‘OBJECTIVITY IS A BIT OF MIRAGE.’
Control Room

DOCUMENTARY production in recent years has been marked by the emergence of films with a pronounced political subtext, coinciding with dramatic international events and domestic developments in the Western world. The Rules of Engagement, Bowling for Columbine, The Corporation, Fahrenheit 9/11, and other documentary films, examine the social malaise, economic and cultural decline, crises, dilemmas and disappointments confronting Western democracies; and/or challenge and question the pre-existing, official versions of events that marked the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. This documentary tendency coincides with the unprecedented dominance of the United States in international relations. It is not surprising, then, that American filmmakers are at the helm of a series of potent and inspiring documentaries, focusing on important political issues and placing particular emphasis on the role of media in an increasingly polarized world.

Recent documentary films Control Room and Outfoxed focus on perspective, propaganda, cross-cultural dialogue, media control and news packaging, and examine the editorial agendas and the ethics and standards behind the reporting of TV channels distinguished by their political influence.

Perspective, Propaganda and Cross-Cultural Dialogue in Control Room

Jehane Noujam’s observational documentary film Control Room challenges the preconceptions and generalizations in Western, and in particular American, media about the Arabic news channel, Al Jazeera. This television channel, with forty million viewers in the Arab world, is based in Doha, Qatar. It is often branded ‘Osama bin-Laden’s mouthpiece’ and criticized for ‘inflammatory’ reporting that gives prominence to Arab suffering. Donald Rumsfeld denounced Al Jazeera journalists as ‘willing to lie to the world to make their case’. Colin Powell criticized it for ‘politically motivated’ reporting that undermines the reconstruction of Iraq.

The alleged anti-Americanism of Al Jazeera might be only one of the reasons for its immense popularity with the Arab masses, disillusioned by the recent military intervention in the Middle East. Another, more immediate, reason is its challenge to the domestic authoritarian governments that vehemently oppose the expression of political dissent. The satellite programs of Al Jazeera bring a form of free speech and open debate to areas of the Middle East that remain under the control of totalitarian regimes.

The Egyptian-born and US-educated Noujam worked with documentary filmmakers Pennebaker and Hegedus on Only the Strong Survive and co-directed Startup.com with Hegedus. Her crew arrived in Qatar in the wake of the invasion of Iraq and used the proximity of Al Jazeera headquarters and CentCom, the US military media centre in Qatar (less than forty kilometres apart from each other) to produce a challenging and provocative insight into the work of the media during the time of war.

Noujam uses excerpts from American and Arabic news programs to exemplify the divergent perspectives and unreported aspects of the war in Iraq. Al Jazeera journalists see the toppling of the Saddam statue in the centre of Baghdad as an event orchestrated by American media, with a crowd of teenagers speaking in foreign accents marching through the Iraqi capital. The unprovoked bombing of Al Jazeera’s office in Baghdad attains a tragic human dimension, largely ignored by the
Western media. The story of private Jessica Lynch emerges as a ‘heroic’ narrative deliberately constructed to obscure and/or undermine other developments on the frontline. The brief portraits of the American journalists, often seen as a monolithic squad of embedded propagandists, show them as professionals under immense strain, trying to create, package and present news to their viewers. This was the period when Peter Arnett was sacked for merely appearing on Iraqi television. Noujam suggests that balancing journalistic ethics and standards against editorial demands and a superficial sense of patriotic duty, emerges as an almost insurmountable obstacle for those reporting for major television channels.

As Noujam pointed out in her interview with indiWIRE, she focused on a small number of engaging characters, tempting to question and challenge the stereotypes of a pan-Arabist propagandist on one side, or of a robotic officer in charge of the military media machine on the other: ‘My loyalties are to the characters as they scramble to make sense of the war and present their points of view.’

Commenting on the accessibility of Al Jazeera journalists, Noujam pointed out that her observational approach helped to remove the initial reservations. Producer Deema Khatib, for instance, agreed to participate once she was assured that the filmmakers were not interested in the ‘veiled woman behind controls’ stereotypes.

It is not surprising that Noujam’s interviews with Al Jazeera journalists and producers reveal an overwhelmingly sceptical view of the Bush administration and the American coverage of the war. Yet, their denouncing of American actions in Iraq, paradoxically, stands in sharp contrast to their admiration of the civil liberties that are yet to take root in Arab societies. The critical comments about the American engagement in Iraq of Sameer Khader, the charismatic, chain-smoking Al Jazeera producer, are accompanied by his astonishing admission that he would accept a job with Fox News. Khader’s statements become even more revealing when he points out that he plans to send his children to American universities, ‘to exchange the Arab nightmare for the American dream’.

A former BBC reporter, Hassan Ibrahim, engages in a wryly cynical debate about the nature and purpose of war reporting with the US Army media liaison, Lt John Rushing, who attempts to defend the position of his Government. At first, their dialogue seems ineffective, as their remarks are directed at and not to each other. However, as The New York Times’ A.O. Scott points out, the mere fact that they are talking signifies a step in a positive direction.

Praising American values, Ibrahim exclaims: ‘You are the most powerful nation on earth. You can crush everyone. But don’t ask us to love it as well.’ His critical remarks about the declining superpower are contradicted by his unreserved belief in the mechanisms of control established by the American democratic system. When asked who is going to stop the empire, Ibrahim responds: ‘I have absolute faith in the American Constitution. The American people are going to stop the American empire.’

The complexity of Control Room as an educational resource extends beyond the examination of journalistic standards, issues of fairness and objectivity, or comparisons and contrasts between television channels from two seemingly opposed sides in the conflict. These aspects of Control Room certainly deserve attention, however, analysing Noujam’s documentary only in the context of political propaganda could corroborate simplistic interpretations that view the current crisis as a clash between cultures, and the film’s use as a resource in a cross-cultural discussion could be lost. Following years of
demonization of Muslims in news and current Affairs programs and racial profiling of Arabs as crazed terrorists in Hollywood blockbusters, this film is an opportunity to encourage a culture of dialogue; to acquaint the public with the views of renowned reporters and producers and, to try to discern the reasons behind the enormous popularity of Al Jazeera in the Arab world.

Media Control and News Packaging in Outfoxed

Robert Greenwald’s Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism, investigates the ongoing tendency to use American media as a propaganda tool in the quest for political domination. Greenwald’s documentary examines the journalistic ethics and standards at Fox News, the influential television channel under the control of Rupert Murdoch, against a backdrop of conservative voices dominating American politics and media in the period following the 9/11 attacks.

The filmmaker uses extracts from Fox News programs, accompanied by interviews with former producers, reporters and writers, to reveal a selective and tendentious type of journalism and transparent bias behind the slogans of fair and balanced reporting. The interviewees describe the atmosphere of pressure in which nationalist rhetoric and right-wing ‘points of view’ became the norm for those unwilling to risk their jobs or position within the organization.

In this climate of close scrutiny and constant monitoring, compared, in some instances, to Stalinist style coercion, the conservative agenda blurs the boundaries between news and commentary, campaign and coverage, editorial opinion and propaganda. Greenwald presents numerous editorial memos, directing the reporters’ response to daily political occurrences, and extracts of Fox programs in which commentators openly advocate the party line, silencing opponents and taking sides in a political debate.

The most revealing examples include the selective reporting of positive developments in Iraq, accentuating a patriotic subtext in the time of war, and the grotesque insistence on the uplifting news about the domestic economy. The filmmaker also provides examples less familiar to Australian audiences, exposing the close links of the Fox reporters and the Republican political apparatus, the orchestrated campaign to smear Richard Clarke after the 9/11 Commission Hearing, the bizarre efforts to represent Democrat presidential candidate John Kerry as a ‘flip-flopper’, and belittle his character and behaviour as ‘French’, and the intimidating on-air silencing of those opposing the war.

Greenwald suggests that one of the most dangerous consequences of the control of the media by multinational corporations is the emergence of an authoritarian power that may influence the democratic process and the public’s right to be comprehensively informed. He points out that, presented with a steady diet of simplistic interpretations of domestic and international affairs, the viewers of Fox News programs have a specific understanding of political realities. Consistent with a conservative stance, and based on incomplete information and partial reporting, their insights seem lacking and inadequate. Seen in this context, the network’s motto, ‘We report. You decide’, becomes a code for astonishing bias and intolerance.

Some would say (a favourite line of Fox journalists, blending news and commentary and arguing their point) that, in calling for action, Greenwald uses the same tools and strategies as those he ardently wishes to expose. The closing of Outfoxed is marked by a somewhat naïve appeal for communal solidarity against media manipulation, reminiscent of Michael Moore’s visit to the local K-Mart store in Bowling for Columbine. However, this well-researched, fast-paced and often entertaining film about media manipulation and hypocrisy emerges as a compelling attempt to acquaint the public with the consequences of corporate control of the public’s right to know.

Media educators and teachers of English, Politics, History, Legal Studies and Studies of Society could use Outfoxed to initiate class discussion about media and politics and their overlapping spheres of interests, especially in Western societies in which television ads, corporate donations and broadcast time emerge as the core components of effective election campaigns. The active involvement of print and electronic media in the political process has emerged as an essential link between decision makers and their democratic constituents. On the other hand, government and corporate strategies and vested political interests play a major role in the way the national and international events are reported and presented to the public. The issues of media ownership and regulation, editorial control and political and corporate interference thus become crucial for understanding the active, ongoing involvement of media in the political process.

Politically engaged documentaries have lately emerged as an effective tool to prompt a critical and independent public response and stimulate participation in decision-making processes: and to awaken a public anaesthetized by commercial cinema, reality television and infotainment. Until recently, the pronounced political subtext was an important aspect of documentaries from the former Eastern Bloc, Asia, the Middle East or dictatorial regimes in South America, while documentary filmmaking in the West has been largely concerned with the political undercurrents in environmental policies, economic mismanagement or industry relations.

The current documentary production phenomenon and the status of ‘dis-sidents’ or active campaigners attained by some American filmmakers, prove the vitality of political subtext in Western cinema. A number of recently produced documentary films pose questions that since the fall of Communism remained unthinkable: should one still consider Western societies and their media as agents of democracy and the model that other cultures should look up to? Moreover, what mechanisms of control and courses of action should the citizens of Western democracies employ amidst increasing concerns about media ownership and the changed nature and quality of their news programs?

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