he argues, ‘the most effective remedy is to achieve a level of distance from our own sectional interests that allows us to see [everyone’s life and well-being as equally valuable]. World political reality is not very encouraging for those who adopt this egalitarian perspective. But then, unless one is beyond caring about our common future, there is no other sensible perspective available.’
Notes

1. C. Bergman (Ed.) (2003), Another Day in Paradise: Front Line Stories from International Aid Workers, Earthscan.

References

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