

Lee Salter  
Lecturer in Journalism and Media Studies  
School of Cultural Studies  
University of the West of England, Bristol.  
Lee.salter@uwe.ac.uk

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## Between Facts and Lies: The BBC's Representation of the Invasion of Iraq

'United States officials were surprised and heartened today at the size of turnout in South Vietnam's presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting. According to reports from Saigon, 83 percent of the 5.85 million registered voters cast their ballots yesterday. Many of them risked reprisals threatened by the Vietcong. A successful election has long been seen as the keystone in President Johnson's policy of encouraging the growth of constitutional processes in South Vietnam' (Peter Grose, 'U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote,' *New York Times* article 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1967)

### Introduction

This paper is essentially an investigation into how we can understand and communicate events in the world. As such it raises questions of politics, questions of epistemology and questions of mediation. I will illustrate some of the difficulties in understanding and communicating events with a case study of the how BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) *news reports* understand and communicate certain aspects of the current conflict in Iraq. However, BBC News' understanding cannot be evaluated in abstraction of its context in a network of political and social relations: the study of the understanding and communication of events in the world must account not just for media representations but also for political and epistemological factors. I will approach the political situation through Hannah Arendt's (1971<sup>1</sup> and 1993) work on lying and truth in politics. Arendt's work is instructive because in the first instance her work proposes forms of truth and lying through which we can analyse the political and epistemological barriers to understanding. It is also instructive because of the conditions she was writing under – she was trying to understand the US government's comprehension of and actions in Vietnam. Similarly, questions have arisen over the US and UK governments' comprehension of and actions in Iraq. Some of the most pertinent questions, however, may be asked not only of governments, but also of the "free and independent" news media's communication of the actions of the former and the circumstances in which they act. As such, I analyse BBC News' naming of protagonists in the US-led invasion of Iraq. I argue that despite no doubt good intentions and its neutrality (or perhaps because of its perceived neutrality) the BBC's "normal", non-investigatory reporting has been embedded in the official US-UK worldview.

### Arendt on lies and politics

In the 1970s Hannah Arendt became concerned with the relationship between politics and truth. Spurred by the investigations into the failure of US policy in Vietnam, Arendt sought to understand the motivations of politicians in the American government – how could they have got things so wrong? Arendt's (1971) *Lying in Politics* sought to understand the 'History of the US Decision-Making Process of Vietnam Policy', that is, the report into why US actions in Vietnam failed to achieve their objectives. Arendt's reading of the report suggests that blame could be set on the self-deception of "problem

solvers” for whom intelligence reports, factual data and basic reality did not matter. For Arendt, these “problem solvers” reflect a more general malaise in modern politics.

Although Arendt (1993: 225) argues, ‘no-one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms... [or] counted truthfulness among the political virtues’ (Arendt, 1993: 225), a certain breed of modern politicians had become so far removed from “simple factual truths” that they can no longer be competent actors, but act nevertheless. For Arendt, competent political action is premised upon the possibility of politicians and citizens understanding “factual truth”. Factual truth is distinct from other truths, such as in mathematics and logic, because the latter are certain, unchanging and exist independently of people knowing them. On the other hand, factual truths are delicate, occurring ‘in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure.’ Her paradigm case of the delicate existence of political fact is the purging of Trotsky from Soviet history books (Arendt, 1993: 231).

The relation of factual truth to politics is, however, difficult. Arendt’s understanding of politics relates it to truth and lying. For her, politics is the realm of action and therefore of freedom. This freedom to act involves the ability to act *against* factual truth, against things as they are, and change them. It is this freedom that enables us to lie, ‘our ability to lie... belongs among the few obvious, demonstratable data that confirm human freedom’. The space in which lying is possible is also a space in which we are able to go beyond the here and now, beyond factual truth, in which we can ‘change the circumstances under which we live’ (Arendt, 1993: 250). In this sense, politics is about recognising what is, realising the tyranny of factual truth, realising what is not, and proposing and enacting something different. However, whilst the ability to change things is a political virtue, it ought not to override our ability to understand things as they are. Unless we recognise what is, we stumble in the darkness. For Arendt, ‘no human world... will ever be able to survive without men willing to... say what is’ (Arendt, 1993: 229). As politics is primarily the realm of action, it cannot be left to politics to tell the factual truth. This problem is compounded by what Arendt understands as the “modern political lie”, which dominated the thinking behind the invasion of Vietnam. For Arendt, “modern political lies” are ‘so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture – the making of another reality into which they will fit without seam, crack or fissure... modern political lies... offer a full-fledged substitute for’ reality (Arendt, 1993: 253).

While politicians engage in lying, it is up to interested parties and journalists to get behind the manufactured reality. Thus, for Arendt, the ‘very important political function of supplying information is exercised from outside the political realm’ (Arendt, 1993: 261). She identifies one of the main purveyors of this truthful information as the press, which should be ‘protected against government power and social pressure’ (Arendt, 1993: 261). Because of the relation between politics, action and truth, Arendt argued that “truth tellers” should be passive (that is, not attempt to change things) and independent: ‘the teller of factual truth, when he enters the political realm and identifies himself with some partial interest and power formation, compromises the only quality that could have made his truth appear plausible, namely his personal truthfulness, guaranteed by impartiality, integrity, independence’. Her faith in journalists is not naïve though, and in demonstrating this she asserts that ‘the telling of factual truth comprehends much more than the daily information supplied by journalists’, but she adds that ‘without them we would never find our bearings in an ever changing world and... would never know where we are’ (Arendt, 1993: 261), for ‘it is not difficult to imagine what the fate of factual truth would be if power interests, national or social, had the last say on... matters’ of truth (1993: 239). To this end, she suggests that

so long as the press is free and not corrupt, it has an enormously important function to fulfill and can rightly be called the fourth branch of government. Whether the first amendment will suffice to protect

this most essential political freedom, the right to unmanipulated factual information without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax, is another question (Arendt, 1971)

It is thus that Arendt confirms the necessary dichotomy between the passive knowing of what a factual truth is and the active force of politics. In contrast to journalists, politicians may act in such a way as to hoodwink the public – political power prevents citizens from comprehending what is by distorting or even eliminating factual truth, and without knowing what is, we cannot know what to change.

### Problems with Arendt's analysis

Arendt makes important observations on the relation between truth, lies and modern politics, especially, as I will show presently, as relates to war. However, there are a number of problems remaining with the active/passive dichotomisation of relations to factual truth, and with her understanding of mediation.

First off, the juxtaposition of truth and lie is not so straightforward. Indeed, one can deceive without lying; deceive whilst telling factual truth. For example, if I were to renege on a commitment to assist a friend by falsely claiming to have a conflicting appointment with a doctor, this is a straightforward lie. However, if I were to arrange an appointment with a doctor so that when I inform my friend that I have a conflicting appointment I am telling the truth, this is not a lie, it is factual truth. In this instance, though, the factual statement is true, though there is deception; it is the act that is deceptive though the reporting of it is truthful. Nevertheless, the disinterested reporting of the fact contributes to the deceit. What this tells us is that rather than political or social power having the *last* say on factual truth (as Arendt suggests, thus restricting her concerns to facts in media form – that is as records, reports, news stories, history books etc.), it may often have the *first* say – it creates the facts in the first place. The point here is that facts are not things that simply exist only to be either cleanly communicated or perverted by politics; rather many facts are created in the first place by political power. This problem can be seen clearly, for example, in the occupied parts of Palestine. Here we see a deliberate strategy of the Israeli state to create the ‘unilateral establishment of “facts on the ground”’, which has been ‘systematic and methodical’ in its establishment of an Israeli population in the Palestinian territories (Christian Aid, 2004: 5-7). These facts then become the basis for negotiation, which is made possible by excluding the history of those facts.

The second matter of concern with Arendt's analysis relates to the communication of facts. Statements of fact are themselves mediated by an already ideological language system. This is to say that the parameters of discussion that facts might generate are limited by the discursive structures into which they are placed. These structures guide the roles, relations and, to use Volosinov's (1973) term, “accents” that frame the facts. The disinterested and passive reporting of the fact that “property is very unevenly distributed in even the most egalitarian states” thus constrains responses to it. In this instance, the response to the fact might be, “then property should be more evenly distributed in such states”. However, this exchange leaves the fact of property and the fact of the state unquestioned. In this instance the truth-teller is, without lying, actively sustaining the naturalism of property and the state.

Arendt's call for journalists to passively mediate factual truth while normatively important is practically problematic. Her dichotomisation of the active politician and passive reporter reflects the dominant attitude in professional journalism, that journalists independently and impartially mediate the world as it is. However, this dichotomy fails to realise the ways in which journalists and “the press” actively construct news, and in which they are linked to ‘government power and social pressure’. A great deal of research into the functioning of news media explains how a number of normal, day-to-day factors prevent journalists and “the press” from functioning as Arendt supposes. For example, the political economy of news pressures journalists to conform to particular interests. Media moguls such

as Rupert Murdoch are known to demand particular editorial lines on particular issues (Allan, 2005: 9-12), and investors demand returns on investments in the form of profits, which becomes the “bottom line” of many news organisations. This bottom line goes on to pressure journalists to make news cost-effective, which is reflected in the routines of news work. As such, we see a reduction in the use of special correspondents (Tunstall, 1971), a decline in expensive investigative reporting and an increase in relatively cheap syndicated stories and an over-reliance on free and easily accessible official sources, press releases and the like. This latter increases the capacity of dominant sources and primary definers – key government figures, experts and “authorities” – to set the agenda, especially when their communications are pre-fabricated for journalists and therefore fit into shared discursive frameworks (even Arendt adopts the dominant understanding of the invasion of Vietnam in which the “North Vietnamese” “Vietcong” – the term “Vietcong” was invented by the US as part of a campaign to represent the invasion and slaughter as a war against communist expansion rather than against a national liberation struggle – fought the “South Vietnamese”). Other routines and practices that influence the freedom of journalists to simply report facts can be seen in the editorial processes to which reports are subject – including how they are made to fit the “house style”, how they are anchored by the headline, and how the different layers of editors ensure that the final report reflects, if necessary the editorial line. Finally, a number of scholars have emphasised how, resulting from the interaction between sources, news organisations and audiences, ideological discursive frameworks impose a common sense (i.e. hegemonic) framework on factual truth. To this end, accounts are discursively ordered – through stereotype, metaphor, framing, sequencing of sources and so on (Herman and Chomsky, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; Glasgow Media Group, 1976/1980/1985). In times of war, there are a number of other techniques by which journalists can be tied to the official government line, such as by embedding reporters with military units (see Miller, 2004: 90-91).

So, the embeddedness of journalists in political, economic and discursive structures limits the “mainstream” journalist’s ability to be free from ‘government power’, ‘social pressure’, a ‘partial interest and power formation’. Rather, it positions the journalist to report from a particular worldview and to accept “facts on the ground” as given. In the first case, the “objectivity norm in journalism” seems impossible, and in the second case, it seems undesirable.

To better illustrate some of these issues, I will turn to consider elements of the reporting of the invasion of Iraq at the BBC. As our ability to understand depends on the mediation of facts through language, I will consider the naming of those fighting against the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. To do this, I will recount some of the major events that have taken place before and during the invasion, how they developed and changed, how they are reported and how the development of events and the reporting of them intercede. It is reasonably well known that so many news organisations (such as *The Sun* newspaper in the UK or *Fox News* in the US – both owned by Rupert Murdoch) clearly lost any pretence of professional independence in the build up to, and during, the invasion, and I am not interested in the propagandistic and opinionated functions of such organisations. Rather, the attempts to mediate the events and facts by those who seem to retain ‘personal truthfulness, guaranteed by impartiality, integrity, independence’ pose a far greater problem for those trying to understand facts and events.

### Background: The Invasion of Iraq

In the first part of 2003 the citizens of the USA and the UK were subject to an onslaught of claims about the behaviour of the Iraqi government. President George Bush of the USA and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the UK had agreed to overthrow President Saddam Hussein of Iraq as early as 2002 (*The Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2005: p.1), but then needed to manufacture the consent of their publics and of the leaders of other states. Presuming that their respective publics would not agree to invade another

country on the basis of regime change, a programme of careful deceit was initiated by both governments. Though US citizens were perhaps more ready than UK citizens to accept regime change as a rationale<sup>2</sup>, tenuous – and unlikely – links between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda asserted by the US government must have contributed to some 70% of Americans believing, against “factual truth”, that the Iraqi government had something to do with the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 (*Washington Post* 6<sup>th</sup> September 2003: p. A01. Even by 2005 47% of Americans believed that former President Hussein ‘helped plan and support the hijackers’ [Harris Poll #14, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005], which was largely inferred in President Bush’s speeches [*Christian Science Monitor*, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2003] and the utterances of other US Government officials – see Rampton and Stauber, 2003: 94-95 for a list of these utterances). These fears were the hooks to which supposed threats from Iraq were attached. The British government on the other hand had no such reference points. Instead, though ‘Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran’, it was thought that ‘it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the UN inspectors’ (Iraq: Prime Minister’s Meeting, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002, cited in *The Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2005: p.1). It seems that British government policy was to create a situation in which President Hussein would be seen to defy the UN, and thereby justify the real objective of regime change. Both governments sought to manipulate public fears – about terrorist links and weapons of mass destruction respectively – in order to manufacture consent for their intended actions.

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 2003, war was declared on Iraq and the invasion began. By 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003 President Bush had declared an end to “major combat operations” – the declared war was over and the Iraqi government had been defeated. Whether or not as a result of distorted intelligence given to the US by disgruntled Iraqis, the expected streets-paved-with-flowers to welcome the invading forces did not materialise at any significant rate, despite attempts by mainstream media in the UK and US to make it appear so. Instead, the invasion forces were met with stiff resistance after the end to “major combat operations”. Accordingly, what plans there were for a post-invasion Iraq were uncertain and constantly changed (*New York Times* 18<sup>th</sup> January 2004: section 4 p. 5). In Arendt’s terms, this was an example of the ‘ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing... permanent’ (Arendt, 1993: 231), and perhaps an example of a modern political lie in which, amidst the desperation to invade Iraq, a ‘defactualized world’ was created in which ‘political goals were set and military decisions were made’ (Arendt, 1971). The initial invasion was followed by the setting up of a Coalition Provisional Authority (CAP) headed by a US-appointed foreign “civilian administrator”, Paul Bremer. The installation of a foreign “administrator” cannot have seemed other than a neo-colonial occupation with a secular neo-liberal reform agenda that intended to shape Iraq in the interests of the US government, and thus intensified the resolve of those Iraqis opposed to the invasion. In June 2003 all self-rule in towns and cities was ended by the US-led occupying forces and in July of that year the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council was formed. By 14<sup>th</sup> November 2003, in the face of increasing levels of violence against the occupiers, the Bush Administration had decided to transfer power to an interim government by early 2004. In March 2004 the Iraqi Governing Council signed an interim constitution, and on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004 all authority was passed to the Iraqi Interim Government and the CPA was dissolved. All through this period violent campaigns raged against the occupying powers and despite the attempt to legitimise the invasion, in a poll conducted by the Coalition Provisional Authority in May 2004, 92% of Iraqis saw the U.S. as “occupiers”, 3% saw them as “peacekeepers” and only 2% Iraqis viewed them as “liberators” (CPA web site June 17<sup>th</sup> 2004). On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2005 the “democratically elected” Iraqi Government proper replaced the Iraqi Interim Government.

### Saying What Is

The BBC probably gets as close to Arendt's 'impartiality, integrity, independence' as any news organisation might. Its Charter and Agreement (Department of National Heritage, 1996) calls for it to 'contain comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs' and to 'treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and impartiality'. The BBC has no corporate backers, no financial investors, no direct advertising in its domestic television operations, and there is very little direct government intervention in the day-to-day running of the news operation (save for renewing the BBC's charter as a whole, legislating for the licence fee funding and the appointment of BBC Governors).

BBC news' accuracy and impartiality are constantly reflected upon by its journalists and editors, whose decisions are open to scrutiny from viewers. This scrutiny is intended to ensure that the BBC's reporting represents "factual truth" as accurately and disinterestedly as possible, and its reporting on the invasion of Iraq did not escape such scrutiny, with journalists and editors struggling to find the right words to define the events and facts supposedly as they *appeared*. One such difficulty related to the definition of the Iraqis who fought against the invasion and occupation, who the BBC defined, since June 2003, as "insurgents". In response to questions about the choice of words the BBC argued that,

'This term was decided upon because it describes people who are "rising in active revolt". It is the best word to use in situations of rebellion or conquest when there is no free-standing government.' (Boaden, 2004)

To assess the accuracy of the BBC's account of the invasion, and in particular its use of the term "insurgent", a number of factors need to be considered: firstly, it has to be determined whether the BBC's definition of the word is accurate; secondly, it must be considered whether the use of other terms reflects the changing conditions of the invasion and occupation – whether it takes account of the creation of reality; thirdly, the history and current uses of the term outside the reporting of Iraq can be used to illustrate the connotations of the term; and finally, possible alternative terms may illuminate the deficiencies of existing terms.

Whilst the BBC claims that "insurgent" 'describes people who are "rising in active revolt"', in 'situations of rebellion or conquest where there is no free-standing government', this does not tally with most dictionary definitions. Most dictionary definitions are similar to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary's definition, which does suggest that the term refers to 'a person who rebels or rises in revolt', but in a revolt '*against an authority*', and usually a government (emphasis added). This is to say that all dictionary definitions that the writer has encountered relate the insurgent to an authority, and usually a government. Therefore there is little justification for the application of the term to situations in which there is no 'free-standing government'. This point is reinforced by the fact that it is difficult to 'rise in active revolt' when there is no 'free standing government' to rise against. To turn to authorities on "subversion, insurgency and peacekeeping", General Sir Frank Kitson (1971: 6) describes insurgency as 'the use of armed force by a section of the people against the government' with the intention of overthrowing it.

Clearly, most insurgents wish to overthrow the so-called government of Iraq. However, this does not justify the use of the term by the BBC, not least because it has been using the term since June 2003. The "facts on the ground" have changed constantly since that time, (the 'ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing... permanent'), which means that any *continuous* term is an inappropriate representation. To follow this point requires us to return to the chronology of the invasion.

As outlined above, we might consider the invasion of Iraq in stages. In the **first** stage, between March and May 2003, the initial invasion took place. On 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003 the end to "major combat

operations” was declared. Soon after this, the **second** stage began with the setting up of the Coalition Provisional Authority. The CPA period lasted from 16<sup>th</sup> May 2003 until 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004. From 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004 until 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2005 the Iraqi Interim Government was in power in the **third** stage. In each of these stages the force against which the “insurgent” acted was different. In the first instance there was no authority to speak of, it was an invasion. In the second period a foreign power ruled over Iraq and in the third period what might be referred to as a “puppet regime” (the Shorter OED describes a puppet state or country as one that is ‘nominally independent but actually under the control of another power’) was installed. At best, in the first and second periods an occupying power dominated Iraq and in the third and fourth a more or less legitimate puppet authority had been established. We might consider, then, that in the first and second periods *resistance* to an invasion took place in which, in the first instance, *soldiers* fought against an *invading army*, and in the second resistance took place against an *occupying army*. In the third and fourth periods, the resistance was replaced perhaps by an insurgency against a puppet government. We might expect, then, that the telling of “what is” would reflect these changing circumstances. What is more, we might expect that “what is” cannot be told without giving some idea of “why is” and therefore raising the possibility of challenging the status of the authority. The US’s initial policy was mitigated by the Iraqis who resisted the invasion. As the CPA poll in the second period showed, the vast majority of Iraqis saw the US as an occupying power. This perception helped fuel the resistance to the perceived occupation, which in turn saw the US speed up the establishment of a “sovereign” Iraqi government.<sup>3</sup> This latter strategy was, then, aimed at quelling the resistance to the objectives of the US government by creating the illusion of a self-selected form of government. Accordingly there can no longer be a resistance to a US-led occupation. Rather, there is an insurgency against a legitimate government, its police and army, which the US army has been invited to help subdue. This enables Rumsfeld, on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 2005, to ask reporters to cease referring to “insurgents” and start referring to “enemies of the legitimate Iraqi Government”, the new “facts on the ground”. Rumsfeld argued that “insurgent” legitimises the resistance. Conversely, of course, “insurgent” also legitimises the authority against which the insurgents are acting.

However, BBC News reports do not tend to use a dynamic lexicon and nor do they explain why present reality is so. At the same time, perhaps its discursive frames prevent it from understanding “why is” itself. This is made clear by the fact that the BBC has been using the term “insurgents” since at least June 2003, that is, since the beginning of the second period, the period of explicit occupation by a foreign power. Whilst perhaps the term “insurgency” might be appropriate under the third and fourth periods, under the first and second periods it cannot be considered to be an accurate representation of factual truth. To boot, the degree to which the term can be applied to the third and fourth periods may depend on the degree to which the authority or government against which it is taking place is legitimate or seen as legitimate (Webster’s New International Dictionary describes insurgency as a revolt ‘against a *legitimate* government’). One possible reason for the lack of dynamic lexicon and explanation in BBC reports is its news conventions – stories must be relatively short, economic, impartial and “to-the-point”. The concern for audience “understanding” is such that a dynamic lexicon may well be considered a confusing barrier to that understanding.

Though there *may* be good reasons for the continuous use of a term, it is interesting to see that the BBC is not consistent in its use, according to its definition, that is in ‘situations of rebellion or conquest when there is no free-standing government’. A brief survey of BBC News Online’s use of the term shows that it has been used to refer to situations in Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yeman, India, Algeria, Rwanda, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Uganda, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Macedonia, Columbia, Liberia, wherein there are people who are ‘rising in revolt’ and in ‘situations of rebellion’, but almost always against an established government or authority. It is also interesting to see that the term is used almost exclusively to refer to “third world”, or very poor, states. From my brief survey I have not found the term to be used to describe resistance to an invasion. Nor has the term been

used to describe people “in active revolt” against the internationally recognised governments of Ukraine, Georgia and Zimbabwe. Instead these insurgents (if the BBC were to consistently apply their definition) are referred to as “protestors”, “the opposition”, “demonstrators”, their leaders are “firebrands” (BBC 2004, 2005a, 2005b), and their actions are “celebrated”.

If a single term were to be used over time, perhaps there are better choices available? Perhaps, if journalists are to act with ‘due accuracy and impartiality’, then they ought not to impose a particular definition of the situation. Rather comprehension of factual truth might only be achieved if one takes an *intersubjective* position, that is, if one understands the different sides from their own perspectives. In this case, we might see the US-UK “armed forces” confronting Iraqi and Islamic “freedom fighters”, for it is clear that their lives are dedicated to being *free* from US and UK influence. To be sure, there are many British and Americans who would fight foreign occupation for their own freedom, and many Christians who would agree with Islamists that to be truly free is to be subject to the will of god, and this is how at least a reasonably large contingent of those fighting the invasion wish to be.

Alternatively, perhaps there are more similarities between the Iraqis fighting the US-led invasion and the circumstances and tactics of the French resistance, who initially fought against the invasion of their state by another, and who then waged an underground guerrilla war of bombings and assassinations to prevent the invaders and their indigenous collaborators from settling.

Should, then, the Iraqis who fight the invasion and occupation be understood intersubjectively and referred to as Iraqi freedom fighters or the Iraqi resistance? This is unlikely primarily given the tradition of referring only to “friends” as freedom fighters or resistance. Perhaps, though, there is a simpler reason for not using the term “resistance”? Perhaps the static dictionary definition will show that the term is an inaccurate description of what is taking place in Iraq? To return, then, to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary we see that “resistance” simply means ‘the action or act of resisting, opposing or withstanding’, the ‘power or capacity of resisting’. Perhaps the dictionary definition of “resistance” is therefore more appropriate to describe the protagonists in Iraq?

On the other hand, perhaps either term is inappropriate, insofar as they not only dichotomise “us” and “them”, but also homogenous “them”. “They” are made up of a very wide range of different groups united only in their opposition to occupation. Sunni militants, Shi’ite militants, Iraqi nationalists, Baathists, al Qaeda, “foreign Islamists”, and Ansar al-Islam share very few beliefs other than their resistance to the occupation, have very different reasons for and ends of their activities, and will stand down under very different conditions. Therefore, to understand what the occupying armies face and how peace might be made, we must understand who is doing what and with what aim. Again, news report discourses do not allow such sophistication.

Certainly the lexical choice matters. If we might move beyond “official” news agencies such as the BBC whilst retaining the lexicon, our chances of finding things out in the less-controlled environment of the Internet, for example, are skewed. A Google search for “Iraqi insurgency” leads us to reports of the situation from the perspective of sources such as Global Security, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, USA Today, Wikipedia, Washington Post, Knight Ridder, BBC, Christian Science Monitor, and National Public Radio. In contrast a Google search for “Iraqi resistance” leads us to Albasrah Iraqi resistance information, Videos from the Iraqi resistance, Sydney Morning Herald “Inside the Resistance”, Free Arab Voice Iraqi Resistance Report, Wikipedia, Asia Times, Jihad Unspun, BBC, and Al Jazeera. Public understanding is however not the only issue at stake. The positioning of a fighter as insurgent is not just a positioning in media discourse, but also a legal positioning. Human Rights Watch (2004) argue that the status as insurgent means that such fighters are

not part of the Iraqi armed forces, and so under IHL (international humanitarian law) they are thus not entitled to the so-called combatant's privilege. The combatant's privilege permits soldiers to fire on enemy troops during an armed conflict without being prosecuted. That is, insurgents in Iraq have no

lawful right to take part in armed conflict and may be legally prosecuted under domestic law for taking up arms and conducting armed attacks.

Accordingly, they cannot be afforded prisoner of war status as insurgents.

Despite the attempts to justify it, the reason for the choice of the term “insurgency” by BBC News is unclear. The BBC justification cited above seems to be simply wrong, certainly as far as it relates to the use of the term prior to the third stage. Perhaps the choice could be explained by drawing on Stuart Hall’s (Hall et al, 1978) concept of primary definers to which mainstream media are too often in subservient relation. There is some evidence for this. For instance, the UK Parliament Select Committee on Foreign Affairs Second Report cites various experts referring to the insurgency in Iraq in 2003, and in the Minutes of Evidence for the Committee, Jonathan Stevenson of the International Institute for Strategic Studies refers to an insurgency having taken place as early as 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003 (Stevenson, 2004). At the same hearings, Dr Toby Dodge (2004) also referred to the insurgency that he had witnessed in May 2003. In addition, Lewis and Brookes’ (2004) content analysis of the BBC’s coverage of the build up to the invasion and the invasion itself found that 56% of sources used came from the UK and US government and military. Of course, this is the instance at which we consider primary definers not as individual agents who exert undue influence on language use, but as particular discourses – in this instance, military discourse.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the difficulty in naming active opponents to the occupation of Iraq stems from “modern political lies”. There is certainly an element of Arendt’s concept of the modern political lie that tallies with the case of Iraq. To be sure, the “factual texture” has been rearranged, and the words used to describe actors, whether they are “terrorist” or “foreign fighter” in the US or “insurgent” in the UK, do usually fit without seam into the wider discourse and to the actual events. However, any distinction between passive truth-tellers and active liars breaks down under interrogation. In this instance we see that the BBC is perhaps reporting passively and “truthfully”, and their reports are “factually accurate” in many respects, but this is only the case from *within* the UK governmental and military *discourse*. The BBC’s reporting both reflects and *actively* reinforces this discourse. The governmental and military discourse becomes the primary discourse in which “Others” are situated. The stating of what was happening by the governmental and military sources can then be truthfully and accurately reported. Indeed, this “neutral” reporting of factual truth also allows itself to presuppose and reinforce the conceptual scheme of those with the power of definition, allowing the latter to frame all subsequent events and factual truths. This framing then goes on to prompt audience expectations in future, and therefore future frames of reference and so on. However, even if it were the case that in the third and fourth period the BBC’s reporting was accurate, then it would still reinforce the UK-US actions and the corresponding discourse. That is, it would not be how those fighting the occupation see themselves.

The above possibility presents us with another problem in applying the concept of the “modern political lie”. For Arendt, the modern political lie is juxtaposed to the ‘facts... in their own original context’, and becomes a *substitute* for ‘reality and factuality’ (Arendt, 1993: 154). However, as I have tried to establish, the reality and the facts have themselves been changed in Iraq to bring about a new situation to which a discourse corresponds. To say “what is” in this situation would involve the continual recognition that the use of the term “insurgent” becomes nearly adequate in the third and fourth period only due to the political manoeuvring that changed the reality of the situation before it is mediated. In effect the American government sought to set up the conditions in which the resistance to the invasion and occupation was delegitimised. The reason that the fighters have become “insurgents”, the reason that the same adjective has moved from false to true, is because of the intentional actions of

US planners to establish a new reality; the world does not become “defactualized”, but “refactualized”. The attempts to set up cooperative indigenous governments has by the US has taken away the discursive landscape in which resistance can occur. As in Chile in the early 1970s, in Iraq today the American government has attempted to engineer “facts on the ground” to which their actions respond and to which hegemonic discourse corresponds.

The problem with such a situation is that, as Arendt rightly points out, without understanding what is, proposals for what can be, whether militarily (see Barkawi, 2004) or otherwise, are likely to rest on poor foundations. If the representation of factual truths removes them from historical context, and ignores activity at the same time at which it positions those mere facts within already existing discursive relations, then there is little chance of citizens comprehending the full situation, with all of the consequences that entails. As I have tried to show, facts are not mere facts, they are the results of action. The claim to neutrality in certain modes of representing reality masks the subjective, dialectical, activity that lies behind factual truth. This passivity does nothing to unmask power and does little to help our understanding of situations. If facts are not neutral or abstract, but power-ridden and political, then journalists must take a critically intersubjective stance against those facts in order to better understand and better communicate them. This would surely be unpopular with chauvinistic presumed audiences, and therefore unviable for most commercial news operations; its rejection of siding with “us” may also mean that state broadcasters, such as the BBC, would come under pressure from governments. Failing to fit with military and government frames is of course not the only option open to journalists but it is perhaps the one that most effectively enables them to fulfil their obligation to a democratic public. The alternative is to give up any pretence of journalistic independence or neutrality and admit partiality.

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<sup>1</sup> The version of this article that I refer to here is the original 1971 New York Review of Books (online) version. Therefore, the exact page numbers are not apparent.

<sup>2</sup> One can deduce this from the fact that regime change was occasionally stated as a reason for intervention by White House staff, and support for the invasion was consistently higher in the US than in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Tarak Barkawi for clarifying this point.

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