

Countering War Propaganda With Critical Media Literacy

By Andy Lee Roth

From William Randolph Hearst stoking public fervor for war after the USS Maine sank in 1898 to Judith Miller reporting on Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” in 2003, the establishment press in the US has a dishonorable history of promoting American militarism.

Today’s corporate media downplays the human cost of war while presenting defense industry flacks as foreign policy “experts.” Such coverage violates basic tenets of ethical journalism and misleads the public. For those committed to building a movement for peace, critical media literacy provides tools to counter war propaganda masquerading as news.

Censoring the human cost of war

We depend on journalism to report truth. But corporate news regularly understates or obscures the human cost of war. FAIR’s Gregory Shupak examined the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan as covered in the editorial pages of the *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. None acknowledged that more than 70,000 civilians had been directly killed in the US-initiated war.

The FAIR report reminded me of research I conducted with a team of students at Sonoma State University in 2007. Our study, *Covering War’s Victims*, examined 1,389 days of front-page news photographs published by the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Based on content analysis of more than six thousand images, we found a mere 3.3 percent of the front-page photos depicted the human cost of US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Government restrictions on journalists embedded with US military units and newspapers’ self-censorship in the name of “good taste” combined to hide the human cost of war from the public’s view. “In the absence of news photos and stories that depict the sensory reality of war,” we concluded, “acceptance of war, with varying degrees of attention to its human cost, becomes much more likely.”

Presenting defense industry hawks as “experts”

Ethical journalism is characterized by transparency and accountability. Yet the nation’s major cable and network television news outlets regularly present retired military personnel as expert analysts, without informing audiences that these “experts” also serve as spokespersons or consul-



graphic: Media Lens

tants for defense industry contractors.

As Robin Andersen detailed in Project Censored’s *State of the Free Press 2023*, after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, MSNBC, CNN, and NBC regularly featured military pundits—including Barry McCaffrey, David Petraeus, and Leon Panetta—who advocated military responses.

None of the outlets alerted their audiences to otherwise obvious conflicts of interest between the hawkish views these “experts” articulated and their personal financial interests.

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Critical Media Literacy

Education in critical media literacy provides tools to identify and deconstruct news frames that present use of force as the best (or only) response to foreign policy dilemmas.

Critical media literacy raises questions about power, focusing especially on connections between corporate ownership and the production, distribution, and interpretation of media messages. Who are the story’s primary sources? Does the story include dissident views? What’s left outside the frame? “The lie in war is almost always the lie of omission,” Chris Hedges wrote in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. The ability to determine the trustworthiness of specific news reports often hinges on examining what’s left out as much as what’s included.

The corporate media’s omissions are evidence of its broken news frame, one premised on exclusive definitions of who and what count as “newsworthy,” not to mention narrow conceptions of “power.”

By adopting critical media literacy education as an essential tool, peace activists can create and establish alternative news frames. These new frames’ specifics cannot be predetermined, but I am confident they will be constructed from respect for the dignity of all human life, appreciation of healthy ecosystems as the matrix for any life worth living, and a new understanding of power (as distinct from force) whose purpose is liberation.