



The Troubling Legacies of U.S. Information Operations during the Iraq Occupation

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“Fake news” and Russian interference are hot media controversies in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. Of course, these phenomena are not new, least of all as tools of U.S. foreign policy. The United States has interfered in numerous foreign elections and it has long used propaganda as an instrument of foreign policy. Most Americans, however, have remained oblivious to these practices during an era when the United States maintained information dominance over much of the world. With the recent waning of U.S. hegemony, the American public feels vulnerable to these kinds of outside manipulations for the first time. Partisan media outlets are spreading narratives of victimization that depict American democracy as under attack from foreign governments, perhaps aided by domestic accomplices and right-wing extremists.

This ahistorical analysis is lacking, however, because it provides little understanding of the extent to which propaganda and influence operations have become standard practice in international affairs – including our own country’s aggressive use of propaganda. Some of that propaganda is disseminated inside the United States with complicity from domestic media. The public deserves to understand how U.S. propaganda, not just propaganda from foreign sources, undermines democracy.

Propaganda and Persuasion

The United States has long used propaganda efforts to sway domestic audiences to support the favored policies of political elites, and it has used both propaganda and coercion to get foreign populations to support or at least accept U.S.-friendly leaders. With the advent of the Information Age and new communications technologies, propaganda has taken on an even more central role in politics, diplomacy, and military operations.

The U.S. military’s use of propaganda in Iraq is illustrative of this more general phenomenon. Since the Gulf War of 1991, the U.S. military has become increasingly concerned about its relationship with the media and adept at using propaganda to help achieve its missions. Instead of trying to censor or limit the media’s access to battlefield events as authorities did in past wars, the U.S. military now tries to utilize the media as a minimally critical channel to disseminate propaganda. What the Pentagon calls *information operations* are now a key part of military actions – including such activities as planting stories in the media, leafleting civilian populations in war zones, spreading misinformation to enemy forces, and offering military spokespersons or “experts” to the media.

By the time of the second U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, propaganda no longer just represented or justified military actions to civilian audiences. Information operations came to be seen as essential to accomplishing missions, and they played a constitutive role in military violence – shaping it, facilitating it, and in many cases,

motivating it. During the occupation of Iraq embedding journalists within military units became a normal practice – and so did sponsoring U.S.-friendly media corporations in Iraq to run uncritical 24-hour coverage of the conflict.

Collusion Between the Military and the Media

The US-led second siege of Fallujah in 2004 – one of the largest and bloodiest operations of the occupation – involved close collusion between the military and the media. The information campaign leading up to this operation followed an attempt to sack Fallujah in April 2004. After *Al Jazeera* broadcast images of atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers, the military was forced to abort the operation. However, U.S. leaders did *not* learn from these events that siege warfare is counterproductive to counterinsurgency operations; rather they concluded that they had failed to control the “information domain” and vowed to achieve information dominance for their second attempt to sack Fallujah.

In preparation for a second siege and assault in November 2004, the United States launched a major information operation to “shape” the battlefield. Military spokespersons began depicting Fallujah as a city dominated by al-Qaeda affiliated terrorists, when the evidence actually suggested that the resistance was led by Sunni nationalists. The U.S. military also launched a psychological operation that exaggerated the role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, said to be the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, claiming he had chosen Fallujah as a base from which he was recruiting a terrorist army and launching attacks all across Iraq. In actuality, there was no proof that Zarqawi had ever even set foot in Fallujah. Yet the U.S. military used these allegations as a justification to proceed with a second siege of Fallujah that displaced 200,000 civilians, destroyed two-thirds of a city the size of Boston, and may have killed up to 6,000 civilians.

Fake News is Not a New Phenomenon

In addition to disseminating misinformation about their opponents in Fallujah, the U.S. military took extensive measures to control media coverage of the operation. The main tactic was to embed 91 journalists within military units, in order to saturate media coverage with narratives that foregrounded the U.S. military’s experience of the operation, while relegating Iraqi experiences to the background. Independent journalists, who might have been capable of providing alternative points of view, were blocked from entering Fallujah. What resulted was a nearly uniform – and highly misleading – narrative across media outlets that omitted war crimes and immense civilian suffering. The U.S. military was able to destroy a center of popular resistance against its occupation without attention to possible crimes or extensive damage to residential neighborhoods. What is more, accounts of this operation ended up mythologized in popular culture, as in the blockbuster film, *American Sniper* (2014).

What the history of Fallujah illustrates is the willingness of our most trusted journalistic institutions to lend themselves to political and military goals, rather than serve as independent sources of information for the public good. “Fake news” is not a new phenomenon. Furthermore, misleading depictions of what happened in the Iraq occupation continue to feed distortions in U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and beyond. The full story of propaganda and disinformation campaigns begs the question of whether our democracy is under greater threat from Russian information operations and far-right internet news sites or from our own, well-established practices for distorting coverage and compromising independent media institutions.

