

Communication:
Breakdowns and Breakthroughs

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Outrage in Fallujah: Strategies in the Communication of Political Violence

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Abstract

The battle of Fallujah in April 2004 was a significant event in the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States (U.S.) military. Occurring one year after the initial assault on Baghdad by the U.S.-led coalition, Fallujah became a symbol of Iraqi resistance after successive U.S. military units failed to take control of the city. Following the killing of four private military contractors in Fallujah and images of their brutal death being broadcast around the world, the U.S. military commenced an attack which impacted heavily on Fallujah's civilian population. Over 700 civilians were killed, more than 1,500 were seriously wounded and the attacks resulted in considerable damage to buildings and infrastructure. Communication tactics used by U.S. officials minimised outrage over the effects of the attack on these Iraqi civilians. Furthermore the mainstream Western media consistently reverberated the official version of events. The strategies used to inhibit or amplify outrage in this case of political violence can be categorised into four main areas: cover up, devaluation, reinterpretation and intimidation. If attempts to minimise outrage over an injustice are not entirely successful there is a likelihood that the attack will backfire on the perpetrator. An understanding of these tactics can provide peace activists with a system for analysing conflict and the way in which broader populations are shielded from the brutality of war.

Key Words: Fallujah, backfire, injustice, outrage.

1. Introduction

The military assault on Fallujah in April 2004 demonstrates information management practices used by U.S. officials in the communication of conflict. Using the backfire model it will be demonstrated how outrage can be minimised over a perceived injustice. The basic principle underpinning the backfire model is that the perpetration of an injustice may be counter-productive in the long term and will potentially backfire on the perpetrator. However, most injustices performed by powerful groups do not backfire because they are able to inhibit outrage. The techniques used by powerful groups to minimise outrage over an unjust attack can be summarised by the five outrage management tactics in the backfire model: *cover up*, *devaluation*, *reinterpretation*, the use of *official channels* and *intimidation*.¹ Of these five, all were used in the Fallujah case study with the exception of official channels.

The chapter begins with a description of the events in Fallujah in April of 2004 that reveals a version of the U.S. assault on the civilian population that was not documented in the Western mainstream media. This account is drawn from U.S. and British independent journalists, an Al-Jazeera news team that were the only journalists in Fallujah at the time of the siege and humanitarian aid workers that were also in Fallujah in April 2004. This is then compared with the version of events presented by the U.S. Department of Defense (D.O.D). By applying the outrage management tactics from the backfire model to this account it will be shown how the information on Fallujah was manipulated by U.S. officials and then distributed by the mainstream media resulting in a wider distribution of misinformation.

2. The Attack and Siege of Fallujah: April 2004

The attack on Fallujah in April 2004 occurred almost immediately after the very public killing of four private military contractors working for the U.S. company Blackwater on 31 March. Their bodies were dragged from vehicles and set alight and then hung from a bridge over the Euphrates River.² Although this event could be viewed as the catalyst for the U.S. military assault, there were other more strategic reasons. Fallujah had been one of the Iraqi cities that vigorously opposed the U.S. occupation and was regarded as a central point of Iraqi resistance.³ The road into Fallujah was controlled by multiple resistance groups and U.S. patrols were unable to travel into the city for any length of time because of the inevitability of a roadside bomb attack.⁴

Within days of the Blackwater killings Fallujah was surrounded by 11,000 U.S. troops blocking all access into and out of the city.⁵ On the outskirts of the city, large concrete blocks and coils of concertina wire were being erected and behind them were many armoured fighting vehicles.⁶ Fallujah was effectively under siege in what appeared to be an attempt to keep all males of fighting age within the city limits. Both the water and power supply were cut off.⁷ Donna Mulhearn, an Australian aid worker, attempted to escape the city through one of the checkpoints with a group of Western humanitarian workers. Only by identifying themselves as Westerners were they able to negotiate their way past long queues of cars carrying Fallujan civilians attempting to flee the impending attack. The U.S. soldiers at the checkpoint explained to Mulhearn's group that women and children could leave but all men had to return to the city because they wanted 'them all in there together so we (the U.S. military) can finish them off at once. It's much easier that way.'⁸ After explaining to the U.S. soldiers that this presented a problem because most Iraqi women do not drive, it was agreed that one man per car could pass through the checkpoint. All other men were turned back regardless of their intention or desire to fight.

The first air attacks on Fallujah were centred on a residential area in the north western part of the city where witnesses described the way in which large bombs

exploded and then distributed many smaller bombs.⁹ This indicated that the U.S. planes had used cluster munitions, a weapon banned under a United Nations (U.N.) convention because of the ‘unacceptable’ level of harm they cause to civilians.¹⁰ Various parts of Fallujah were bombed on the first evening and the U.S. soldiers attempted to enforce a night time curfew by firing at civilian vehicles travelling at night.¹¹ Treatment for victims of the air attack was difficult because U.S. soldiers were occupying the bridge that connected much of Fallujah to the general hospital.¹² Eventually the hospital was also bombed and doctors were forced to operate in makeshift clinics without anaesthetic and vital equipment required for treating substantial wounds. Without electricity or generators, medical work performed at night was under the light of ‘candles, torches and cigarette lighters.’¹³

As well as the risk posed to civilians from the bombing, U.S. Marine snipers were set up in locations around the city. Some of the victims of sniper attacks documented by Mulhearn included a ten year old boy and a grandmother.¹⁴ U.S. independent journalist Dahr Jamail,¹⁵ and Ahmed Mansour from the Al-Jazeera news team also documented the targeting of civilians by U.S. Marine snipers.¹⁶ Another concerning aspect of the U.S. attack was the targeting of ambulances. Jo Wilding, a British aid worker travelling with Mulhearn was fired upon by U.S. snipers whilst travelling in an ambulance to reach a woman going into premature labour.¹⁷ Other attacks on ambulances were also documented by Mulhearn,¹⁸ Mansour,¹⁹ and British independent journalist Lee Gordon who described the U.S. military as ‘committing the most heinous crimes possible in Fallujah.’²⁰ At this time U.S. officials claimed that the U.S. military were ‘escorting ambulances’ and cooperating with Iraqi health officials. The Secretary General of the Iraqi Red Crescent rejected this claim, saying that no Red Crescent ambulances had been allowed to enter the city since April 13 and the official U.S. claim that they were providing humanitarian assistance was not endorsed by a single refugee or doctor interviewed by Jamail.²¹

Patrick Cockburn, a Middle Eastern correspondent since the 1970s, interviewed Fallujan civilians taking refuge in an abandoned air-raid shelter in Baghdad. He was directed there by Dr. Abed al-Allah, a representative of the U.S. appointed Iraqi Governing Council. The Iraqi doctor estimated that of around 600 people reported dead in Fallujah, roughly 350 were women and children.²² The figures of around 700 dead and 1500 wounded are regarded as conservative because of the difficulty of counting casualties in the U.S. controlled section of the city.²³ Considering that the public justification for the attack on Fallujah was in retaliation for the lynching of the four Blackwater employees it can be concluded that the military assault was inherently unjust. The attack was an explicit violation of Article 33 in the Fourth Geneva Convention with respect to the ‘Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War’ which prohibits collective punishment and methods of intimidation. The U.S. military was also in breach of Article 35 in relation to the entitlement of civilians who wish to leave a territory ‘at the outset or during a conflict.’²⁴

3. Minimising Outrage: The Official US Account of Fallujah

In trying to locate a central point for a U.S. account of Fallujah, a valid and accessible option was the U.S. Department of Defense (D.O.D.) news briefings conducted in April 2004. All D.O.D. news briefings and 'significant interviews' are archived online with transcripts.²⁵ Not only do these transcripts provide a method for determining whether or not government officials have used outrage management tactics with respect to particular events during the war, on occasions they also provide the identity of attending journalists and their affiliation. With this information it is possible to trace the journalists' news articles to determine whether official perspectives were transmitted to a wider media audience. This is one way of understanding how Western audiences are shielded from injustices relating to war and in this case, the injustice perpetrated against Fallujah's civilian population.

In the D.O.D. news transcripts analysed from 5-13 April 2004, cover up and reinterpretation are the most common outrage management tactics used although there is also some evidence of devaluation. On 5 April, General Mark Kimmitt described a 'series of traffic control points to establish a cordon around the city.'²⁶ There was no mention of the concertina wire, concrete blocks, 11,000 troops or armoured vehicles surrounding the city. Kimmitt stated that the purpose of the cordon and a 1900-0600 curfew was so that there could be a commencement of 'civil military projects in Fallujah.'²⁷ He makes reference to work on schools, health clinics and the water system but also warns that the 'Marines are capable of putting down their paintbrushes and picking up their weapons to defend the people of Iraq.'²⁸

From an outrage management perspective, Kimmitt's 'traffic control points' and 'cordon' are a misrepresentation of what is effectively a military siege. Important details are omitted and in particular the prevention of men under the age of 45 from leaving the city in what could be described as form of *gendercide*. In an article appearing the following day by one of the attending journalists, John Burns, the siege line is described as an 'encirclement of the city' and he reiterates the Kimmitt's civilian infrastructure rhetoric.²⁹

On 7 April General Kimmitt states that the cordon around Fallujah has been implemented to curtail movement in and out of the city with 'the exception of humanitarian supplies.'³⁰ When asked by an unnamed reporter about the threat to civilians in Fallujah resulting from the assault Kimmitt implies that the responsibility rests with the Fallujan resistance and he suggests that the 'extremists' in Fallujah might prefer a 'Talibanization' of their country.³¹ This is an example of devaluation by associating victims with Islamic fundamentalists which for Western audiences may be less worthy victims. Later in the briefing when asked about civilian casualties by a German journalist, Kimmitt emphasises that U.S. weapons are 'extraordinarily precise,' which in the context of Fallujah is a misrepresentation of the damage caused by the air attacks. It could be said that

the snipers attacks are precise, but their occasional choice of women and children as victims highly questionable.

In the news briefing on 8 April, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez reiterates Kimmitt's notions of precise weaponry.³² Sanchez reaffirms the false notion that the U.S. military is working on humanitarian assistance initiatives in Fallujah and specifically mentions food and medical assistance. When questioned by non-Western journalists about civilians lacking food and medical equipment, the targeting of aid vehicles and by this stage up to 300 civilian casualties, Sanchez gives only brief answers in the form of a denial or pledge of ignorance. This could be viewed as a form of cover up by omission.

A report the following day in the *Washington Post* by attending journalist Sewell Chan makes reference to a large number of Iraqis killed and wounded, but claims the 'reports could not be verified.'³³ Chan does not make any reference to the questions raised at the previous day's news briefing with respect to civilian casualties, the targeting of ambulances or the lack of food and medical supplies. The failure by Chan to acknowledge these elements of the news briefing illustrate a deepening of the cover up in relation to *Washington Post* readers. Where Sanchez denied these occurrences before a relatively small audience of journalists, Chan's article, presented to a much larger audience ignores them altogether.

By 12 April foreign journalists, Radel Azawi from the B.B.C. and Ali Saheed from Al-Jamuriya, explicitly raised the question of civilian casualties.³⁴ The tactics from Kimmitt at this briefing were similar to Sanchez on 9 April in so far as preferring not comment. Although foreign journalists by this stage were becoming more focussed on civilian casualties in Fallujah, the point was not raised by a single major U.S. media organisation during this time.

In summary, the U.S. Department of Defense news briefings were a vehicle for outrage management using the first three tactics in the backfire model. Cover up was manifested in the suppression of details relating to civilian casualties and the proportion who were children and women. Other significant omissions were the effects of the bombing on hospital and medical services, the targeting of ambulances, the use of cluster bombs, the refusal to allow civilians through military checkpoints and the shooting of civilians by marine snipers. Examples of reinterpretation were the description of military siege lines as 'traffic control points,' making reference to a humanitarian intention in Fallujah when in fact humanitarian groups such as the Iraqi Red Crescent were prevented from entering the city, and the framing of the operation as a civil infrastructure project when it was strictly a military operation. Devaluation of the victims was less obvious perhaps because U.S. officials either denied there were civilian casualties or claimed not to know about them. The way in which they blamed the resistance fighters for any possible civilian casualties was one example of devaluation, as well as the false claim that Fallujans might prefer 'Talibanisation' over (U.S. enforced) democracy.

4. The Targeting of Al-Jazeera: Violence and Intimidation

Although the work of Ahmed Mansour and the Al-Jazeera team did not reach broader Western media audiences it was widely broadcast to Arab and Middle Eastern audiences. The work performed by the Al-Jazeera team proved to be an effective weapon for *promoting* outrage over the injustice being perpetrated by the U.S. military. The broadcasts demonstrated the capacity of the U.S. government to act as a 'rogue outlaw state executing one of the worst attacks on a civilian population.'³⁵ The process of exposing the U.S. military attack on Fallujah was not without risk and the Al-Jazeera crew were subjected to a campaign of intimidation by the U.S. military. Mansour's crew came under heavy fire from tanks which forced them to relocate from their initial 'well known location.'³⁶ U.S. fighter jets targeted the new location as well as bombing the house where they had stayed previously which resulted in the death of the owner of the house. Each time the crew made a broadcast they came under attack from U.S. planes, presumably because their broadcast signal had been detected. Although the crew survived the attacks they were forced to stop broadcasting for a 'few days.'³⁷

5. U.S. Withdrawal and Backfire

The Al-Jazeera team's work did however come to an unexpected end. After nearly two weeks of fighting U.S. officials met with Iraqis in Fallujah to negotiate a 'ceasefire.' Although claiming that they wanted to give the Fallujans time to 'tend to the wounded and dead,'³⁸ a more likely reason was that land supplies to U.S. troops had been cut off in Fallujah because resistance networks had taken control of supply routes.³⁹ The declared ceasefire did not bring an end to the bombing from the air which continued throughout April.⁴⁰ Whilst this is significant, from a backfire perspective the most telling aspect of the negotiated ceasefire was that the first condition set down by the U.S. officials was that Mansour and the Al-Jazeera team leave Fallujah immediately.⁴¹ In a classified U.S. Army document released by Wikileaks, U.S. officials conceded that one of the primary reasons they were unable to continue in Fallujah was because of the 'political pressure to halt military operations' as a result of the 'broadcasts on Arab satellite news channels.'⁴²

From a backfire perspective their broadcasts brought the attack to a receptive audience, assigned value to the victims as civilians who are supposed to be protected under international law during war, and interpreted or presented the event for what it was: a large scale military attack which resulted in the death and injury of innocent people. The actions of Mansour and his crew were an example of using four of the outrage management tactics in reverse. They exposed the U.S. attacks on Fallujah, emphasised or interpreted the attack as an injustice, assigned value to civilian life and resisted acts of intimidation directed against them. It could be argued that these actions contributed to the attack backfiring on the U.S. military.

As a case study in backfire, the April assault on Fallujah demonstrates two important points. Firstly, identification of the use of outrage management tactics in the communication of political violence enables one to understand misinformation campaigns as an expression of one or more of the five tactics. In the case of Fallujah there were four: cover up, reinterpretation, devaluation and intimidation. Secondly, the work of the Al-Jazeera team demonstrated to some extent the effect of being able to use these tactics in reverse to bring about peace or at least a reduction in violence.

Sadly in Fallujah, the relative calm lasted only for a short time and in November 2004, the U.S. mounted a second large scale attack which devastated the city. It was noted in the classified document released by Wikileaks that during the April assault there were no journalists embedded with the U.S. military. In November there were '91 embeds representing 60 media outlets.'⁴³ The U.S. military's amended media strategy for the second assault on Fallujah underlines the importance of controlling information during conflict, a control that can demonstrably limit potential outrage over perceived injustices.

Notes

¹ Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 4.

² Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), 160-168.

³ Matt Carr, 'The Barbarians of Fallujah', *Race and Class* 50, No. 1 (2008): 24.

⁴ Dahr Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007), 81.

⁵ Ahmed Mansour, *Inside Fallujah: the Unembedded Story* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 69.

⁶ Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone*, 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸ Donna Mulhearn, 'The Road to Fallujah', *Griffith Review* 17 (2007): 149.

⁹ Mansour, *Inside Fallujah*, 90.

¹⁰ 'Convention on Cluster Munitions', 30 May 2008, accessed September 17, 2011, <http://www.clusterconvention.org/files/2011/01/Convention-ENG.pdf>.

¹¹ Mansour, *Inside Fallujah*, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 93.

¹³ Mulhearn, 'The Road to Fallujah', 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone*, 138.

¹⁶ Mansour, *Inside Fallujah*, 151.

¹⁷ ‘Christian Peacemakers Report Killings of Women and Children by U.S. Troops in Fallujah’, Staff writers at *Ekklesia*, 14 April 2004, accessed 16 August 16, 2011, http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news_syndication/article_040414fallujah.shtml.

¹⁸ Mulhearn, ‘The Road to Fallujah’, 134-135.

¹⁹ ‘Al-Jazeera Reporters Give Bloody First Hand Account of April ’04 U.S. Siege of Fallujah’, Democracy Now, 22 February 2006, accessed September 2, 2011, http://www.democracynow.org/2006/2/22/exclusive_al_jazeera_reporters_give_bloody.

²⁰ Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone*, 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²² Patrick Cockburn, ‘Do We Look Like Fighters? Ask Fallujah Families with Their Disabled, Their Old and Their Children’, *The Independent*, 13 April 2004, accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/do-we-look-like-fighters-ask-fallujah-families-with-their-disabled-their-old-and-their-children-559814.html>.

²³ Mulhearn, ‘The Road to Fallujah’, 138.

²⁴ ‘Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva’, 12 August 1949, accessed August 29, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b36d2.html>.

²⁵ ‘Transcripts Archive’, U.S. Department of Defense, accessed August 26, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/archive.aspx>.

²⁶ D.O.D. News Transcript, Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing, 5 April 2004, accessed August 4, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2421>.

²⁷ D.O.D. News Transcript, 5 April 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

²⁹ John Burns, ‘Showdowns Loom in Iraq Showdown’, *Pittsburgh Post*, 6 April 2004, accessed August 4, 2011, <Proquest>.

³⁰ D.O.D. News Transcript, Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing, 7 April 2004, accessed August 5, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2467>.

³¹ D.O.D. News Transcript, 7 April 2004.

³² D.O.D. News Transcript, Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing, 8 April 2004, accessed August 6, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2472>.

³³ Karl Vick and Sewell Chan, ‘U.S. Troops Battle to Retake Cities’, *The Washington Post*, 10 April, 2004, accessed August 8, 2011. Newspaper Source Plus.

³⁴ D.O.D. News Transcript, Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing, 12 April 2004, accessed August 8, 2011,

<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2485>.

³⁵ Michael Niman, 'Yes, We Murder Journalists', *The Humanist* 66, No. 2 (2006): 7.

³⁶ Ahmed Mansour, 'Letter', Arab Commission for Human Rights, 29 April 2004, accessed September 15, 2011, <http://www.achr.nu/newen26.htm>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ D.O.D. News Transcript, Coalition Provisional Authority Briefing, 9 April 2004, accessed August 7, 2011,

<http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2479>.

³⁹ Mansour, *Inside Fallujah*, 182.

⁴⁰ Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone*, 139 and Mansour, *Inside Fallujah*, 182-190.

⁴¹ 'Al-Jazeera Reporters Give Bloody First Hand Account of April '04 U.S. Siege of Fallujah', Democracy Now, 22 February, 2006.

⁴² U.S. Army National Ground Intelligence Centre, 'Complex Environments: Battle of Fallujah 1, April 2004', 13, accessed March 17, 2011, http://www.wikileaks.ch/wiki/Complex_Environments:_Battle_of_Fallujah_I,_April_2004.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

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