Discursive (re)construction of the prelude to the 2003 Iraq War in op/ed press

Ahmed Sahlane

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Dialectics of argument and rhetoric

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2.1 Introduction

Operation Iraqi Freedom marked not only the US’s second incursion into Iraq in just over a decade but also an unprecedented alignment of the media with the interests of the US government. As in the First Gulf War (1991), the desirability of attacking Iraq became increasingly tied up with human rights abuses committed by Saddam Hussein (the ex-president of Iraq, 1979–2003). Though the Bush run-up to war has generated some frame analysis and agenda-setting research (e.g. Degano, 2007; Nicolaev and Porpora, 2007; Porpora and Nicolaev, 2008), few studies have investigated the prelude to the Iraq War debate from a critical discourse perspective and across different media contexts (e.g. Chang and Mehan, 2008; Sahlane, 2012, 2013, 2015; Wilson, Sahlane, and Somerville, 2012). The present study is an attempt to fill this gap by addressing the role of language in shaping the way the 2003 Iraq crisis unfolded and remained unresolved.

I first discuss the data used. Then, I show how argumentum ad hominem (personal abuse aimed at preventing the opponent from advancing his standpoint) and argument from pity were strategically deployed in pro-war argument in a way that provided blinkers that prevented the American–British public from viewing the Iraqi conflict from different perspectives (silenced rebuttals). Argument from pity resorts to emotional appeal (argumentum ad misericordiam) “either to put pressure on the audience or to sway the audience in the protagonist’s favour” (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, p.139). Argumentum ad misericordiam consists of “unjustifiably appealing for compassion and empathy in cases where a specific situation of serious difficulties, crisis or plight intended to evoke compassion and to win an antagonist over to one’s side is faked or pretended” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, p.72). Such emotional appeals in argument are fallacious when the arguer fails to substantiate his standpoint through solid and relevant evidence. The two fallacies listed above can be classified as argumentative moves that are not intrinsically wrong but are “dangerously prone to abuse” (Jacobs, 2002, p.119). Finally, I conclude by highlighting the important findings of the study.
2.2 Sample materials and methods

Mass media reflect the sociopolitical and cultural-ideological environment they operate in. While French journalism has always emphasised the need to analyse facts and educate (inter)national public opinion rather than merely report facts (Berkowitz and Eko, 2007, p.781), American journalism values balanced exposition of the different positions of the contending parties in a conflict, without getting involved in the analysis of the hard facts of political disputes. Hence, US journalists have become more dependent on official sources for information, and they consequently help in the framing of sociopolitical issues. While the French (and Arab) media can be characterised as fitting within the “Mediterranean” or “polarised” model, the US–British media belong to the “North Atlantic” or “liberal” model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In other words, the US–British press (which is not state-owned or subsidised) is supposed to be more independent, neutral and information-oriented while state support for the French press (and across Europe) “is justified as a measure to promote political pluralism” (Benson and Hallin, 2007, p.43). However, sometimes the US media “is forced to move closer to the state in order to maintain its legitimacy and authority” (ibid.) and promote its commercial self-interest. In this sense, they face a more challenging task – that of providing a wide range of perspectives and acting as a “watchdog” of the government’s policies (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p.189). Similarly, the British press has to “compete nationally for readers who are reached primarily via daily sales rather than subscriptions” (ibid., p.42). Consequently, to account for the diverse needs of its readership, “the British press is forced to cover politics in a highly critical, sensational fashion” (ibid.). As British newspapers are financially independent of political parties, they tend to display a significant degree of political pluralism by allowing for more diverse viewpoints and alternative voices in their coverage of international affairs (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

2.2.1 Newspaper sample

The opinion and editorial (op/ed) articles used in this study were retrieved from six prominent daily broadsheet newspapers (see Table 2.1). Two papers from each Western country (France, the UK and the US) were selected, one known as being “conservative” (Le Figaro, The Times and The Washington Post, respectively) and the other as being “liberal” (Le Monde, The Guardian and The New York Times). In addition, Al-Ahram Weekly was selected as a major quality English newspaper from the Arab world. These newspapers are chosen because they are often considered representative of the mediated public sphere.

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The New York Times (NYT) is supposed to be the most “literate”, “comprehensive” and “magisterial” of US newspapers; it is the US “paper of record” for international news reporting and the “guardian of oppositional news practices” (Goss, 2002, p.84). Together with NYT, The Washington Post (WP) is incontestably the main elite press source for the US foreign policy decision-makers. However, WP was the most hawkish major daily US newspaper in its adoption of a clear pro-war stance during the prelude to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (Sahlane, 2012). It systematically silenced or downplayed criticism of the Bush administration’s rush to war (ibid.).

Similarly, The Times is regarded as the newspaper of record and the “organ of the British establishment” in view of its “conservative political allegiance” (Cameron, 1996, pp.318–20). While The Times offered strong support for the US-led war on Iraq, The Guardian forcefully opposed it. The Guardian, which draws its readership mostly from educated, higher socioeconomic classes, has online popularity because of its support for liberal causes. Its editorials demonstrated a clear anti-war stance during the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion. However, its coverage changed in favour of the war once the British troops were on the battlefield (Wells, 2007).

On the other hand, Le Monde is selected because it is a newspaper of record of leftist/Gaullist outlook; it is a “sober paper; there are few ‘soundbites’, no trace of populism. Texts are long, dense and demand high levels of literacy from the reader” (Grundmann et al., 2000, p.306). Likewise, Le Figaro demonstrates an outstanding coverage of international political affairs; its opposition to the Iraq War was very clear in its editorials (Sahlane, 2015). The inclusion of the English-language weekly paper Al-Ahram Weekly was partly motivated by its adoption of a Western style and its broader educated pan-Arab audience.

2.2.2 Methods of analysis

Using the keyword “Iraq (editorial)” on a Web-version Lexis Nexis search, the current study has identified 362 NYT and 174 WP op/ed articles. Searches using “Iraq (editorial or comment)” yielded 135 op/ed and feature articles from The Times and 139 Guardian op/ed articles from the selected period (1 February to 20 March 2003). Sunday editions were excluded. As regards the French newspapers, Le Monde (“Saddam”) yielded 695 articles while Le Figaro (“Irak”) generated 237 articles (31 of which were “debates and opinions”). For Le Monde, the analysis mainly targeted sections that were unsigned or written by guest academics or regular op/ed writers. It should be noted that “French newspapers often publish guest opinion articles as well as official editorials on their front pages” (Benson and Hallin, 2007, p.31). The op/ed articles coded as mixed in the theme category or irrelevant were excluded, leaving a total of 109 op/ed articles to be examined. On the other hand, Al-Ahram Weekly data contained 158 articles concerning the same range of topics that were published in the other papers and in the same period. However, owing to space restrictions, my focus will be on “typical” pro-war arguments in US–British op/eds and counterarguments (rebuttals) will be provided from other anti-war papers as deemed useful.

The unit of analysis is the individual op/ed. “Op/eds” here refers to both editorials and opinion pieces. Editorials are “unsigned and represent the position of the publication” and opinion pieces are “signed” and “represent the opinion of an individual, a regular, or a guest columnist” (Nikolaev and Porpora, 2007, p.7). Op/eds are predominantly in argument mode and they are schematically structured in that they first define the situation, then summarise the news event and finally evaluate the given situation on the basis of which
recommendations for a course of action are highlighted. The analysis of the op/ed articles is carried out in two stages. First, argumentative strategies that have the potential to impart ideological meaning are identified. Then, an analysis of selected texts is carried out to illustrate the type of fallacious arguments that the US–British mainstream op/ed discussants advanced in their debate of the legality of the potential US-led war on Iraq. The sampled op/ed texts will be largely presented as illustrative of US–British op/ed discursive practices vis-à-vis the looming Iraq conflict.

In a pragma-dialectical approach, the reconstruction of argumentative exchange involves a systematic interpretation of the discourse in the light of the pragma-dialectical objective (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984). The discourse analyst needs to closely examine actual utterances and their underlying interactive and communicative functions. Therefore, the newspaper op/ed argumentation about Iraq is “reconstructed” as a “critical discussion” aimed at a “rational” resolution of a difference of opinion (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984). This reconstruction was guided by the macro-structure of the argumentation process, i.e. the contextual situation in which the argumentative moves are embedded. In other words, the analyst reflected upon the broader circumstances that shaped the unfolding of the Iraq conflict. In this sense, both the verbal indicators and the contextual information served as clues for detecting the type of complex argumentation schemes used by the disputants. In addition, only those elements that are verbally expressed (externalisation) and/or implied from unstated commitments by the participants were considered, contingent upon the overall macro-structure of the argumentative discourse (i.e. the participants’ communicative, interactive and strategic goals).

The present study assumes that all representations of social events are polysemic and intertextual in that discourse enters into a synchronic and diachronic relationship with other co-occurring communicative events. For example, the type of arguments put forward by pro-Iraq War op/ed discussants intertextually resonated with the Bush administration’s “war on terror” rhetoric in an uncritical way that created a form of indexical association through “recontextualisation” (Sahlane, 2012). More interestingly, language should be seen as a “socially and historically situated mode of action” in that “it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or constitutive” (Fairclough, 1995, p.131). The aim of this chapter is to show how ideology may manifest itself in discourse through the use of argumentative manoeuvring strategies that can be geared to manipulate meaning construction.

2.3 The function of ad hominem fallacies in argumentation

Pragma-dialecticians define “argumentation” as a communicative encounter in a context of controversy, whose main goal is to resolve a difference of opinion in a rational way (i.e. based solely on the merit of the arguments put forward). Arguers might tacitly resort to “strategic manoeuvring” when they “attempt to exploit the opportunities afforded by the dialectical situation for steering the discourse rhetorically in the direction that serves their own interests best” (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999, pp.481–2). Effective argumentation should involve taking a stance that is morally worthy (ethos), providing sound evidence in support of argument (logos) and legitimately appealing to the audience’s emotions (pathos). However, strategic manoeuvring may lead to manipulative practices such as (a) exploiting the “topic potential” by directing discussion to the topics that are easiest to handle (e.g. filtering information and keeping argumentation within the bounds of “acceptable” premises), (b) appealing to the audience’s emotions to gain their sympathy for a
preferred stance and (c) using effective presentational devices (e.g. rhetorical questions, metaphor, analogy, loaded expressions, strategic ambiguity) to frame contentious issues from a certain perspective (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999, p.484). In other words, when a deficient “strategic move” in an argumentative exchange hinders the rational resolution of a disagreement (e.g. false witness testimony, ad hominem arguments), a “fallacy” is said to be committed (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984). Therefore, an interplay of ethos and pathos, seeking to enhance the arguer’s standpoint, might be manipulative, as the following sections demonstrate.

2.3.1 Argumentum ad hominem: strategies of character attack

An ad hominem fallacy occurs when an interactant resorts to irrelevant personal abuse of an opponent instead of addressing his argument. Such a defamation strategy can also involve discrediting moves that cast doubt on the opponent’s character by portraying them as inconsistent (circumstantial ad hominem) or biased, in order to disqualify them as legitimate interlocutors in a rational dialogue (poisoning the well). Therefore, in what follows, ad hominem arguments are treated as dialogical moves (speech acts) aimed at achieving “rhetorical” goals.

2.3.2 Direct (abusive) ad hominem

Personal attack is a manoeuvring strategy that calls into question the character, sincerity and credibility of the other party instead of countering their standpoint. Its function is to ridicule the opponent. Hence, it violates proper rules of social exchange (i.e. politeness), as illustrated below:

[M]any elements of the Democratic Party, including most of its base and many of its most conspicuous leaders, seem deranged, unhinged by the toxic fumes of hatred and contempt they emit for the president [...] they consider ignorant.

(Will, WP, 19 March 2003)

It [France] was given its permanent seat on the Security Council to preserve the fiction that heroic France was part of the great anti-Nazi alliance rather than a country that surrendered and collaborated [...] France spent the entire 1990s weakening sanctions and eviscerating the inspections regime as a way to end the containment of Iraq. France is doing this to contain the United States.

(Krauthammer, WP, 28 February 2003)

[Short’s “not in my name” position is] more a slogan of disengaged individuals who are opting out of the political battle than of those fighting for an alternative. So, our moral Cabinet minister ends up hiding behind the bogus authority of the UN, waiting for unelected, unaccountable apparatchiks such as Hans Blix and Kofi Annan to pass judgment on Iraq before she can give the bombers her blessing.

(Hume, The Times, 13 March 2003)

US Democrats, British labour politicians and French and UN leaders are negatively portrayed. While “martial virtues” were associated with American jingoistic masculinity, opposition to war and the advocating of diplomacy became a form of cowardice, dereliction of
responsibility, defeatism and the pursuit of prudential self-interest. For example, Clare Short (the then-secretary of state for international development, who resigned from Tony Blair’s government in opposition to the 2003 Iraq War) was portrayed as “disloyal Ms Short” (The Times, 11 March 2003), “the people’s peacenik” whose “angry rebel routine boosts her crafted PR image as the conscience of the Labour Party in an otherwise sinful world” and won her the title of “Saint Clare of Ladywood”. She also sounded “as if she were a spokesman for Greenpeace” (Hume, The Times, 13 March 2003). “Her outburst on Iraq is less a statement about the war than about Clare Short” (ibid.), and her “brave stands against government policy” are fake as they tend to “bomb soft targets such as […] a war without UN support” so that “she can ride a wave of public sympathy” (ibid.).

The problem with character evidence is that it is a mere strategic manoeuvre to discredit the opponent in the eyes of a third-party audience. This *ad hominem* argument can be represented as follows (Walton, 2004, p.361):

Clare Short is unfit to engage in a dialogue about Iraq War because of her political conduct (“disloyal”, “self-important”, “irresponsible”) and her dialogical propensity to get “angry” and rebellious.

*Therefore*, Short’s “not in my name” stance over Iraq should not be accepted as it is a mere “slogan” of political disengagement and partisan “betrayal”.

2.3.3 *Circumstantial ad hominem*

*Circumstantial ad hominem* is a “form of argument […] used by one party to infer that the other is committed to a certain proposition, based on what the other has said or done in the past” (Walton, 2004, p.362). Robin Cook’s case can provide a useful illustration of this fallacy that combines argument from commitment and personal attack. Robin Cook (the former British Labour Foreign Secretary, who resigned from Tony Blair’s Cabinet over the 2003 Iraq War) convincingly argued that “Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction” (The Guardian, 18 March 2003). Besides, in the 1980s, “the US sold Saddam the anthrax agents and the then British government built his chemical and munitions factories” (ibid.). Therefore, he argued:

Why is it now so *urgent* that we should take military action to disarm a military capacity that has been there for 20 years and which we helped to create? And why is it necessary to resort to war *this week* while Saddam’s ambition to complete his weapons programme is frustrated by the presence of UN inspectors? […] If we believe in an international community based on binding rules and institutions, we cannot simply set them aside when they produce results that are inconvenient to us.

*(Cook, The Guardian, 18 March 2003)*

William Rees-Mogg (former editor of The Times and former vice-chairman of the BBC) countered Cook’s anti-war position by claiming that:

Kosovo is the nearest comparable case to Iraq. NATO acted without UN approval on the grounds that Milosevic’s conduct was a crime against humanity […] That is a problem […] for Robin Cook, who was Foreign Secretary at the time […] If Kosovo was *legal*, Iraq will be legal as well.

*(The Times, 17 March 2003)*
Rees-Mogg’s appeal to ethos is a manoeuvring strategy that can be schematised as follows (Walton, 2004, p.364):

\( a \) (Cook) advocates argument \( a \) (“why rush to war now?”), which has proposition \( A \) (“invading Iraq without a UN mandate is illegal”) as its conclusion.

But Cook has agreed to the bombing of Kosovo without UN backing when he was the British foreign Minister, which implies that he is personally committed to not-\( A \) (“If Kosovo was legal, Iraq will be legal as well”).

Therefore, Cook has a defect in ethical character (he is inconsistent and hypocritical) and thus Cook’s argument (“invading Iraq without UN authorisation is illegal”) should be retracted because it violates the rules of ethical conduct (a discussant should honour his past commitments).

Silenced rebuttal: Why has [the bombing of Iraq] become so much more pressing than any other [humanitarian concern] that [the US] should command a budget four times the size of America’s entire annual spending on overseas aid? (Monbiot, 2003).3

Rees-Mogg’s ethical appeal seeks to refute Cook’s anti-war position in an illegitimate way. First, the analogical presumption that Iraq and Bosnia were similar is yet to be evidenced (burden shift strategy): “Iraq is not a Kosovo, where ethnic cleansing was an immediate, urgent horror or a fledgling East Timor, crying out for external assistance” (Tisdall, 2003). Besides, the goal of the US invasion of Iraq might be motivated by the need “to change social and economic relations by military force in favour of the ‘Master Race’ of the day” (Amin, 2003). Therefore, though personal traits might be valid attacks on an opponent’s credibility, character evidence might become problematic when used to silence others’ viewpoints. More interestingly, even if the character attack is retracted, the damage to the opponent’s credibility may nonetheless persist. The irreparability of the damage is even more serious in the “poisoning the well” *ad hominem* (Walton, 2006).

### 2.3.4 The “poisoning the well” *ad hominem*

The deployment of culpabilisation strategies was a very crucial Manichean “rhetoric” to delegitimise the religious leaders’ anti-war position. During Bush’s preparations for war, “church leaders have warned of the unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences of war against Iraq – massive civilian casualties, a precedent for preemptive war, further destabilisation of the Middle East and the fueling of more terrorism” (Wallis and Cohen, 2003). For example, Tincq pointed out that:

> Opposition to war on Iraq is contagious in the churches, which view attacking Iraq as *politically and morally unacceptable* [...] The sanctions already killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians. Iraq does not need bombs or missiles; what it (desperately) needs is moral, political, and economic support.

*(Le Monde, 2003 – translation mine)*

Their anti-war stance brought the religious leaders much criticism in mainstream media. For example, it was claimed that “a list of more than 573 priests” who were “accused of abusing minors since 1976” (Goodstein, 2002) were born radicals as they also opposed the Vietnam War. Instead of addressing their “immoral” scandals, these clerics chose to “turn to
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writing anti-war policy” (ibid.). A conspiracy thesis was also invoked in that any opposition to war was characterised as mere “anti-American/Israel” sentiment (Amos, 2003; Friedman, 2003). Besides, the French and Russian UN veto threats were characterised as “largely driven by economic interests in Saddam’s continuance in power” (Safire, 2003). After all, the UN itself “has rarely risen above being a mere bazaar for the trading of interests between major powers” (Hoagland, 2003).

In the same vein, referring to the verbal clash between Izzat Ibrahim (the former right-hand man to Saddam Hussein) and Al-Ahmed (the Kuwaiti representative to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference) about the need for Saddam to resign to avert war, Hoagland argued that “Americans and Europeans dismiss the insults and accusations that Arab leaders hurl at one another at public gatherings and summits as angry and even irrational outbursts” (Washington Post, 2003). Hence, as Tony Blair (Prime Minister for the UK from 1997 to 2007) put it, “the only persuasive power to which Saddam responds is 250,000 allied troops on his doorstep” (The Guardian, 2003). This “perceived Arab tendency towards verbosity and antagonistic dispute is the opposite of self-ascribed European norms of negotiation, consensus and rational dialogue” (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998, p.19). As a Westerner, Hoagland, a columnist for The Washington Post and a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1991 for his op/eds on the lead-up to the Gulf War, deployed rhetorical strategies “whereby constructions of personal subjective cultural opinion are transformed into cultural realities” (Shi-Xu, 1997, p.182) about the Arab Other (secundum quid fallacy), who is categorised as rationally inferior. Iraqis were characterised as “political minors who are in need of a regime change and/or are unable to carry one out” (Youssef, 2008, p.160). However, as Van Dijk points out:

Ideological opinions selectiv[e]y invoke and hide history […] we need continuity in presenting Arabs as the enemy of the West by describing them in terms of ideological opinions that are part of a long tradition of Western superiority and Arab inferiority. (van Dijk, 1998, pp.60–1)

Similarly, Charles Krauthammer (a political columnist for Washington Post, a Fox News commentator and a Pulitzer Prize winner for Commentary in 1987) argued that it would be ridiculous to ask for “the permission of Guinea to risk the lives of American soldiers to rid the world – and the long-suffering Iraqi people – of a particularly vicious and dangerous tyrant” (WP, 2003). As Bush put it, “when it comes to our security, we really don’t need anybody’s permission” (quoted in McGrory, 2003) because “[t]he course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others” (WP, 2003). Therefore, this “agonistic combat” creates an “epistemic context” of “radical incommensurability” and “moral alienation” (Jacobs, 1989, p.359) which reserves epistemic privileges for pro-war arguers and excludes the other party. This “poisoning of the well” ad hominem can be schematised as follows (Walton, 2006, p.289):

\[ a \text{ (Cook, Short, Russia, Guinea, US democratic party, UN, Arab and ‘Old Europe’ leaders, the clergy, etc.) have argued for a thesis } A \text{ (a US invasion of Iraq would be an unprovoked war of aggression against a sovereign Arab state).} \]

But \( a \) belong to or is affiliated with groups \( Gs \) (far left radicals, Gaullist nationalists, violent communists, African dictators, rogue Arab regimes, peacenik paedophiles, etc.).

It is known that such groups \( Gs \) are special-interest partisan groups that take up a biased (dogmatic, prejudiced, irrational, fanatic, anti-American/Semitic, “pacifist”, etc.) quarrelling attitude in pushing exclusively for their prejudiced views.
Therefore one cannot engage in a reasoned dialogue over Iraq (or any other ethical/political issue) with any members of these Gs, and hence the arguments of A for A do not deserve to be taken seriously.

In other words, “It is futile to try to reason with passionate marchers waving signs proclaiming that America’s motives are to conquer the world and expend blood for oil. Nor should we waste more precious time trying to beg or buy moral approval from France or Russia, their UN veto threats largely driven by economic interests in Saddam’s continuance in power” (Safire, 2003).

Ad hominem arguments are faulty once they try to prevent the other party from advancing their standpoints by casting doubt on their character and/or circumstances. Attributing certain personality traits to a person or a group of people to exclude them from taking part in a rational dialogue is illegitimate, especially when ad hominem is deliberately used with a rhetorical intent to divert attention from the core issues at hand. For example, instead of addressing the illegality of the US’s pending attacks on Iraq, pro-war arguers strategically shifted discussion to irrelevant issues (e.g. the character of anti-war political actors, conspiracy theories). The epistemic harm caused by ad hominem fallacy can extend to the whole out-group beyond the individual engaged in the dialogue. Such epistemic injustice can also be perpetuated through media cultivation of false witness accounts.

2.4 Media appeal to witness testimony as strategic manoeuvring

During the 2003 Iraq War, editorial perspectivation of news was very clear in the way mainstream media reframed the US invasion of Iraq as a “necessary” and “benign” “war of liberation”. For example, television news reporters “tend to portray [Iraqi] women as the embodiment of sadness, despair [and] helplessness” (Lipson, 2009, p.152). Iraqi women were also depicted as “immobile subjects” (the only active role given to Iraqi women is their “begging” for water from the coalition forces) and “objects to be seen” (ibid.). This stereotypical portrayal was meant to justify the US invasion as a war to liberate Iraqi women. More seriously, the BBC suppressed “the emotional, ethical and political issues that lie behind the bombardment of Baghdad” (Chouliaraki, 2005, p.147). This “detached overview” reconstructed the US bombing of the Iraqi capital “not as a scene of suffering”, but as “a site of intense military action without agency”, “full of spectacularity and striking action” (ibid., p.153). Reports were “free of bloodshed, dissent and diplomacy but full of exciting weaponry, splashy graphics and heroic soldiers” (Aday et al., 2005, p.18). Likewise, The Guardian featured images of innocent Iraqi children “standing on an abandoned Iraqi tank” and “giving the victory salute” under the “protecting gaze of a soldier” (ibid.). Triumphalist images of “children taking food parcels from the back of a military truck” (Wells, 2007, p.62) erased the sociopolitical context of the Iraqi conflict by rendering the Iraqi children’s suffering attributable to parental “neglect rather than attack” (ibid., p.66).

This sanitised depiction of the 2003 Iraq War in Western mainstream media was challenged by the anti-war argument. For example, The Daily Mirror’s iconography confronted the readers with the “brutal realities of the invasion” (Wells, 2007, p.69). Equally, in the Greek press, the gaze of a wounded child in a photograph entitled “The soundless cry of a child” functioned as “a metonym of the Iraqi people looking directly towards the (western) readers” as if telling them “‘I dare you’ (to care, to respond), backed up with the ‘Shame on you’ (for refusing) performative speech act” (Kostantinidou, 2008, p.152). Hence, “its
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narrative was one of shame about what was being done ‘in our name’” (ibid., p.68). Another iconic photo(story) was that of Ali Ismail Abbas, the 12-year-old Iraqi child who lost 16 family members and was maimed for life by a US missile attack on his home. He was flown to the UK for specialised medical treatment. The global infotainment media reframed Ali’s tragedy as a “rescue” story (ibid.) by evoking “liberal narratives of compensation and healing […] to neutralise the iconic photograph’s sense of guilt” (Hariman and Lucaites, 2003, pp.49–50).

Therefore, while the act of witnessing is intimately bound up with suffering, it remains a conflict-ridden discursive act in that “the narrator conveys biased selections based on interpretations and conveys evaluations that guide an audience in specific directions” (Van den Hoven, 2015, pp.169–70). This performative aspect of media witnessing is crucial in that arguments from pathos do not merely reflect reality, but they actively seek to shape it, as the data of the present study demonstrate below:

Based on Iraqi government figures, UNICEF estimates that containment kills roughly 5,000 Iraqi babies (children under 5 years of age) every month, or 60,000 per year […]. Saddam Hussein is 65; containing him for another 10 years condemns at least another 360,000 Iraqis to death. Of these, 240,000 will be children under 5.

(Mead, 2003)

Men were dropped into [industrial shredders] and we were again made to watch. Sometimes they went in head first and died quickly. Sometimes they went in feet first and died screaming. It was horrible. I saw 30 people die like this. Their remains would be placed in plastic bags and we were told they would be used as fish food […] On one occasion, I saw Qusay [President Saddam Hussein’s youngest son] personally supervise these murders.

(Clwyd, 2003)

Another witness told us about practices of the security services towards women: “Women were suspended by their hair as their families watched; men were forced to watch as their wives were raped […] women were suspended by their legs while they were menstruating until their periods were over, a procedure designed to cause humiliation”.

(Clwyd, 2003)

Thousands [of Bosnian Muslims] died. They were killed individually in battle and individually in latter-day concentration camps. They were murdered by the hundreds in massacres. Women were raped. Unlike the Holocaust, the world could not pretend ignorance. We all knew what was happening at Srebrenica in July 1995.

(Cohen, 2003)

On the second day of the invasion [of Kuwait], I saw a woman, minutes after she had been raped by a member of the Republican Guard.

(Ewald, 2003)

many more [Kuwaitis] had been brutalized […] ritually humiliating […] robbed, beaten, raped, tortured. Some of the subjugation, rape and torture had been professional: the work of Iraq’s terrible special security units […] I watched one torture
Discursive (re)construction in op/ed press

First, Walter Russell Mead (then serving as the Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy), in his WP op/ed “Deadlier than war”, contended that 12 years of US-backed “genocidal sanctions” (1991–2003) had been detrimental for the innocent Iraqi civilians. Then, he fallaciously argued that invading Iraq to effect a regime change would be the only morally acceptable solution because the suffering that the US might inflict upon the innocent Iraqi people (“collateral damage”) would be less dreadful than that which would be forestalled. He tried to enhance the “credibility” of his position through the citation of authority sources, such as UNICEF and Iraqi government figures (argumentum verecundiam). This “manoeuvring strategy”, however, is an attempt to use the other party’s data (as already agreed facts) to his own advantage.

Similarly, Ann Clwyd (a Welsh Labour Party MP for Cynon Valley since 1984), in her opinion piece “See men shredded, then say you don’t back war”, argued that Blair’s call for arms against Iraq was justified, based on the human rightist argument she espoused and the presumption that her witnesses are “truthful” beyond reasonable doubt. Hence, her use of direct speech might be motivated by the need to leave a back door open for plausible deniability (Walton, 1996b) (she can easily retract any claim that cannot be conclusively defended) by shifting the burden of responsibility (witnesses were made to “swear that their statements are true and sign them”) (Clwyd, 2003). Though “compassion” is a desirable virtue, acting solely based on unverified witness testimonies might lead to simplistic conclusions. She also argued that “[Saddam’s] evil, fascist regime must come to an end. With or without the help of the Security Council, and with or without the backing of the Labour Party in the House of Commons” (Clwyd, 2003). Her description of how Saddam fed dissidents “feet first” into industrial shredders evokes human abuses detailed in Tony’s Blair’s infamous “dodgy” dossier on Iraq. In other words, Clwyd “strategically” introduced into her argument “presuppositions that may not be true at all” (van Dijk, 1998, p.34), but that are “ideologically” coherent with regards to the pro-war stance she was supposed to defend.

Such pragmatic presuppositions are very instrumental in political persuasion in that they: regulate the way authors or speakers take their (envisaged) audience into account by attuning their formulations and arguments to the kind of views they implicitly suppose this audience to endorse. Consequently, pragmatic presuppositions reflect not so much the authors’ hidden opinions, but rather such opinions as they expect from their readership.

(Clwyd invoked feelings of pity to induce immediate military action against Iraq, even when she knew that her claim was not relevant to her conclusion: if all dictators should be toppled, the world would turn into a perpetual battlefield. Besides, “it is a bit problematic to be invoking international law and insisting on your right to ignore it at the same time, in the same cause and with the same righteous indignation” (Kinsley, 2003). “Civilised norms of global behaviour” say that “Thou shalt not use military force without the approval of the Security Council – even if thou art the United States of America” (ibid.).

Cohen’s witnessing narrative is meant to shock and evoke moral outrage. It conveys a very powerful “never again” instrumental moralism (Nazification strategy) by rendering the

victim, a big, strong man, being interviewed in the place of his torture by a BBC television crew – weeping and weeping, but absolutely silently, as he told the story.

(Kelly, 2003)
failure to act as complicity. Recourse to guilt technique has a persuasive force as it enlists the emotional involvement of the readers, who are themselves agentivised, through the ethical claim that “we” should all share responsibility for remembrance and human rights abuse prevention (inclusion strategy). However, Cohen’s argument is based on “presumptive appeal to a precedent [Bosnia], to plead for exemption from the [UN] established rule” (Walton, 1996a, p.94). His shame appeal forewarns the international community and incurs an obligation to assume the moral responsibility of inaction. Cohen’s appeal to shame argument can be reconstructed as follows (Manolescu, 2007, p.380):

**If** you (the international community) do *A* (tolerate Saddam’s repression of Iraqis), “shame on you”. Feeling shame is undesirable (and I dare you to act responsibly).

**But**, the only way to assume your moral obligation and prevent shameful conduct (as in Bosnia) is to do *A* (support Bush’s plan to effect a regime change in Iraq).

Therefore, you ought to do *A*.

Ewald’s testimony was meant to stress the authoritative role of journalistic eye-witnessing and create the effect of truth (veracity) to validate his pro-war stance (e.g. “I saw a woman, minutes after she had been raped”). The Ba’th regime’s alleged sexual atrocities are rendered factual by the appropriation of the voice of a Western insider-narrator (in his capacity as a reporter). More importantly, he communicates not only his knowledge of the event (spatio-temporal context, circumstance, causality, persecutor-victim relations, etc.) but also his emotional reaction to the traumatic incident. Therefore, his aim is to elicit affective response from readers, who are invited to step beyond the role of complicit passive spectators and take public action to stop the depicted atrocities.

However, “a handful of women whom [Al-Ali] interviewed shortly after the invasion vehemently denied the atrocities committed against Kurds by the Iraqi regime and Iraqi soldiers” (Al-Ali, 2016, p.8). Similarly, the widely publicised “incubator” testimony by the 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl, Nayirah (Kuwaiti premature babies dumped out of the incubators by Iraqi troops), that helped build support for the 1991 Iraq War turned out to be a fabrication (Walton, 1995, p.771). Had the identity of Nayirah been disclosed (a member of the Kuwaiti royal family), her testimony could have been eroded by her motivation as a witness (though Bush could still have invaded Iraq). The choice of witnesses is not always innocent. For instance, while Bakri chose Palestinian victims in his documentary film to bear witness to the Israeli attacks on Jenin on 3 April 2002, Shalev recounted the conflict from the perspective of Israeli soldiers (wearing civil clothes and outside the battlefield) and Palestinians (wearing dark masks and on the location of the attacks) (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009, p.152).

Kelly’s appeal to “argument from witness testimony” brings into play proof to expound the arguer’s attempt to sell war to the British public. Witness testimonies are invested with the power to invoke an emotional response as they invite the audience to reflect upon the traumas of others who are suffering. This “Western experience-as-proof” strategy (e.g. “I watched one torture victim”) creates in the reader a sense of experiential proximity with otherwise distant suffering (assertion performative act and its spatio-temporal circumstance). When a BBC TV crew is quoted, evidentiality becomes intertextual. However, reference to “mythical” groups (“another witness”, “one torture victim”) is another form of burden of proof avoidance (anonymisation strategy).

Therefore, it seems that this “persistence on the humanitarian discourse of compassion towards victims was pivotal in identifying with the western moral virtues of ‘civilised’ humanity” (Kostantinidou, 2008, p.148). The evocation of “rape” scenarios serves
as a cultural trigger of the black rapist/white woman schema, which ultimately led to the ritualistic lynching and “castration of the racial Other” in the 1920s (Farmanfarmaian, 1998, p.288). Likewise, “Native Americans were accused of kidnapping white women and these allegations were used as justification for genocide” (Stabile and Kumar, 2005, p.770; see also Augoustinos et al., 2002; see also Kumar, 2004). This “sexual anxiety” “necessitates a display of virility” against “sand niggers” (ibid., p.289).

The pro-war argument from appeal to pity can be schematised as follows (Walton, 1997, p.105):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premise 1</th>
<th>Saddam is using “torture chambers and rape rooms” to suppress his Iraqi restive people (President Bush’s televised war ultimatum to Saddam Hussein on 17 March 2003, reported in The Guardian, 18 March 2003). The US war on Iraq is a “war for drinkable water”, a “war to replace a regime that throws children from helicopters to force their parents to confess” (Ignatius, 2003).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Premise 2</td>
<td>“The Iraqis would be much better off after an invasion than they would be living indefinitely chained to Saddam Hussein” (Bobbitt, 2003). “Iraqis, even more than Americans, have much to gain from the downfall of a tyrant” (WP, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Therefore “The removal of Saddam Hussein would […] free millions of Iraqis from deprivation and oppression and make possible a broader movement to reshape the Arab Middle East, where political and economic backwardness have done much to spawn extremists such as al Qaeda” (WP, 2003); “prisoners can be released, ethnic minorities freed from brutal repression, war criminals brought to justice, and a polity based on torture and murder replaced by one that respects basic political and human rights” (WP, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silenced</td>
<td>“We say ‘no’ to this preventive war, carried out by the starvers of Iraqis by embargo” (Morin and de Saussure, 2003) because it is a mere “return to the colonial era and might aim at the remapping of the Middle East” (Myard et al., 2003). “[D]emocracy is a long-term endeavour, more complex than the neo-imperialists of the Bush Administration seem to realise” (Pons and Vernet, 2003). “American hegemony and imperial desires necessitate aborting any and all genuine democratic attempts and aspirations inside Iraq […] Alas, the prospect of a free and democratic Iraq is now more distant than ever” (Antoon, 2003).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* President Bush declared: “we will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. In a free Iraq, there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near” (The Guardian, 18 March 2003).

** When Bremer came to Iraq as a US neocolonial “proconsul”, he occupied Saddam’s palaces and “stifled Iraqi calls for direct elections” (Scahill, 2007, p.66). He instead created “a thirty-five-member Iraqi ‘advisory’ council, over which he would have total control and veto power” (ibid.). He “banned many Sunni groups from the body, as well as supporters of Shiite religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, despite the fact that both had significant constituencies in Iraq” (ibid.). The “de-Baathification” process deprived the Iraqi skilled manpower from reconstructing post-invasion Iraq. In addition, the disbanding of the Iraqi military paved the way for its replacement by mercenary contractors (Blackwater) and a powerful Shiite militia (Al-Mahdi Army). Hence, it came as no surprise when John Negroponte was appointed as the first US ambassador to post-Saddam Iraq. Negroponte supervised the training of “death squads or repressive militaries to crush popular movements [in Latin America] Washington deemed a threat to its interests” (Scahill, 2007, p.182). The irony was that “President Bush has argued for a war ostensibly to protect democracy by besmirching democracy” (Hartnett and Stengrim, 2004, p.173).

Though philosophical moralists of the Platonic school view emotional appeal as irrational ad pasiones fallacies (and, thus, as an unreliable guide to action), efficacious rhetoric can turn emotion into a powerful “strategic manoeuvring” tactic to “adjust the conditions of the deliberation for the better” (Jacobs, 2002, p.125) and prepare the audience for “the proper
frame of mind” by drawing their attention to “the urgency of the situation” and “its moral gravity” (ibid.). However, hearing witness is never innocent of politics in that the pro-war culturalist and gendered narratives are meant to boost their topic potential to the effect that the need to verify the truthfulness of rape and torture allegations becomes functionally irrelevant to the production of an immediate “call for arms” appeal.

The problem, therefore, is that the media representation of the Iraq crisis reduces the conflict to a morality tale of good versus evil that requires moral denunciation. It portrays distant suffering of Muslim victims as “their” own fault and absolves the US of any political or moral responsibility. Besides, gender-based violence in the Iraqi context is sensationalised, exaggerated (in terms of scope and threat) and instrumentalised in essentialist political and media narratives to the effect of fulfilling the US post-9/11 political agenda for the “Greater Middle East”. More interestingly, witnessing texts have a “performative” power.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how *ad hominem* arguments are derailments of appropriate strategic manoeuvring in that they irrelevantly involve (1) direct personal abuse, whose main goal is for the proponent to evade the burden of proof, (2) the accusation of the opponent having violated ethical norms of reasoned dialogue to force him to retract commitments from his support argument store and (3) questioning the disputant’s motivation or intention. *Ad hominem* arguments, even if retracted by the contender, still detract from the “rhetorical credibility” of the opponent.

Another instance of fallacious manoeuvring is the deployment of narrative representations of the traumatic suffering of Iraqis in order to manipulate public opinion in favour of the pro-war perspective. Appeal to pity as a means to induce moral engagement is fallacious when it frames personal testimonies as having incontestable justificatory potential and fails to address the diversity of perspectives (perspectivisation strategy). Witnessing remains a political site of struggle “entangled with conflict and power, itself attesting to the contested ground of experience” (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009, p.155). Therefore, the safeguard against media manipulation is that readers can reconceptualise the Iraq conflict “in accordance with the reservoir of images they already carry with them as visual memories” (Möller, 2010, p.125).

Media witnessing espousing the narrative of trauma and victimhood is a form of social activism that is infused in ethical and legal discourses operating within the matrix of testimonial engagement, moral responsibility and action. However, the act of bearing witness involves social actors who occupy different roles and hold competing positions and divergent interests and resources. Therefore, the appropriation of witnessing as an identity marker by many pro-war arguers remains a socially contested terrain of political struggle in that appealing to narratives of atrocity to legitimise a certain political action can yield prejudiced media accounts. The “chivalrous” engagement between “us” and the suffering cultural “others” in the mainstream global mediapolis does not always provide an unchallengeable record of what really happened.

The pro-war discussants deployed an enthymematic argument in that “the activated narrative scheme makes the audience construct a tightly connected web of information that far exceeds the content of the utterances that are presented to the audience” (Van den Hoven, 2015, pp.169–71). The deployed enthymematic topoi evoke socially shared beliefs about human compassion and functions as a warrant for the pro-war argument. The tendency of narrative witnessing to reproduce rather than challenge Bush’s pro-war rhetoric rendered
press relations more integral to policymaking and the media largely relinquished their “watchdog” role in favour of their self-assigned “guard dog” position.

Feminism and human rights activism certainly intersect with the struggle against other structural forms of oppression, especially the glorification of emerging neocolonial and militarised masculinities. After the invasion, the liberation of Iraqi women dropped off the US political agenda as “sexual abuse and rape in prisons” became “part of counterinsurgency campaigns” (Al-Ali, 2016, p.10). The torture images of Abu Ghraib (200 made popular, but 1,600 kept secret) represented not only America’s drift away from its constructed image of the post-World War II “moral beacon” but also “carried a post-modern burden as well: the burden of shame” (Hamm, 2007, p.275; see also Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008, 2014). The sexual enslavement of Yezidi women by Daesh fighters marked an unprecedented scale of brutality against Iraqi women. Unsurprisingly, the “Shock and Awe” attacks on Iraq have ignited sectarian violence, created a fertile ground for global terrorism, inaugurated a new era of “preventive” regime-change and established a hybrid theocratic junta that, at best, bears more resemblance to the aspirations of Ayatollah Khomeini than Paul Wolfowitz.

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Notes

1 An *ad hominem* argument is not always fallacious. *Ad hominem* fallacies are fallacies of relevance and they are context-dependent. What counts as “relevant” to the interlocutor’s argument will vary with context.

2 In 2003, Mohamad El- Baradei stated that “The IAEA concluded, by December 1998, that it had neutralised Iraq’s past nuclear program and that, therefore, there were no unresolved disarmament issues left at that time” (quoted in Hartnett and Stengrim, 2004, p.172). Besides, the evidence for Saddam’s WMD threat presented by the British secret service turned out to be a mere plagiarised MA thesis of a Kurdish Iraqi student of the University of California (Claude Jacquemart, *Le Figaro*, 15 March 2003).

3 “By August 2002, General Franks had spent close to $700 million quietly preparing the military groundwork in the Gulf” and the CIA had also spent “about $189 million” for the same objective (Lando, 2007, p.219). Then, the imposition of non-fly zones by the Anglo-American planes (without UN authorisation) targeting the air defence capacities of Iraq constituted the subsequent preparation phase for the 2003 invasion of Iraq (ibid.). Such build-up for the invasion was privatised: “When US tanks rolled into Baghdad in March 2003, they brought with them the largest army of private contractors ever deployed in a war” (Scahill, 2007, xvii). The privatisation of war brought to Iraq the Blackwater-recruited commandos of mercenaries, with valued expertise not in “humanitarian” aid but in “kidnapping, torturing and killing defenseless civilians” (ibid., p.200). In addition, foreign contractors marched into Iraq to “reap enormous profits while ordinary Iraqis lived in squalor and insecurity” (ibid., p.119). For example, Halliburton was awarded a $11billion “reconstruction”
Ahmed Sahlane

contract (Lando, 2007, p.259). During Bremer’s short “pro-consulate” in Iraq “some $9 billion of Iraqi reconstruction funds were unaccounted for” (Seahill, 2007, p.61).

4 During the sanctions, US reporters from Baghdad were “careful to avoid inferring causality for Iraq’s plight, sticking with the facts directly visible to [them]” (Goss, 2002, p.95). Such a “voyeuristic” stance led to the construction of an “Orientalized” Iraq framed as “a portrait of a nation that has authored its own fate with its defiance of law, aggressive ambitions and malevolent head of state, who also functions as a synecdoche for an undifferentiated citizenry” (ibid.).

5 Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney met with Women for a Free Iraq (a newly formed group of US-backed Iraqi opposition activists) to publicise the Iraqi regime’s abuse of women’s rights, in preparation for the invasion of Iraq. Similarly, Tony Blair met a delegation of Iraqi women in November 2002 for the same purpose (Al-Ali, 2016, p.8).

6 Media witnessing refers simultaneously to the witnesses’ accounts in media reports, the media actors themselves bearing witness and the positioning of the targeted media audiences as distant witnesses to represented events.

7 An argument is characterised as “enthymematic” when implicit premises needed to make the argument reasonable are only implicitly recoverable from the context of the argument (Walton, 1989, p.115). A “topos” is a system of cultural-social cognition shared by a rhetorical community, which is activated as “a discursive resource in which one may find arguments for sustaining a conclusion” (van der Valk, 2003, p.319). Topoi are the “basic principles” underlying any “accepted” social conduct, and hence constitute “the consensual, self-evident issues of a community” (ibid.). Topoi are effective persuasive tools that call upon “socially shared values”, “beliefs” or “maxims” of a particular discursive community with the aim of informing discussions on disputed issues (ibid.).

8 The Taguba Report revealed that “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees” (Taguba, 2005, p.74). This “systemic and illegal abuse of detainees was intentionally perpetrated by several members of the military police guard force” (ibid.). “Evidence gathered from Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and US prisons in Afghanistan suggests that torture, the keeping of ‘ghost detainees’ and other violations of the Geneva Conventions were endemic within the system of [US] military custody” (Wilson, 2005, p.19).

References


