

MEDIA ALERT

MEDIA ALERT UPDATE: John Sweeney Responds on Mass Death in Iraq

On June 24, 2002, Media Lens published a Media Alert: '[John Sweeney Of The Observer And The BBC on Mass Death In Iraq](#)'. Also on June 24, we received this reply from John Sweeney:

"I don't agree with torturing children. Get stuffed."
(Email to Media Lens Editors, June 24, 2002)

Having dealt with the mainstream 'liberal' media frequently over the last few years, this is pretty much what we have come to expect. Arrogant and cynical though they are, mainstream politicians have a vestigial sense that they should at least +appear+ to be accountable to the public. Not so journalists. They work for large businesses - media companies - and their job, as far as they are concerned, is their business and no one else's. This is understandable enough - executives in other industries would not dream of tolerating public interference in the production of their business plans and marketing reports, why should corporate journalists accept our interference in the production of their reports? Likewise, editors flatly refuse to publish material that seriously challenges the performance of their newspapers or industry. It might be vital for press freedom and democracy to publish such criticism, but business is business - would cornflake manufacturers put damaging comments on the side of their boxes?

Many ramifications flow from the fact that our media is corporate in nature - corporations are totalitarian structures, with rigid hierarchies based on strict top-down control. These totalitarian structures are responsible to no one and nothing beyond shareholders and the bottom line.

This is a silent catastrophe for democracy - silent because the messengers are themselves the catastrophe.

On June 25, Sweeney replied with a second letter sent to a large number of Media Lens correspondents. He was responding to the question of why, in seeking answers to the causes of mass death in Iraq, he had ignored so many credible individuals and organisations:

Thank you for your email.

I report by getting on the road and listening to people. All of the Iraqis in our film spoke their own words. We did not script them. Northern Iraq is the only part of Iraq where people can speak freely. They spoke about Saddam and what his regime did. Child killing. Child torture. The absence of drugs in the hospitals. Chemical weapons. The faking of mass baby funerals. George Galloway and his tribute to Saddam: 'Sir, I salute you.' The tyrant's sanctions against his own people.

That their testimony conflicts with theoretical constructs from non-Iraqi organisations about Iraq is no help to ordinary Iraqis.

Denis Halliday and Hans Von Sponeck are not Iraqi.

On the UNICEF figures, if a government tortures children - and Saddam's does - then is it impossible to imagine that it doesn't torture figures? The raw data came from the Iraqi Ministry of Health.

George Galloway made the point on the Today programme that sanctions have blocked pipework for public health programmes. According to OPEC Iraq sold \$12 billion of oil last year. That flow of oil needs a lot of pipework. Not enough money for drains, eh?

But best of all, why don't you go to Iraq and see for yourself - but go to both Baghdad and Halabja. Don't forget to count the palaces in Baghdad.

Best

John Sweeney (June 25, 2002)

MEDIA LENS RESPONDS

We are grateful for John Sweeney's second, more measured, reply. We are pleased that he has abandoned the slur suggesting that our critique of mainstream reporting on Iraq indicates support for a murderous dictator.

Sweeney writes:

"I report by getting on the road and listening to people. All of the Iraqis in our film spoke their own words. We did not script them. Northern Iraq is the only part of Iraq where people can speak freely. They spoke about Saddam and what his regime did."

This is a remarkable version of what journalism is about. Are we to believe that the communication of important and complex issues to the public should be based solely on anecdotal evidence gleaned from "getting on the road" and speaking to people? It's difficult to know what to say in response to such an idea. Of course anecdotal evidence and reports 'from the ground' are important, but if we relied on these alone it would be impossible to make sense of anything that happens in the world. Understanding the world, no matter what the discipline, means turning to sources that are recognised as credible, well-informed and honest. However well-intentioned individuals 'in the field' might be, journalists must offer such testimony in the context of a body of understanding built up by human rights groups, aid agencies, the UN, and so on. The assertion is too absurd to merit even this much discussion.

Sweeney writes:

"Denis Halliday and Hans Von Sponeck are not Iraqi."

John Sweeney is also not Iraqi, so why should we turn to him for information on Iraq? In his Observer article he was writing for a British paper, moreover one that has never so much as mentioned the names of Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, who ran the UN's oil-for-food programme in Iraq before resigning in protest. And what right, by his own reasoning, does Sweeney have to comment on the work of Unicef? He does not work for Unicef, the people interviewed in his programme do not work for Unicef - by his logic, we should only listen to someone from Unicef telling us about the views of other Unicef workers. Should environment correspondents assess the seriousness of climate change based on their interviews with carbon dioxide molecules? Again, it's difficult to know how to respond to such an absurd idea. In his letter to Sweeney, one of our Canadian correspondents expressed our own feelings well:

"The sanctions against Iraq are devastating. Incredibly, the 'others' whom you casually dismiss, and even place, grammatically and thus rhetorically with Saddam himself, are the very people who know the situation most accurately. Why their opinions were not deemed relevant is baffling." (Michael Belyea Fredericton, Email to Media Lens Editors, 26 June, 2002)

Beyond Sweeney's illogic, to describe credible and rational evidence that our government is responsible for genocide in Iraq as "theoretical constructs" is extraordinary. How would we respond to the idea that the figure of 6 million Jewish dead during the Holocaust is a "theoretical construct"? How would we respond to someone dismissing that figure as "bogus" on the basis that it was compiled by Allied war crimes investigators, rather than by German or Jewish investigators? We recall that the Guardian's David Leigh and James Wilson similarly described the evidence of mass death in Iraq as a "statistical construct" and "atrocious propaganda" (see: 'Counting Iraq's victims - Dead babies always figure heavily in atrocity propaganda, and Osama bin Laden is merely the latest to exploit them. But what is the truth?' The Guardian, October 10,

2001: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4274013,00.html>)

Sweeney writes:

"On the UNICEF figures, if a government tortures children - and Saddam's does - then is it impossible to imagine that it doesn't torture figures?"

Recall, again, that we are here debating credible factual evidence that our government is responsible for nothing less than genocide. Sweeney's response is to ask "if it is impossible to imagine" that the Iraqi regime "doesn't torture figures?" This is grotesque. Any reasoned attempt to refute these deadly serious accusations must surely involve careful consideration of all the facts, not point-blank dismissal or vague speculation about the Iraqi regime torturing figures. It is not enough to +imply+ that the Iraqi regime may have manipulated figures; we need to examine if that +is+ the case and see whether Western organisations - who are obviously well aware of this danger - have taken account of this potential for manipulation in their figures and methodology. Sweeney gives the impression that he has not investigated Unicef methodology. Given the subject under discussion - the mass death of children - this is irresponsible. Hans von Sponeck has responded again to Sweeney's claims of "bogus" Unicef figures:

"Dear Mr. Sweeney, I have always held the 'Observer' in high regard. I am therefore even more taken aback by the article you have written on Iraq in which you consider the mortality figures as Iraqi propaganda. Unfortunately it is very difficult to get any statistics on Iraq which are as rigorously researched as would professionally be desirable. This includes the available mortality figures. You are, however, very wrong in your assessment of the UNICEF analysis. UNICEF, of course, cooperated with the Government but methodology of analysis and the findings is UNICEF's. A large team of UNICEF professionals subjected the data to rigorous review to avoid what you have not avoided and that is a politicization of statistical material. This is not professional and disappoints. Why did you not consult with UNICEF/Baghdad and New York before you wrote your article? I am sure you did not want to play into the hands of those who want to find reason to discredit every effort that tries to portray the enormous damage that sanctions have done to Iraq in addition to the damage the Iraqi civilian population has experienced from within. But this is exactly what you have done, making a difficult situation even more difficult. Regards, Hans von Sponeck" (Email to Media Lens Editors, June 25, 2002)

Why does Sweeney mention only Unicef in his article? Why does he not also explicitly dismiss the work of Richard Garfield, a renowned epidemiologist at Colombia University in New York, who concluded that "most" excess child deaths between August 1990 and March 1998 were "primarily associated with sanctions"? (Garfield, 'Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 Through 1998: Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions', March 1999, available on-line at <http://www.cam.ac.uk/societies/casi/info/garfield/dr-garfield.html>).

Garfield notes that, in tripling since 1990, the death rate of children in Iraq is unique, as "there is almost no documented case of rising mortality for children under five years in the modern world". (John Mueller and Karl Mueller, 'The Methodology of Mass Destruction: Assessing Threats in the New World Order', The Journal of Strategic Studies, vol.23, no.1, 2000, pp.163-87)

Why does Sweeney not dismiss Save the Children Fund UK, who have described the economic sanctions against Iraq as "a silent war against Iraq's children"? (Quoted, Voices in the Wilderness UK, March 2002: www.viwuk.freemove.co.uk)

Why does he not dismiss The Catholic Relief Agency, CAFOD, who have described the economic sanctions against Iraq as "humanly catastrophic [and] morally indefensible"? (Ibid)

Why does he not dismiss Human Rights Watch, who have said: "the continued imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions is undermining the basic rights of children and the civilian population generally" and "the [Security] Council must recognise that the sanctions have contributed in a major way to persistent life-threatening conditions in the country"? (August 2000, *ibid*)

Why does he not dismiss seventy members of the US Congress, who signed a letter to President Clinton, appealing to him to lift the embargo and end what they called "infanticide masquerading

as policy"? (Quoted, Philadelphia Enquirer, April 1, 1999)

These comments, to our knowledge, are all made by non-Iraqis, who clearly have no business commenting on the matter.

Sweeney writes:

"George Galloway made the point on the Today programme that sanctions have blocked pipework for public health programmes. According to OPEC Iraq sold \$12 billion of oil last year. That flow of oil needs a lot of pipework. Not enough money for drains, eh?"

Again, instead of approaching the problem rationally, Sweeney resorts to sarcasm and speculation. Consider the extraordinary scale of the damage done by the 88,500 tons of bombs (the equivalent of seven Hiroshima bombs) dropped on Iraq during the Gulf War. All of Iraq's eleven major electrical power plants as well as 119 substations were destroyed - 90 percent of electricity generation was out of service within hours, within days all power generation in the country had ceased. Eight multi-purpose dams were repeatedly hit and destroyed - this wrecked flood control, municipal and industrial water storage, irrigation and hydroelectric power. Four of Iraq's seven major water pumping stations were destroyed. Fourteen central telephone exchanges were irreparably damaged with 400,000 of the 900,000 telephone lines being destroyed. Twenty-eight civilian hospitals and 52 community health centres were hit. Allied bombs damaged 676 schools, with 38 being totally destroyed. Historic sites were not immune - 25 mosques were damaged in Baghdad alone and 321 more around the country. Seven textile factories sustained damage, as did five construction facilities, four car assembly plants and three chlorine plants. A major hypodermic syringe factory was destroyed. All major cement plants were hit along with various clothes and cosmetic factories, and so on.

In 1991, UN Under Secretary-General Martti Ahtisaari reported on the effects of the bombing, describing the "near apocalyptic" state of Iraq's basic services. "Iraq has for some time to come been relegated to a pre-industrial age", he wrote, "but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology." (New York Times, June 3, 1991)

Beyond this, the economic effects of subsequent sanctions on public health are undeniable. Adnan Jarra, a UN spokesperson in Iraq, recently told the Wall Street Journal:

"The [oil-for-food] distribution network is second to none. They [the Iraqis] are very efficient. We have not found anything that went anywhere it was not supposed to." (Quoted, Anthony Arnove, 'Iraq: Smart Sanctions and the US Propaganda War', ZNet Commentary, May 21, 2002)

Tun Myat, the administrator of the UN oil-for-food programme, said in an interview with the New York Times. "I think the Iraqi food-distribution system is probably second to none that you'll find anywhere in the world. It gets to everybody whom it's supposed to get to in the country."

But Myat stressed, "People have become so poor in some cases that they can't even afford to eat the food that they are given free, because for many of them the food ration represents the major part of their income."

Denis Halliday comments:

"As most Iraqis have no other source of income, food has become a medium of exchange; it gets sold for other necessities, further lowering the calorie intake. You also have to get clothes and shoes for your kids to go to school. You've then got malnourished mothers who cannot breastfeed, and they pick up bad water. What is needed is investment in water treatment and distribution, electric power production for food processing, storage and refrigeration, education and agriculture." (Quoted, John Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World*, Verso, 2002, p.59)

So-called 'smart sanctions' are powerless to revive the badly damaged Iraqi economy. As the Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI) points out:

"There will still be a prohibition on foreign investment into Iraq, necessary to rebuild the shattered infrastructure of the country.... [and] Iraq will not be allowed to export any goods other

than oil." (Arnove, op., cit)

Even the Security Council's own humanitarian panel reported in March 1999 that for Iraq to recover, "the oil for food system alone would not suffice and massive investment would be required in a number of key sectors, including oil, energy, agriculture and sanitation". (Ibid)

Finally, Sweeney writes: "go to Iraq and see for yourself - but go to both Baghdad and Halabja. Don't forget to count the palaces in Baghdad."

It is good advice. But in the integrated, globalised world in which we live, it is not nearly enough. If John Sweeney wants to understand what is happening in Baghdad and Halabja, we say this: go to London and Washington, talk to the powers that be. Talk to their backers on Wall Street, and in the oil industry, and in the arms industry. Don't forget to count the palaces.

SUGGESTED ACTION

Write to Sweeney at the BBC: john.sweeney@bbc.co.uk Ask John Sweeney what he means when he writes that "Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck are not Iraqi". Does he really believe that only Iraqis are qualified to comment on what is happening in Iraq? Is he aware of the influence of the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States? Ask him if he has discussed Unicef's methodology with Unicef personnel? If so, why has he not reported their views? If not, why not?

Copy your letters to the Observer's editor, Roger Alton roger.alton@observer.co.uk

Find out more about the impact of sanctions on the Iraqi people and what you can do to help, by visiting the website of Voices UK

<http://www.viwuk.freemove.co.uk/index.html>

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. In writing letters to journalists, we strongly urge readers to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

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