



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## ***The Media's Role in the Public Perception of National Security***

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Over the past 50 years, the mass media has established itself as the chief source of the American public's perception of national security. Dating back to World War II, media has been the link between the public and the government via newspaper, radio and television. Media advancements, particularly in radio technology were crucial to the spread of the Red Scare and McCarthyism. Due to today's technological advances, the American family has access to live media coverage of events. Immediate viewing of 9/11 and the recent war with Iraq have been made possible, thanks to the adoption of embedded reporters and real time coverage. Advancements in the media have allowed for a public that is more aware of current threats to national security.

Along with the awareness that the media has generated for American society, there exists a rapidly growing demand for news reports. After 9/11, a very shocked and alarmed America was searching for answers. Not surprisingly, they turned to the media for facts about what went wrong, who was responsible and why tragedy struck. Additionally, changes in the new terrorism alert status heightens the nation's sense of insecurity and desire for the facts; consequently, the public turns to the media to keep informed on such issues.

While the media is the public's main link to daily news, they are not always a reliable and credible source of information. It is important to note that the media, like any other industry, must provide products and services that are appealing to the consumer. Media outlets are ultimately owned by corporations who must adhere to their own corporate

missions and operational budget. Recently, Federal Communication Commission (FCC) relaxed ownership laws of newspapers, television and radio stations; this decision created much controversy. In support of these acts, FCC Commissioner Kathleen Q. Abernathy stated that "given the rules we adopt today...it is simply not possible to monopolize the flow of information in today's world. Indeed, the fall of Communism in the 1980's and of military dictatorships in the 1990's shows that diverse viewpoints cannot be suppressed even by authoritarian governments, much less by private media companies." In dissent of the acts, fellow FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein claimed that "as big media companies get bigger, they're likely to broadcast even more homogenized programming that increasingly appeals to the lowest common denominator. If this is the toaster with pictures, soon only Wonder Bread will pop out." Congress is now continuing the debate as some Congressmen are working to overturn the ruling.

This revived interest in safeguarding media coverage highlights America's desire for the most accurate and up-to-date news stories. Deeming what is newsworthy is not always a simple task. Executives and editors have the challenge of finding the balance between their corporate ownership, their paper's or station's integrity, and the flood stream of news. Journalists must then take informational leads and write a concise and attractive piece, taking into account several points of view. In *continued on page 2*

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- *Academia's Biological Studies in Wartime*
- *US Policy and Public Health - AIDS in Africa*

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the case of security threats, the pressure to capture an accurate portrayal of the situation is further complicated by the limited governmental access<sup>a</sup> journalists have to information. As one embedded journalist reports, “the discomforts and dangers of the war were easily dealt with; accurately conveying the reality of it to the readers back home was not.”

When working toward a better-informed nation, it is crucial to acknowledge the tedious work the media must undergo in order to prepare news reports on security issues. With this in mind, today’s scientists and future scientists must work with journalists and editors in order to create a more accurate picture of today’s national security issues. Without an informed debate, vague reports on national security threats can evoke strong emotional responses. Scientists and security experts are needed to create this debate around both current threats and policies made to protect the nation.

This is not a new concept. In 1955, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell drafted a manifesto calling for scientists around the world to become active in political affairs. They encouraged scientists to assemble in conference to discuss resolutions to the nuclear crisis thereby creating the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. Today,

organizations such as Pugwash, the Federation of American Scientists, and the Union of Concerned Scientists are taking part in campaigns to promote the reliance on sound scientific research in effective policy decisions. Scientists must work with the media to create an educated electorate, thereby, putting well-informed public pressure on policy leaders around scientific issues affecting national security. Aspiring scientists and current scientists need to understand that their roles must extend beyond the research laboratory.

Today’s policies are quickly trying to catch up to the scientific and technological advancements of the last 20 years. Covering this story takes a collaborative effort. For more in-depth information on this topic, including statistics and articles, which present the differing perspectives on this issue, visit [www.spusa.org/issue](http://www.spusa.org/issue).

***“Without an informed debate, vague reports on national security threats can evoke strong emotional responses.”***

## From the Field

To learn more about the personal satisfactions of being a science writer, or what a typical week is like for the Associate General Counsel for a major magazine, visit [www.spusa.org/issue](http://www.spusa.org/issue).

Featuring interviews with:

**Ashley Gauthier**, Associate General Counsel, *U.S. News & World Report*

**Paul Guinnessy**, Journalist, *Physics Today* magazine

# Exploring Ethical Questions

*Hypothetical Scenario: How do you report on the status of WMD's in Iraq when you do not yet know the final outcome of the search?*

You are an embedded journalist with a front-line US infantry division and have been covering the war with Iraq. Your reports focus on the possibility of weapons of mass destruction (WMD's) in Iraq. At the present time, there is no significant evidence of Iraqi WMD's. Nevertheless, the US went to war with Iraq in order to seek out these WMD's and they will be anticipating a report stating that they were found.

government's actions to wage war with Iraq in the first place. Is it appropriate to question the government in a time of political controversy due to the tension it could cause with allied nations? Should this influence your decision? Would it be more effective to save your questions for a later time period? If not, is it possible to report the fact that no significant amounts of WMD's have been found in Iraq, without being accused of reporting with a bias?

On the other side of the issue, if you report that the military should be given more time to search for

## *Is it appropriate to question the government in a time of political controversy due to the tension it could cause with allied nations?*

You are beginning to suspect that there are no WMD's to be found and that the country went to war under illegitimate pretenses. You understand that there still could be WMD's not yet discovered. How do you report on the status of WMD's in Iraq when you do not yet know the final outcome of the search?

WMD's, are you being objective? If your contemporaries decide to report on the lack of evidence proving WMD's in Iraq, how will that affect your image? Does their reporting influence your decision?

If you report that WMD's have not yet been found in Iraq, this could be viewed as a questioning of the

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## Point/Counterpoint

**Jordan Goldstein**, Senior Legal Advisor to Commissioner Michael J. Copps of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), discusses his viewpoint on the government's role in regulating the media and its impact on the public perception of national security.

*Do you believe that the media has the power to influence public opinion in regards to national security?*

Absolutely. Part of what the media does is bring news and information to individuals. In fact, what we saw in our surveys was that most people get their news from either their newspapers or their television stations. Given that ability to bring stories and information to people, constitutes an influence of public opinion... When it is clear that the public relies on the media as a source of news and information, it is that much more important to have editorial diversity in the media. We do not regulate the diversity that they put into their outlets, that is, we do not say you must broadcast this specific story or that one. However, what we do is try to make sure that all major news stories are covered so that citizens can get a diverse source of information. Commissioner Copps' view is that we are eliminating that diverse source and we are getting to the point where one entity can control large parts of information that the public is receiving. That definitely does influence the public opinion on a variety of issues.

**Read the rest of Mr. Goldstein's interview, along with that of Jeffrey Boutwell, Executive Director of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, at [www.spusa.org/issue](http://www.spusa.org/issue).**

# Event Ideas

## MOVIES

- 15 Minutes
- Fahrenheit 9/11
- The Sum of All Fears
- Trial by Media

## SUGGESTED SPEAKERS

- *Stephen Hess* – The Brookings Institution
- *Henry Kelly* – Federation of American Scientists
- *Bill Kovach* – Committee of Concerned Journalists
- *Bob Steele* – The Poynter Institute

## WEBSITES

- Accuracy in Media—[www.aim.org](http://www.aim.org)
- Alternative Press Organization—[www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org)
- Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting—[www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)
- Federal Communications Commission—[www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)
- Free Press Organization—[www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org)
- National Security Agency—[www.nsa.gov](http://www.nsa.gov)
- Research on American Opinions—[www.pewtrusts.com](http://www.pewtrusts.com)

## BOOKS AND PUBLICATIONS

- *Bad Things in the News* by Marc Gellman
- *Bias* by Bernard Goldberg
- *Breaking the News* by James Fallows
- *Censored 2003* by Peter Phillips and Project Censored
- *Coloring the News* by William McGowan
- *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning* by Chris Hedges

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