

**MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media  
May 2, 2007****MEDIA ALERT: PUTTING VIRGINIA TECH IN PERSPECTIVE****Analytical Value****noreply@medialens.org**

Two days after a gunman shot dead 32 students and staff at an American college, Virginia Tech, on April 16, a series of car bombs killed more than 200 people in Iraq causing one of the highest death tolls since the war began. In a single attack, 118 people died in a car bomb explosion in the Shi'ite neighbourhood of Sadriya. Channel 4 news commented:

"Such ghastly numbers do also put the tragedy in Virginia into some sort of perspective." (Snowmail, April 18, 2007)

But in fact this was not the case for most journalists. Indeed a largely unspoken question hung over media reporting that week: Why did the deaths of American students and staff matter so much more to the British media than the deaths of six times as many Iraqi men, women and children?

Whereas the carnage in Iraq disappeared from media reports the following day, the killings in Virginia continued to receive saturation coverage all the way to the end of the week. An April 25 media database search found that the killings in Sadriya had been mentioned in just 12 British national media press articles, while Virginia Tech had been mentioned in 391 articles. In the US press, Sadriya was mentioned in 16 articles - mentions of Virginia Tech, unsurprisingly, exceeded the capacity of the search engine, recording "More than 3,000 results."

Attempting an explanation, BBC radio presenter Jeremy Vine suggested that the difference with Virginia Tech was that "it happens every day" in Iraq (The Jeremy Vine Show, BBC Radio 2, April 19, 2007). But this is surely to reverse cause and effect - the slaughter in Iraq is able to happen every day +because+ it elicits minimal political or media concern. Can we even conceive of the level of reaction if Virginia Tech-scale death tolls occurred in the US or UK every day, as they do in Iraq? The coverage would be enormous, as would be the media and political pressure for something to be done to stop the killing.

But in the media reaction to events in Iraq there is barely a hint of the desperate need for a change of course, for some kind of initiative to solve the problem. There is almost no serious discussion of how British and American troops might be replaced by a genuinely international peacekeeping force, or of the need for peace talks between the various warring factions in Iraq. One would think such options were completely impossible. For the press, they are all but unthinkable. Instead, the sending of an additional 20,000 US troops - the famous "surge" - was complacently presented as a positive and hopeful initiative, even though the consequences for the civilian population were certain to be grim. On February 5, the Daily Mail reported:

"Unlike previous strikes in Baghdad there will be no areas off limits. Analysts believe that hand-to-hand combat is inevitable and large numbers of civilian casualties are expected." ('US gears up for Battle of Baghdad,' Daily Mail, February 5, 2007)

The frequency of atrocities in Iraq cannot be the cause of media indifference for the simple reason that the indifference existed from the very start of the war. On March 28, 2003, 62 civilians were killed by an American bomb in the al-Shula district of Baghdad - one of the first mass killings of the war. Newsnight's coverage of the atrocity on the BBC that night was limited to a 45-second report - less than one second per death. Unlike Virginia Tech, we did not learn about the family backgrounds, hopes and dreams of the Iraqi victims - we did not see their photographs or watch interviews with their bereaved families.

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