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## How the spooks took over the news

**In his controversial new book, Nick Davies argues that shadowy intelligence agencies are pumping out black propaganda to manipulate public opinion – and that the media simply swallow it wholesale**

Monday, 11 February 2008

On the morning of 9 February 2004, The New York Times carried an exclusive and alarming story. The paper's Baghdad correspondent, Dexter Filkins, reported that US officials had obtained a 17-page letter, believed to have been written by the notorious terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi to the "inner circle" of al-Qa'ida's leadership, urging them to accept that the best way to beat US forces in Iraq was effectively to start a civil war.

The letter argued that al-Qa'ida, which is a Sunni network, should attack the Shia population of Iraq: "It is the only way to prolong the duration of the fight between the infidels and us. If we succeed in dragging them into a sectarian war, this will awaken the sleepy Sunnis."

Later that day, at a regular US press briefing in Baghdad, US General Mark Kimmitt dealt with a string of questions about The New York Times report: "We believe the report and the document is credible, and we take the report seriously... It is clearly a plan on the part of outsiders to come in to this country and spark civil war, create sectarian violence, try to expose fissures in this society." The story went on to news agency wires and, within 24 hours, it was running around the world.

There is very good reason to believe that that letter was a fake – and a significant one because there is equally good reason to believe that it was one product among many from a new machinery of propaganda which has been created by the United States and its allies since the terrorist attacks of September 2001.

For the first time in human history, there is a concerted strategy to manipulate global perception. And the mass media are operating as its compliant assistants, failing both to resist it and to expose it.

The sheer ease with which this machinery has been able to do its work reflects a creeping structural weakness which now afflicts the production of our news. I've spent the last two years researching a book about falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media.

The "Zarqawi letter" which made it on to the front page of The New York Times in February 2004 was one of a sequence of highly suspect documents which were said to have been written either by or to Zarqawi and which were fed into news media.

This material is being generated, in part, by intelligence agencies who continue to work without effective oversight; and also by a new and essentially benign structure of "strategic communications" which was originally designed by doves in the Pentagon and Nato who wanted to use subtle and non-violent tactics to deal with Islamist terrorism but whose efforts are poorly regulated and badly supervised with the result that some of its practitioners are breaking loose and engaging in the black arts of propaganda.

Like the new propaganda machine as a whole, the Zarqawi story was born in the high tension after the attacks of September 2001. At that time, he was a painful thorn in the side of the Jordanian authorities, an Islamist radical who was determined to overthrow the royal family. But he was nothing to do with al-Q'aida. Indeed, he had specifically rejected attempts by Bin Laden to recruit him, because he was not interested in targeting the West.

Nevertheless, when US intelligence battered on the doors of allied governments in search of information about al-Q'aida, the Jordanian authorities – anxious to please the Americans and perhaps keen to make life more difficult for their native enemy – threw up his name along with other suspects. Soon he started to show up as a minor figure in US news stories – stories which were factually weak, often contradictory and already using the Jordanians as a tool of political convenience.

Then, on 7 October 2002, for the first time, somebody referred to him on the record. In a nationally televised speech in Cincinnati, President George Bush spoke of "high-level contacts" between al-Q'aida and Iraq and said: "Some al-Q'aida leaders who fled Afghanistan, went to Iraq. These include one very senior al-Q'aida leader who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year, and who has been associated with planning for chemical and biological attacks."

This coincided with a crucial vote in Congress in which the president was seeking authority to use military force against Iraq. Bush never named the man he was referring to but, as the Los Angeles Times among many others soon reported: "In a speech [on] Monday, Bush referred to a senior member of al-Q'aida who received medical treatment in Iraq. US officials said yesterday that was Abu al Musab Zarqawi, a Jordanian, who lost a leg during the US war in Afghanistan."

Even now, Zarqawi was a footnote, not a headline, but the flow of stories about him finally broke through and flooded the global media on 5 February 2003, when the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, addressed the UN Security Council, arguing that Iraq must be invaded: first, to stop its development of weapons of mass destruction; and second, to break its ties with al-Q'aida.

Powell claimed that "Iraq today harbours a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al Zarqawi"; that Zarqawi's base in Iraq was a camp for "poison and explosive training"; that he was "an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Q'aida lieutenants"; that he "fought in the Afghan war more than a decade ago"; that "Zarqawi and his network have plotted terrorist actions against countries, including France, Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany and Russia".

Courtesy of post-war Senate intelligence inquiries; evidence disclosed in several European trials; and the courageous work of a handful of journalists who broke away from the pack, we now know that every single one of those statements was entirely false. But that didn't matter: it was a big story

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