

Syria: The propaganda blitz

More than a decade after the war in Iraq, have global media outlets learnt to look beyond the spin?

Listening Post Last Modified: 25 Sep 2013 12:54

This week on the Listening Post: Presidents, propaganda and channelling the media to get the message out: a look at the similarities and differences between Syria in 2013 and Iraq 10 years ago.

As the crisis in Syria deepens, the diplomatic battle outside the country – being fought out in the global media – intensifies. Newscasts have chronicled the summit meetings, various bilateral talks, the photo-ops that precede the gatherings behind closed doors – while waiting for a vote on a UN resolution that would mandate the Assad government to hand over all of its chemical weapons.

Both sides in this geopolitical tug of war have reached deep into their media arsenals, as politicians and their proxies have pushed their particular agendas. Presidents Obama, Putin, and Assad have all - in their own ways - blitzed the cameras.

More than a decade after the ‘sales job’ that was the run-up to the war in Iraq, the question is whether media outlets have learnt to look beyond the spin and see the story in Syria for what it really is – a country at war with itself, with more than 100,000 dead, millions displaced and millions more in peril.

Our starting point this week is Damascus, with stops in Washington, Paris, Moscow, and London, on a story that is heading for a resolution – of some sort – at the UN headquarters in New York City.

Our Newsbytes this week: In Tunisia, journalists have held a one-day strike to protest press restrictions and the arrests of several media professionals; Vietnam is growing into an increasingly dangerous place to make one’s political views known online - the Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders ranks Vietnam 172nd out of the 179 countries it tracks on its press freedom index; one reporter unlikely to be working in Pakistan anytime soon is the New York Times’ absent bureau chief in Islamabad, Declan Walsh who was deported by the Pakistani authorities four months ago, one day before the parliamentary elections - after his article examined various murder investigations against a political party called Muttahida Quami Movement and, coincidentally, its heavy handed approach to journalists.

This week’s Listening Post feature examines Afghanistan’s changing media landscape.

Back in the days of the Taliban, Afghanistan’s media landscape was barren. Television sets were banned, radio stations were not allowed to play music and newspapers were forbidden from printing pictures. But since 2001, the country’s media sector has been revolutionised.

Today, there are more than 400 news outlets. The explosive growth in media has been largely bankrolled by the West, primarily the US. But with western troops preparing to leave in 2014, international funding for the media will soon be drying up.

Can Afghanistan’s fledgling economy support its vast new media sector? Or will a western-backed media that is among the most vibrant in the region dwindle, giving way to what critics call ‘warlord TV’ - the partisan playthings of Afghanistan’s political and religious parties. Listening Post’s Meenakshi Ravi reports on the future of Afghanistan’s media.

Finally, this month marked the 12th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and to commemorate the event, [EarthCam](#), a US tech firm, has released a [time lapse video showing](#) the construction of the new One World Trade Centre building in Manhattan. Filming began in October 2004 when ground zero was not much more than a sandpit. We see the rise, over what Americans consider hallowed ground, of the 104-story skyscraper that is scheduled for completion in early 2014. It is one of those viral videos that is strangely moving. There is plenty of room to criticise American foreign policy post 9/11, but this time lapse symbolises that Americans have a way of bouncing back. With more than 2.2 million hits online, the “One World Trade Center Time-lapse” is our Web Video of the week.

