

1-1-2003

## Ground Rules for Complacent Media: Tag That Expert

Nishan Havandjian

*California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo*, [nhavandj@calpoly.edu](mailto:nhavandj@calpoly.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius>

---

### Recommended Citation

Havandjian, Nishan (2003) "Ground Rules for Complacent Media: Tag That Expert," *Moebius*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 10.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol1/iss1/10>

This The Gamut is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moebius by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [mwyngard@calpoly.edu](mailto:mwyngard@calpoly.edu).

## GROUND RULES FOR COMPLACENT MEDIA: TAG THAT EXPERT

*Nishan Havandjian*

The TV screen flickered with images of a street demonstration in Cairo. Many in the crowd carried banners depicting Egypt's former president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, who passed away three decades ago. The news network did not inform its audience who was represented on the banners and posters and why. Did the staff in New York and Atlanta know? Were the Egyptians perhaps hankering for the days when their leader had the ears of Washington and Moscow and brought respect, albeit furtively, to the Arab Middle East? We will never know.

From the unabated Palestinian Intifada to the explosive Iraqi crisis, the media coverage has been beset with shallow assumptions with a tenuous hold on veracity spouted by an endless stream of talking heads with louche experience. On "Donahue" a couple of weeks ago, three "ladies of the right," as they were labeled, weighed in with their opinions about a possible war with Iraq. Predictably, the sister of an also-ran Republican presidential candidate, a Republican strategist who managed Dan Quayle's presidential bid, and a radio talk show hostess from Dallas, chimed in with well-worn information: "he has gassed his own people," and "he has weapons of mass destruction." Not once were any of the three challenged or questioned about how they came about the conclusions they were drawing. Did any of the three spend time in the Middle East studying its peoples and cultures? Did any write books or articles borne of that experience? Did any of them speak a Middle Eastern language, which may have helped them to reach a better understanding of its myriad cultures? What were the sources of information for the three guests? No shred of evidence was presented that Saddam Hussein actively supports world terrorism or has irrefutable links to Al Quaida.

On Monday, January 21, a USA Today columnist decried the public's ignorance about the Iraq crisis background. The author referred to an early January poll by Knight Ridder in which respondents said "one or more" Iraqi citizens were involved in the 9/11 World Trade Center attack. Roughly

25 percent said, “Bush has produced evidence that Iraq had a role in the planning and funding of these attacks.” No such evidence has been provided that supports these beliefs.

A month ago, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared during a press conference that the main aim of the United States in effecting “regime change” in Iraq is to install a democratic government allowing its citizens board freedoms. “We want to stop the bombing of the Kurds,” he said. Not a single reporter asked him whether that democratic ideal would be extended to regimes of U.S. allies in the region. Or did anybody point out whether a trusted non-Arab NATO ally treats its Kurdish citizens democratically.

The U.S. public has the potential to be one of the most informed publics in the world. There is freedom of access to information sources and by hooking to the Internet a citizen can scour thousands of sources in English about the Iraq situation. Few of us, though, have the time, curiosity, tenacity and patience to achieve that. When the stakes in human and financial terms are so high, the U.S. media owe it to their public to present a comprehensive view of the potential Iraqi conflict covered by correspondents and experts well versed in the cultural and political dimensions of the event. Here is, then, some ground rule proposals for the mass media: \*that news networks allow only correspondents with credibility to cover Iraq. Not too long ago, correspondents were sent to “exotic locales” only after they had familiarized themselves with the culture, religion, economy and political apparatus, and, in many cases, the language of that country. A recent Fox News headline reader has suddenly popped up in Baghdad. What is her expertise, besides that her blond tresses look very telegenic?

\*that the media refrain from lapdog postures at official press conferences and come armed with tough follow-up questions based on their own independent research \*that the media identify, maybe on a split-screen, who the experts on its political talk show is. They ought to know what is the background of the Middle Eastern “expert.” Have they written about the topic? What has been their general stance about the situation in the Middle East? Are they independent in their opinion or do they belong to a think tank?

\*that the media elucidate the public with more than the think tank affiliation of the “experts.” A think tank title such as “Center for Newer Democracies” doesn’t mean anything until it’s put in the proper context. Nor does the “Heritage Foundation.” The average viewer needs to know who is supporting the think tank and what is their stated agenda.

Only by disclosing the truth about labels that experts wear and by giving access to authoritative voices about international conflicts will the U.S. media be able to provides its consumers have the opportunity to make reasoned, independent judgments devoid of manipulation. 

*Nishan Havandjian is Professor and Chair of the Journalism Department. His currently studying the role of Arab ethnic media in the United States post 9/11. He has taught courses in international communication, newswriting and reporting.*