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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Tony Blair took Britain to war in 2003 – but most of Fleet Street marched with him

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Tony Blair making his now-infamous speech to the nation about going to war in Iraq, March 2003.
Andrew Parsons / PA Archive/Press Association Images

When, in October 2015, Tony Blair apologised for the use of “wrong” intelligence in the run up to the 2003 Iraq war, his contrition was qualified. Speaking to Fareed Zakaria on CNN, the former prime minister also said:

I also apologise for some of the mistakes in planning and, certainly, our mistake in our understanding of what would happen once you removed the regime.

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

Blair's belated regret for how events transpired cut little ice with the British press. Writing in The Guardian, Roy Greenslade expertly discussed editorial responses which ranged from the scathing: "Blair's weasel words insult Iraq war dead" in the Daily Mail – to the rather more considered. The Independent, which had offered qualified support for the invasion of Iraq, stated that the apology represented progress in coming to some sort of understanding about that ill-starred adventure and its longer-term consequences.



The Sun in the antiwar rallies. The Sun

In The Sun, meanwhile, Trevor Kavanagh wrote that Blair had taken the country to war on a false prospectus. He was now a globe-trotting, perma-tanned ex-PM who, until now, had rejected any blame for the greatest geopolitical catastrophe this century. With his weasel words, Blair's reputation was in tatters, opined Kavanagh. This one-time political colossus now had to settle for life as a very rich but grubby pariah, despised and unwelcome in his own land.

Clearly, the same newspapers which had (by and large) so staunchly and unquestioningly supported the Iraq war were now condemning Blair for his duplicity. It's a fair bet that, with the imminent publication of the Chilcot report, these titles will be highlighting Blair's culpability without examining their own role in the progress towards war.

Beating the drum for war

I've written before about how, in his diaries cataloguing his time as communications director at Number 10, Alastair Campbell noted that in the week before the fateful vote on Iraq in March 2003, Rupert Murdoch phoned Blair three times. Campbell writes that Murdoch warned the PM of the dangers of delay and that was he was "pressing on timings, saying how News International would support us etc".

As we know, that support from the Murdoch press was unwavering and unequivocal. The much maligned editor of the Daily Mail, Paul Dacre, said in written evidence to the Leveson inquiry in 2012 that Murdoch expected his advice to be acted upon:

I don't think there's any doubt that he had strong views which he communicated to his editors and expected them to be followed. The classic case is the Iraq War. I'm not sure that the Blair government or Tony Blair would have been able to take the British people to war if it hadn't been for the implacable support provided by the Murdoch papers. There's no doubt that came from Mr Murdoch himself.

But it's not just a case of highlighting the usual suspects of The Sun, News of the World and The Times. Guardian columnist George Monbiot asserted in 2004 that The Independent, Independent on

Sunday and The Guardian, some of whose journalists were admittedly unconvinced about some assertions made by the government and intelligence agencies, also carried erroneous reports about Saddam Hussein's regime. The falsehoods reproduced by the media before the invasion of Iraq, wrote Monbiot, were massive and consequential. For him, it was hard to see how Britain could have gone to war at all if the press had done its job properly.

David Cromwell and David Edwards of the tirelessly critical Media Lens produced a mountain of evidence to support their claims that the mainstream press accepted too readily the parameters of debate and facilitated a fraudulent discussion about weapons of mass destruction.



Mirror, Mirror...

That said, it must be remembered that the press was not completely united in its support for Blair. It was the Daily Mirror, under the editorship of Piers Morgan which was most visible and vocal in its opposition to the invasion. As Des Freedman has written, the paper campaigned vigorously to challenge the arguments of the UK and US administrations, employing the anti-war journalist John Pilger in the process.

Anti Iraq War Demonstration, London 15/2/2003



It was the **Mirror** that backed the millions-strong anti-war March on February 15, 2003; it was the **Mirror** that ran “No War” petitions and offered anti-war posters. And while it’s also true that to say that once the invasion had commenced, the coverage of the war effort became much more supportive, the **Mirror** was nonetheless the only newspaper to fully align itself with the sizeable opposition to the conflict.

In the past few years, some journalists and commentators who did support war have offered various reasons and explanations as to why they did so. In 2008, the **Independent** reported **Times** columnist Matthew Parris as saying: “Mostly on WMD we believed what we were told. I’m not ashamed about having believed what I was told.”

Another **Times** columnist, Mary Ann Seighart, was as revealing: “If the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee produces a dossier saying that they are convinced that there’s a very strong case that Saddam has WMD, who are we to question that?”

In 2010, investigative journalist David Rose wrote in the **Mail on Sunday** that he was one of those that had helped make the case for war, presenting “evidence” now known to be bogus of Saddam’s links with al-Qaeda and stocks of weapons of mass destruction. Whenever he reflects on his role now, he stated, rather like the journalists of World War I, he is nauseated, angry and ashamed.

There is no doubt in my mind that the remorse of Rose and the rest is genuine – and the willingness to write about that contrition is to be applauded. But their admissions speak of the failures of journalism in times of conflict to sufficiently scrutinise official pronouncements. There are many reasons for this, of course, not least the historic closeness of journalism to power. The Chilcot report, at 2.6m words and massive in scope, may or may not address this issue, but we shall see soon enough.

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