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Review: A Century of Media, A Century of War. By Robin Andersen.

Jonathan Lawson

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Book Reviews

A Century of Media, A Century of War. By Robin Andersen. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. xxxi, 350p. (paper) ISBN-10: 0-8204-7893-8; ISBN-13: 978-0-8204-7893-7.

Independent, critical journalism, always a prerequisite for the informed debate that characterizes a functioning democracy, is especially important during times of crisis and war. The failure of the American establishment media to promote or sustain such public debate during the Bush administration's drive towards war in 2002 and 2003 has been catastrophic both for American democracy and for the hundreds of thousands of people whose lives have been torn apart in the rubble of Iraq.

The "Countdown to Iraq" and the early months of the war were marked by unapologetically nationalistic coverage from major broadcast operations including CNN and MSNBC, and by the now-infamous series of *New York Times* articles by Judith Miller and Michael Gordon, claiming to reveal advanced Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapons programs. Counter-narratives, anti-war voices and international law or human rights perspectives, though present from the start, were systematically marginalized or omitted entirely.

Even after four years of war (and the implosion of support for the war, even among political elites), these basic contours of media coverage continue to reassert themselves. While the *Times* was forced belatedly to disavow the conclusions of Miller and Gordon's influential prewar reporting, it has not abandoned its journalistic bad habits – in 2007 the paper was once again printing anonymously-sourced articles by Gordon, this time making claims about Iranian military aggression.

That this history should repeat itself comes as no surprise to those who have critically examined American media coverage of other conflicts in recent memory, especially the Gulf War and Reagan-era interventions in Central America. In fact, looking back across the last few decades, it is difficult to name a US military conflict in which powerful pro-war interests did not successfully manipulate media coverage.

How has this sorry and anti-democratic state of affairs come to be the rule for American establishment media? After another round of media mistakes have been revealed or debunked, why aren't the lessons learned? These questions are at the heart of *A Century of Media, A Century of War*, a valuable new work of history and criticism by media scholar Robin Andersen. The book provides a deeply useful examination of how both American journalism and entertainment media have taken sides in debates over going to war, or more accurately, have served to minimize such debates.

A Century of Media's first sections recount the invention of modern war propaganda during the Wilson administration and World War I, and its development as a tool for shaping public opinion during World War II. Andersen's most detailed sections are devoted to news coverage of Reagan-era military interventions in Central America, the Gulf War, and the current generation of conflicts in the Middle East. She notes that it was during the era of the "Great Communicator" that

the US administration developed media manipulation of the public to a fine science.

Understanding clearly that the public did not favor armed interventions, the Reagan administration devoted tremendous resources to public opinion research. They developed a strategy of making their case to the media through the use of supposedly 'detached' academics and intellectuals, and, perhaps most significantly, by using cartoonish and potent oversimplifications to distinguish their "American" positions from those of evil enemies. This strategy tacitly demanded that the media choose sides, and paid off well in coverage of stories such as the Iran/Contra scandal. Andersen carefully documents the development and use of these media strategies, which have remained in widespread use ever since.

By comparison, the wars in Vietnam and Korea are covered somewhat briefly; with Andersen examining the narratives which journalistic and entertainment media imposed on those wars in later decades. Post-Vietnam narratives have been both generally anti-war (*The Deer Hunter*) and pro-Cold war (*Rambo*); the question of which often depends on which way the political wind blows.

Andersen's critiques of entertainment media in *A Century of Media* draw upon her past work as a cultural studies scholar, much of which has analysed and critiqued entertainment media narratives apparently designed to narrow, rather than broaden, the emotional and intellectual choices of their audiences. She finds that the mythmaking power of American entertainment media has been used to prop up politically dominant ideas.

Andersen's insightful chapter-length reading of *Black Hawk Down*, for example, reveals how even a film with a seemingly anti-war (or at least ambivalent) message can yet convey fundamentally militaristic themes and values. She concludes that the film "offers a cultural attitude of acquiescence to the desires of the US military that continues to prepare for a permanent war on terrorism."

While Hollywood directors don't simply take their cues from the Pentagon or the White House, Andersen notes that political elites and even the military itself have often been in positions to direct trends in entertainment media – blessing selected producers and projects access to military resources for filming, for example. Military investment in violent shooter-type video games has influenced that entire industry.

In describing what she calls the "military-entertainment complex," Andersen also documents the trend – developed especially during the Gulf War and since – of the rising influence of military public relations strategies on broadcast news media. Aspects of this trend include the use of "embedded" journalists and a high degree of news management, with high-tech video briefings and visuals created with entertainment in mind. As Andersen notes, the media has proved continually willing to scoop up made-for-TV events featuring militaristic values embedded within mythologized story lines, such as the largely fabricated story of Jessica Lynch.

What's largely missing from *A Century of Media* is the counter-hegemonic American media which deserves its own, similarly detailed treatment (Andersen has written about independent media movement elsewhere). This is not a failing of *A Century of Media* itself, however. Aggregating an encyclopedic amount of information in a single, well-organized volume, Andersen has provided the new essen-

Lawson: Review: A Century of Media, A Century of War. By Robin Andersen.

74 *Democratic Communiqué 21, No. 1, Spring 2007*

tial casebook for anyone wishing to understand the linkages between media and militarism in the United States.

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Reclaim the Media
