

FROM



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Washington

Nonsense prevails

IN THE MEDIA MORE THAN IN POLITICS

IT REALLY IS A TRULY CRAZY WORLD! The other day TV anchors seemed to feel the need to apologise to viewers as Cable News Network (CNN) "broke away" in mid-afternoon to carry President Clinton's press conference in Kiev, Ukraine. Somehow the fate of nuclear Ukraine had to be squeezed in as a hushed world sat mesmerised by the real-life soap opera in a courtroom in Manassas, Virginia. The CNN announcer was quick to explain that the network would immediately return to what it appeared they considered the main event of the day — the trial of Lorena Bobbitt for the sexual mutilation of her former Marine husband!

Simply put, our new all-pervasive and instant media world has become one of images and manipulation, and increasingly so all the time it seems.

"The Bobbitt trial is just another manifestation of how we have lost control of our environment", writes Richard Cohen in *The Washington Post*.

"The Bobbitt trial is really just another form of pornography," Cohen adds. "Its salient feature is sex. It is about little else. But because the tale was told in a courtroom, it came packaged as news. CNN devoted almost its whole programming day to the trial, breaking away only to report on President Clinton's doings in Eastern Europe."

Marshall McLuhan, some decades ago, coined the expression that "the medium itself had become the message". True enough. What the major media tell us is news, and how they package what they tell us, actually becomes our news. The medium is the message!

But the big problem these days is that the major media, absorbed as they are in a race for advertising revenue and thus ratings, now use a business equation which more and more requires news to be subservient to prurient interests and titillating presentations. A kind of lowest-common denominator approach to what is news has taken grasp and more and

more defines in its wake what is supposed to be really important.

In short, since a lot more people wanted to watch the sex talk in the Manassas courtroom than the President of the United States in Kiev, all of us were pushed toward that way of thinking.

Now when it comes to coverage and commentary about international affairs, there is an associated phenomena involved. Those who control the media, those who have the resources to cover the costs of magazines and journals, they are the other major component — in addition to the ratings/advertising situation — determining just what we are all handed as important news. And both the packaging and the content are considerable affected.

Take for instance, all the commentary about what's going on in the Israeli-Palestinian situation. An awful lot of nonsense and shallow thinking is finding its way into print these days. And in juxtaposition an awful lot of profound commentary has to be searched for in obscure places.

Just ask yourselves, for instance, how often in recent months have you heard on any major radio or TV programme, or read in any major publication, the views of Edward Said or Noam Chomsky in the US, Maxim Ghilan in Paris, Matti Peled in Israel, or Muhammad Sid Ahmad in Cairo — all brilliant experts and analysts of Mid-east affairs.

The day-to-day Palestinian-Israeli talks in Cairo, in Taba, in various European cities, and sometimes back in Washington, capture much of the media. A kind of side-show for the press is put on by the parties as far more serious developments take place out of the camera's eye.

Furthermore, in today's era of the mass media explosion and the lowest common denominator phenomena, much of what passes for serious commentary is really designed to be misleading at best, manipulative at worst. Sadly what one reads in the mainstream media and watches on the major networks all too often these days obfuscates rather than clarifies the

real issues involved.

Indeed, distortion of reality has become an avocation for all kinds of commentators, writers and analysts, far too many of whom are in one way or another being paid by one or another of the parties to mislead and distort. Sadly, far too many of those whose names adorn TV screens, newspaper columns, and editorial boards are in effect at best PR agents, at worst cousins to those practising the well-known "world's oldest profession".

Examples abound of course. For the myth of a really "independent press" today comes up against the basic realities that in the large media establishments most people are forced to rely on — be they newspapers, TV networks, or journals — are nearly always owned and controlled by business and political interests which at the very least "guide" their editors and commentators into presenting things in a certain way while blocking those with divergent and sometimes dangerous views from having their say.

Now, for instance, the basic reason that very little has really changed on the ground between Israelis and Palestinians, in spite of the agreement signed at the White House back in September, is not that the negotiators haven't been able to quite finish things up in the time they said they would.

The basic reason for this situation is that the deal signed at the White House was purposefully crafted much more to keep Yasser Arafat and his cronies on top than to liberate the Palestinian people from Israeli occupation.

Indeed, the very reason the Americans and Israelis were so quick to adopt the deal and whisk Arafat to the White House, world centre-stage, was because this was the kind of new arrangement they had for so long been aiming to bring about.

The Israelis have wanted the Intifada off their backs, sought a license to hunt down Hamas — in a sense the new PLO — and needed the complicity of Palestinian leaders in order to recast the very image

of the occupation. In addition they have wanted to seal off Gaza — now that Israel has enough unemployment of its own — and then get the international community not only to endorse the Gaza Ghetto concept but to finance a modicum of separate Palestinian development there.

Arafat and what's left of the once potent PLO simply wanted to stay on top one way or another, meaning two basic things: first having funds to keep going and second having public legitimacy in the eyes of the media. Having failed at nearly every step for the past few decades, having allowed the PLO to become a hodgepodge of buddies, having squandered the substantial funds made available to the PLO since the 1960s, Arafat chose his own personal survival over all the principles he had long claimed to stand for. The formerly much touted Palestine National Council was not even consulted, much less convened. The very notion of Palestinian self-determination was simply sidestepped.

Even so, self-proclaimed friends of the Palestinians are constantly joining in the political charade by filling their writings full of rhetorical gobbledygook and political nonsense. Take for instance, Richard Curtiss, a nice retired old-Mid-east hand of the American government who everyone in Washington knows works very closely with the Arab establishment to publish the monthly magazine *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

Instead of writing about how happy the Israelis really are that they've finally got someone to give Gaza away to, instead of informing people about the corruption and ineptitude of Arafat's PLO, instead of dealing with the basic core issues that underlie the political situation that led to the recent White House ceremony, instead of detailing the actual conditions that brought about the PLO's demise and Arafat's surrender, writers about the Mid-east distort the situation with a false symmetry that is maddening in its false simplicity but understandable in its political designs.

"Whether the September 13 Washington declaration leads to an Israeli Palestinian settlement depends upon Palestinians dealing forcefully with the obstructionists in their midst. They will when and if the Israelis withdraw," Curtiss writes.

Read this as backing for Israeli-Arafat attempts to quash Hamas and promote the integration of Israel into the Arab Mid-east, a goal now backed, in the aftermath of the Coalition War, by such regional establishments which now tend to see both the US and Israel as their protectors.

"Nor will the declaration work unless the Israeli government deals decisively with its settler obstructionists and terrorists. So far it has not, although it is in a position to do so."

Read this as a further attempt to discredit the very Palestinian forces who gave birth to the Intifada in the first place and have struggled so valiantly for so long against such odds by daring to liken them to Israeli settlers and Jewish fascists! Outrageous!

Too often however, such nonsense prevails... especially for many whose access to more thoughtful and independent analysis is either severely limited and restricted.

CAUSE OF SOVIET

Introduction of high meant that Soviet citizen to information from allowing uncensored into the country, the effect, agreeing to Soviet Union was stru and other forms of a if people are kept su

Academia is reading

By Carol Wang

THE COMPANY THAT PREDICTS the fall of the Soviet Union 1986 now forecasts that China will become a dozen more countries within the next five years.

Perception International, a corporate consulting organisation in Ridgefield, Connecticut in the US, reaches such assessments by looking for events that are out of the ordinary and fitting them into a broader picture.

The company is the creation of Alan Alkiewicz, a former British intelligence officer. Together with five associates and 12 correspondents, Alkiewicz warns clients about changes the group sees in the future. He pieces together information from economics, sociology, political science, and other disciplines, and mails written observations to about a dozen clients three times a month. Mailings cover one subject at a time and are summarised quarterly.

Over the last quarter, for example, Perception International predicted that the Chinese economy is on its way to being replaced by commercial espionage organisations will be recruiting from temporary employees working in a company.

Perception International charges clients anything from \$12,000 to \$60,000 a year, depending on the amount of personalised services a company requires.

For the time being, Alkiewicz may have a corner on the market. At one time there were two other organisations involved in a similar business. But those companies have changed directions, leaving Perception International alone in its field.

Richard Clarke, a senior vice president at Fleet Investment Advisors, has been working with Perception International most since its inception 11 years ago. He considers it a helpful tool in market formation. "It's another source of information, a reaching, looking-out. With Merrill Lynch's and Peabody's formation, you have to act now. But something you tuck away and keep in mind for the long term," he says.

AT&T has used Perception International reports to create a model of the 21st century will look like, says Ingolia, an operations manager at AT&T. The company even established

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A kind of lowest common denominator approach to what is news has taken grasp and more and more defines in its wake what is supposed to be really important