
Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by dcromwell - 2007/10/09 11:23

MEDIA LENS: Correcting for the distorted vision of the corporate media

October 3, 2007

MEDIA ALERT: IRAQ BODY COUNT: "A VERY MISLEADING EXERCISE"

Introduction

The mainstream media are continuing to use figures provided by the website Iraq Body Count (IBC) to sell the public a number for total post-invasion deaths of Iraqis that is perhaps 5-10% of the true death toll.

As we recently reported, only a handful of media outlets covered a new ORB poll revealing that 1.2 million Iraqis had been murdered since the 2003 invasion. BBC Online provided a rare example:

"A UK-based polling agency, Opinion Research Business (ORB), said it had extrapolated the figure by asking a random sample of 1,461 Iraqi adults how many people living in their household had died as a result of the violence rather than from natural causes.

"The results lend weight to a 2006 survey of Iraqi households published by the Lancet, which suggested that about 655,000 Iraqi deaths were 'a consequence of the war'.

"However, these estimates are both far higher than the running total of reported civilian deaths maintained by the campaign group Iraq Body Count which puts the figure at between 71,000 and 78,000." (BBC Online, 'US contractors in Iraq shootout,' September 17, 2007; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6998458.stm)

BBC's Newsnight programme used IBC's figures in the same way:

"More than a million Iraqis have been killed since the invasion in 2003, according to the British polling company ORB. The study's likely to fuel controversy over the true, human cost of the war. It's significantly up on the previous highest estimate of 650,000 deaths published by the Lancet last October... The independent Iraqi Body Count group puts the current total at closer to 75,000." (Newsnight, BBC2, September 14, 2007)

These reports again raise serious issues about what IBC's figures actually mean, how they are being used and misused to cast doubt on higher numbers, and about what IBC is doing to promote or reduce the confusion. (See our 2006 Media Alerts archive for previous analysis, beginning with: http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060125_paved_with_good.php)

Just "Care And Literacy" - No Extrapolations Required

In its latest press release, 'The State of Knowledge on Civilian Casualties in Iraq,' IBC explains 'What IBC Does':

"Provides an irrefutable baseline figure"

Similarly in 2006, IBC wrote: "We are providing a conservative cautious minimum."
(<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/qa/ibc-in-context/>)

These both describe laudable objectives involving little more than accurate data collection. IBC co-founder John Sloboda made the point in a BBC interview in response to criticism that he and his colleagues were "amateurs" in the field of mortality studies:

"Our position is, and always has been, that reading press reports, which is what this job is, requires nothing other than care and literacy. The whole point about it is that it doesn't require statistical analysis or extrapolations."
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4950254.stm>)

And yet in their latest press release (September 3, 2007), under the title, 'How plausible is 600,000 violent Iraqi deaths?', IBC devote five pages to wide-ranging criticism of the 2006 Lancet study which estimated 655,000 excess deaths in Iraq. IBC's conclusion:

"Our own view is that the current death toll +could+ be around twice the numbers recorded by IBC and the various official sources in Iraq. We do not think it could possibly be 10 times higher."

(<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/state-of-knowledge/7>)

In similar vein, the Toronto Star quoted IBC co-founder John Sloboda as saying:

"The death toll could be twice our number, but it could not possibly be 10 times higher." (Haroon Siddiqui, 'How many civilians have died?' Toronto Star, September 20, 2007; <http://www.thestar.com/columnists/article/258511>)

This last comment was reported less than a week after the publication of ORB's poll revealing 1.2 million Iraqi deaths.

Two questions arise: Why is it important for IBC - providing an "irrefutable baseline" based on data collection - to challenge the methodology and conclusions of epidemiological studies published in the Lancet which go far beyond data collection and which do not in any way challenge their baseline as a "cautious minimum"?

Secondly, while IBC's self-described task does indeed require only "care and literacy", does not the task of challenging peer-reviewed science published by some of the world's leading epidemiologists require very much more? Does it not, in fact "require statistical analysis or extrapolations," and much else besides?

In a 2006 addition to their website, IBC wowed visitors with scientific jargon:

"Our data is very rich, because it provides a large subset of what is happening.

"It has high spatiotemporal specificity. Post-event interviews are always hampered by the fact that people tend to move on, and may not remain in the area or even in the country. Our data is recorded as close to the time and place of death as possible, and so has 'forensic' elements." (<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/qa/ibc-in-context/10>)

It seems that IBC have used their credibility as data collectors to 'cross sell' their credibility as commentators on peer-reviewed epidemiology to the media community. But this second task is unrelated to their task as data collectors, and is an area in which, to our knowledge, none of the co-authors of their press releases have any research record or publication history in any relevant scientific discipline.

In a 2006 BBC interview, John Sloboda said of the 2004 Lancet study:

"Some critics of the Lancet study have said it's like a drunk throwing a dart at a dartboard. It's going to go somewhere, but who knows if that number is the bulls eye.

"Unfortunately many many people have decided to accept that that 98,000 figure is the truth - or the best approximation to the truth that we have." (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4950254.stm>)

Sloboda was here endorsing a claim based on a failure to comprehend even the basic meaning of the Lancet study's range of figures - the "drunk throwing a dart at a dartboard" analogy was and is absurd. No qualified epidemiologist would countenance making such a comment.

Unsurprisingly, most journalists reporting on international affairs appear unable to distinguish between the task of "reading press reports" on the one hand, and engaging in "statistical analysis or extrapolations", on the other. Reporters naturally assume that, given its "high spatiotemporal specificity", IBC's credibility is on a par with the world's leading experts in the field published in the world's leading scientific journals and subject to an exacting system of peer review.

Certainly IBC do nothing to discourage, and everything to encourage, such a view. Wouldn't it be more reasonable for IBC to point out in commenting on the Lancet studies to highly influential media that they are in fact +not+ especially qualified to comment on the science of epidemiology?

The Problem Of Relying On The Journalistic Record

IBC also move far beyond data collection in this latest addition to the site:

"Those who suggest that the IBC data-base is likely to contain only a tiny minority of actual deaths generally argue three things. First, they say that IBC only records deaths in areas where Western journalists are present; second they propose that there have been at least seven credible studies which suggest up to ten times as many deaths as we have recorded; and third they assert that an alternate media world exists containing a professional Arab-language press which continually reports far more deaths than the sources we monitor in English.

"We have dealt with the first two claims in detail on the public record and will be happy to answer questions about them in the discussion. IBC in Context (Feb 2006)"
(<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/state-of-knowledge/>)

IBC omit to mention the most obvious and telling criticism: that the credibility of their database as an approximate guide to levels of violence in Iraq - i.e., "The death toll could be twice our number, but it could not possibly be 10 times higher" - is undermined by the fact that conditions in Iraq are so lethal that journalists are unable to discover many violent deaths of civilians.

Consider that a study of deaths in Guatemala from 1960 to 1996 by Patrick Ball et al at the University of California, Berkeley (1999) found that numbers of murders reported by the media in fact decreased as violence increased. Ball described the "problem of relying on the journalistic record" in evaluating numbers killed:

"When the level of violence increased dramatically in the late 1970s and early 1980s, numbers of reported violations in the press stayed very low. In 1981, one of the worst years of state violence, the numbers fall towards zero. The press reported almost none of the rural violence." (Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak, and Herbert F. Spierer, 'State Violence in Guatemala, 1960-1996: A Quantitative Reflection', 1999; <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ciidh/qr/english/chap7.html>)

Ball added:

"Throughout the 1980 to 1983 period newspapers documented only a fraction of the killings and disappearances committed by the State. The maximum monthly value on the graph is only 60 for a period when monthly extra-judicial murders regularly totaled in the thousands."

Ball explained that "the press stopped reporting the violence beginning in September 1980. Perhaps not coincidentally, the database lists seven murders of journalists in July and August of that year".

The significance is indicated in a Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) report (September 7, 2007), which described how the number of journalists and media workers killed in Iraq since the start of the 2003 invasion had reached 200. According to RSF, 73 per cent of journalists killed had been directly targeted, a figure which was "much higher than in previous wars". RSF also reported that more journalists had been taken hostage in Iraq than anywhere else in the world. A total of 84 journalists and media workers had been kidnapped in the previous four years. (http://electroniciraq.net/news/themedia/Media_Worker_Death_Toll_Reaches_200-3197.shtml)

Lancet study co-authors Les Roberts and Gilbert Burnham wrote recently:

"A study of 13 war affected countries presented at a recent Harvard conference found over 80% of violent deaths in conflicts go unreported by the press and governments." (Roberts and Burnham, 'Ignorance of Iraqi death toll no longer an option,' <http://www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2613>)

We contacted the author of the study, Ziad Obermeyer, for details. Demonstrating a level of scientific caution that is absent from some of IBC's bold pronouncements, Obermeyer responded that because his manuscript was progressing through the peer review process he could not provide anything for "formal citation". He added:

"It is safe to say, however, that our estimates of violent war deaths, based on nationally representative surveys, are substantially higher than those commonly cited for most of the 13 countries we study." (Email to Media Lens, September 24, 2007)

Roberts and Burnham continued:

"City officials in the Iraqi city of Najaf were recently quoted on Middle East Online stating that 40,000 unidentified bodies have been buried in that city since the start of the conflict. When speaking to the Rotarians in a speech covered on C-SPAN on September 5th, H.E. Samir Sumaida'ie, the Iraqi Ambassador to the US, stated that there were 500,000 new widows in Iraq. The Baker-Hamilton Commission similarly found that the Pentagon under-counted violent incidents by a factor of 10." (Roberts and Burnham op. cit)

IBC's methodology was devised by Marc Herold, a professor of economics at the University of New Hampshire. Herold has tracked deaths in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of 2001. It was Herold's Afghan Victim Memorial Project that inspired John Sloboda to set up IBC. Herold's "most conservative estimate" of Afghan civilian deaths resulting from American/NATO operations is between 5,700 and 6,500. But, he cautions, this is "probably a vast underestimate". (Haroon Siddiqui, 'Counting the casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan,' Toronto Star, September 23, 2007; <http://www.thestar.com/columnists/article/259269>)

There is no reason to believe that the application of the same methodology in Iraq is generating very different results. But IBC has never, to our knowledge, accepted that their own count is "probably a vast underestimate" of the total death toll.

In the past, IBC's response to the suggestion that violence prevents journalists from capturing many deaths has been, in effect, 'Prove it!' Well, the bureau chief of one of three Western media agencies providing a third of IBC's data from Iraq

sent this email to a colleague last year (the latter asked us to preserve the sender's anonymity):

"iraq body count is i think a very misleading exercise. We know they must have been undercounting for at least the first two years because we know that we did not report anything like all the deaths we were aware of... we are also well aware that we are not aware of many deaths on any given day." (Email sent October 25, 2006)

Despite IBC's claims, nowhere in their discussion do they deal with the problem that journalistic reporting of violent deaths can decrease as violence increases, particularly when that includes violence against journalists, as is very much the case in Iraq.

More to the point, as data collectors, IBC are not in a position to comment authoritatively on the impact of violence on the capacity of journalists to report accurately from Iraq. As data collectors, they have no more insight, no deeper understanding, than anyone else.

The reasonable response to the question of political impacts on their database is not for IBC to authoritatively suggest that they "have dealt with" the problem of lack of journalistic coverage - to conclusively declare: "The death toll could be twice our number, but it could not possibly be 10 times higher" - but to openly acknowledge that their task is limited to the monitoring of media reports.

For leading mainstream journalists, and for IBC themselves, to present IBC as an informed and credible source on political realities on the ground in Iraq is highly inappropriate.

A good example of this distortion was provided on September 7 by Michael Gordon of the New York Times. Gordon offered positive spin on the 'progress' of the 'surge':

"The most comprehensive and up-to-date military statistics show that American forces have made some headway toward a crucial goal of protecting the Iraqi population." (Gordon, 'Assessing the "Surge" - Hints of Progress, and Questions, in Iraq Data,' New York Times, September 8, 2007)

In assessing evidence for this humanitarian "headway", Gordon turned to IBC:

"Iraq Body Count, a British-based nongovernmental group that monitors civilian deaths, notes that the number of civilians who were killed by shootings, executions and bombs has declined from January through July."

He quoted IBC:

"Levels of violence reached an all-time high in the last six months of 2006... Only in comparison to that could the first half of 2007 be regarded as an improvement."

The last caveat was unimportant, the word supporters of the occupation were looking for was "improvement".

But there is a problem with IBC's evidence and with Gordon's analysis of its significance. In fact, IBC have not at all found that "the number of civilians who were killed by shootings, executions and bombs has declined". The website has found fewer +reports+ of deaths of civilians killed by shootings, executions and bombs in "information gathering and publishing agencies, principally the commercial news media who provide web access to their reports". (<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/about/methods/2>)

While a significant proportion of the deaths recorded or corroborated by IBC come from "cumulative totals reported by official Iraqi sources, in particular the Medico-Legal Institutes (morgues) and, for corroboration purposes, the Ministry of Health", IBC describes the commercial news media as their "main sources". (Ibid)

And Les Roberts has commented:

"Media and government reports catch only the tip of the iceberg." (Siddiqui, op. cit; <http://www.thestar.com/columnists/article/261722>)

For IBC to emphasise that "the first half of 2007 be regarded as an improvement" on the basis of their data collection is therefore misleading. Indeed the whole basis of IBC's comment was misleading:

"Levels of violence reached an all-time high in the last six months of 2006."

In fact, levels of media +reporting+ of civilian deaths was at an all-time high in the last six months of 2006 - that is not the same thing. As a consequence, and as the material cited above from Patrick Ball and RSF makes clear, IBC are in a position to comment +only+ on numbers of media reports of deaths, not on the inferred significance of those numbers for political realities on the ground.

The Failure To Challenge Media Distortions

What is so disappointing is that while IBC are willing to stray radically beyond merely "reading press reports" with "care and literacy" to challenge scientific studies that do not in any way challenge their "irrefutable baseline figure", they are apparently not willing to challenge media reports that in effect do challenge that figure. The New York Times report above was a good example. Another appeared in the Financial Times on September 10:

"The war has already cost the lives of 3,760 US troops, and wounded 28,000 more. Iraq Body Count, a group that monitors Iraqi deaths, estimates that 70,000 Iraqis have been killed. It says there has been a 'modest improvement' in security compared with the bloody second half of 2006...." (Demetri Sevastopulo, 'Echoes of Westmoreland and Vietnam,' Financial Times, September 10, 2007)

But IBC is +not+ "a group that monitors Iraqi deaths"; it is a group that monitors media reports of Iraqi deaths. And IBC does not monitor "Iraqi deaths"; it monitors media reports of Iraqi +civilian+ deaths as a result of violence. IBC does not monitor reports of war-related deaths due to disease, lack of food, water and medicine, and so on. IBC also does not collect reports of Iraqi military deaths.

Because IBC's "irrefutable baseline" figure refers only to violent deaths of civilians reported by the media, the Financial Times in effect challenged that baseline by asserting that 70,000 Iraqis - i.e., civilians and military - had died. Readers might well have construed that some of these "Iraqi deaths" must have been military deaths, for example, and therefore will have come away from the article believing that many less than 70,000 civilians had died from violence.

The Financial Times could hardly be a more prestigious, influential and high-profile media outlet. And this kind of distortion has been repeated innumerable times, globally, since 2003. Notice, again, the complete inappropriateness of quoting IBC as an authoritative source reporting "a 'modest improvement' in security" on the basis of its data collection. As the Guatemala study above indicates, the drop in media reporting could be interpreted as indicating a +worsening+ of security, not least for journalists, leading to a drop in reporting of violent deaths.

Whereas IBC have responded vigorously, indeed tirelessly, in responding to the 2004 and 2006 Lancet studies (and to our criticism), to our knowledge they have all but ignored these actual challenges to their baseline figure - a figure which seeks to establish a "cautious minimum" for violent deaths of Iraqi civilians +alone+, not for "Iraqi casualties" in toto, as the Financial Times report suggests.

Indeed, far from exposing these abuses of their work, under 'Press and media uses of IBC' (<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/qa/used-how/1.php>), IBC provide not a single word of criticism of media use of their work. Instead, one of the examples they choose to highlight is an Independent article from July 2005. The first sentence of the article reads:

"Almost 25,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed during the two years of war and insurgency that began with the US-led invasion in March 2003. More than a third have died as a result of action by allied forces." (Terry Kirby and Elizabeth Davies, 'Iraq conflict claims 34 civilian lives each day as "anarchy" beckons,' The Independent, July 20, 2005; http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article300368.ece)

It is striking that IBC link to a high-profile media report that so badly misrepresents its figures. As so often, this opening sentence gave the impression that IBC are recording the total number of civilian deaths, rather than merely recording deaths from violence as reported by the media. The extreme gravity of this distortion in downplaying the true extent of Iraqi casualties to the British public is clear enough, given, for example, Patrick Ball's work.

Elsewhere, IBC write:

"A large number of press and media reports have cited our figures, discussed and assessed our work. Nearly all mentions have been in the context of drawing attention to the human cost of the war." (John Sloboda, February 17, 2006; <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/qa/ibc-in-context/13>)

Again, this is not mere data collection; it is political analysis of media performance. Having ourselves studied media reporting on Iraq closely over the last four years, we arrive at a very different conclusion: media reports have often cited IBC's figures in the context of +burying+ the human cost of war.

As numerous studies over many decades have shown, it is quite simply the structural role of the corporate media to defend established power by minimising, as far as possible, public perception of the costs to civilians of US-UK state violence. This role has not suddenly changed in regard to Iraq. On the contrary, media performance on Iraq has been a text book example of a corporate propaganda system acting to protect allied elite interests.

Finally, the danger of moving beyond data collection is emphasised in this comment on IBC's website in response to media reports of the "surge":

"Despite any efforts put into the surge, the first six months of 2007 was still the most deadly first six months for civilians of any year since the invasion." ('The Baghdad "surge" and civilian casualties'; <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/baghdad-surge/>)

This was also highly politicised analysis. IBC's framing of the issue exactly matches that found in the pro-war Observer:

"Despite the surge, violence remains roughly at the same levels." ('Iraq benchmarks,' The Observer, September 2, 2007)

Imagine what Western journalists would have made of a Soviet organisation observing that a particular period of time had been "the most deadly" for civilians in Afghanistan in the 1980s "despite" a massive surge in Soviet military activity.

And yet this is currently the standard line in mainstream reporting, part of a wider attempt to present the occupation as a well-intentioned effort to achieve peace and democracy, rather than conquest and control.

To their credit, IBC have made an improvement to their website. Their "counter", which previously recorded "Minimum" and "Maximum" deaths in Iraq, has been changed. Viewed alongside the name Iraq Body Count, visitors were likely to assume that the "Maximum" category referred to the maximum possible number of civilian deaths in Iraq - the full body count - rather than the maximum number of deaths recorded in media reports. The counter now reads:

"Documented civilian deaths from violence 74,432 - 81,120" (<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>)

IBC comment:

"The change to a simple unlabeled range is intended to help avoid misinterpretation or misrepresentation of these numbers as (for example) the 'maximum possible' death toll, or IBC's 'estimate' of it."

This is a welcome change. However, the very name of the website remains misleading. IBC is, in truth, an Iraq Reported Body Count - nothing more.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you decide to write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to Iraq Body Count
Email: comment@iraqbodycount.org

Raise the issues covered in this alert with the following journalists:

Write to Katherine Butler, foreign editor of the Independent:
Email: k.butler@independent.co.uk

Write to Peter Beaumont, foreign affairs editor at the Observer:
Email: peter.beaumont@observer.co.uk

Write to Ian Black, Middle East editor at the Guardian
Email: ian.black@guardian.co.uk

Write to Paul Reynolds at BBC Online:
Email: Paul.Reynolds3@bbc.co.uk

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This media alert will shortly be archived here:
http://www.medialens.org/alerts/09/071003_iraq_body_count.php

Media Lens is to be awarded The Gandhi Foundation International Peace Award 2007:

<http://www.gandhifoundation.org/peaceaward.html>

The Media Lens book 'Guardians of Power: The Myth Of The Liberal Media' by David Edwards and David Cromwell (Pluto Books, London) was published in 2006. John Pilger described it as "The most important book about journalism I can remember."

For further details, including reviews, interviews and extracts, please click here:
http://www.medialens.org/bookshop/guardians_of_power.php

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We have a lively and informative message board: <http://www.medialens.org/board>

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by Eric Herring - 2007/10/09 11:59

There has been a longstanding disagreement between IBC and Medialens on Iraq casualty reporting and estimation.

This is an important issue and discussing it in a Naspir forum is a reasonable thing to do.

However, there is a delicate aspect of it to which I would like to draw everyone's attention, namely that Naspir member John Sloboda is co-founder of IBC and Naspir members David Cromwell and David Edwards are co-founders of Medialens.

My hope is that Naspir will primarily be a place where we work together on the ground that we can agree on, and that internal disagreements are pursued only to the degree that they are productive. Assessing where disagreement ceases to be productive is of course a matter for discussion and interpretation, and I hope that we can find that place without too much difficulty.

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by DavidE - 2007/10/09 15:37

Thanks, Eric - good to be posting here. You write:

"There has been a longstanding disagreement between IBC and Medialens on Iraq casualty reporting and estimation."

It's certainly true that we've challenged IBC on a number of points. But actually IBC has repeatedly and strongly disagreed with the findings of the 2004 and 2006 Lancet studies on mortality in Iraq - that's the more important disagreement. As we noted in our latest media alert, John Sloboda commented in a BBC interview on the 2004 Lancet study:

"Some critics of the Lancet study have said it's like a drunk throwing a dart at a dartboard. It's going to go somewhere, but who knows if that number is the bulls eye.

"Unfortunately many many people have decided to accept that that 98,000 figure is the truth - or the best approximation to the truth that we have."

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4950254.stm>)

That was a remarkable comment to make about peer-reviewed science conducted by some of the world's leading epidemiologists and published in the world's leading medical journal. Co-author Gilbert Burnham told us:

"Our data have been back and forth between many reviewers at the Lancet and here in the school (chair of Biostatistics Dept), so we have the scientific strength to say what we have said with great certainty. I doubt any Lancet paper has gotten as much close inspection in recent years as this one has!" (Dr. Gilbert Burnham, email to Media Lens, October 30, 2004)

And yet Sloboda noted in the same BBC interview:

"Our position is, and always has been, that reading press reports, which is what this job is, requires nothing other than care and literacy. The whole point about it is that it doesn't require statistical analysis or extrapolations."
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4950254.stm>)

As we've noted, challenging the world's leading epidemiologists is about very much more than "reading press reports... with care and literacy".

And yet Sloboda and IBC have categorically stated:

"The death toll could be twice our number, but it could not possibly be 10 times higher." (Haroon Siddiqui, 'How many civilians have died?' Toronto Star, September 20, 2007; <http://www.thestar.com/columnists/article/258511>)

Our questions include: Are IBC qualified to make these categorical statements? If so, on what basis? If their task doesn't require expertise in "statistical analysis or extrapolations", how can they insist the death toll "could not possibly be 10 times higher"?

This is a sample of the questions we and others have asked - there are many more.

The subject could hardly be more important. We are of course talking about our government's responsibility - which means +our+ responsibility - for the mass death of civilians in Iraq.

Best wishes

David Edwards

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Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by RobertJS - 2007/10/11 16:32

Thanks to David Cromwell, editor of Medialens, for posting the Medialens article on Iraq Body Count (IBC). As some people may already know, Medialens have been publishing/promoting material critical of IBC since early 2006. This has occasionally been extreme, as in the claim that IBC were "actively aiding and abetting in war crimes" (a comment posted to the Medialens website by the Medialens editors, 17/3/06 - see <http://tinyurl.com/ytb6yy>, p5).

Given that the editors of Medialens (Cromwell and David Edwards) have now stated their case against IBC on Naspir, I think scrutiny of their arguments is warranted. I'd particularly like to draw attention to the following misrepresentations and errors in their article:

1. Medialens writes:

"It is striking that IBC link to a high-profile media report that so badly misrepresents its figures".

This is a misrepresentation. The link is listed by IBC under the heading "Lists of victims or victim categories to signal the pervasive impact on every sector of Iraqi society". The purpose of the link is to provide an example of how media have used IBC's data on individual victims (the lower section of the article). There's no implication that IBC approve of the article's wording on totals.

Interestingly, the article correctly notes that IBC's figures are "based on media reports as well as official figures from the Iraqi ministry of health and mortuaries", whilst getting its description of the Lancet 2004 study wrong (it didn't estimate "civilian" deaths).

2. Medialens writes:

"Whereas IBC have responded vigorously, indeed tirelessly, in responding to the 2004 and 2006 Lancet studies..."

This is, at best, a gross exaggeration. IBC released only two documents commenting on Lancet 2006 (both mildly critical) and one on Lancet 2004 (uncritical). I provide links to these documents, so people can make up their own minds:

<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/lancet100000/>

<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/reality-checks/>

<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/state-of-knowledge/> (only part of this document deals with Lancet 2006)

3. Medialens writes:

"In the past, IBC's response to the suggestion that violence prevents journalists from capturing many deaths has been, in

effect, 'Prove it!'"

This appears to be an outright falsehood. Medialens know that IBC have always stated that "many if not most civilian casualties will go unreported by the media. That is the sad nature of war." This IBC statement has been quoted several times by the Medialens editors - eg here: http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060125_paved_with_good.php - so they can't really excuse themselves by claiming ignorance.

4. Medialens writes:

"It was Herold's Afghan Victim Memorial Project that inspired John Sloboda to set up IBC. Herold's 'most conservative estimate' of Afghan civilian deaths resulting from American/NATO operations is between 5,700 and 6,500. But, he cautions, this is 'probably a vast underestimate' There is no reason to believe that the application of the same methodology in Iraq is generating very different results."

IBC use the same approach as Herold, but they don't use the same methodology. And there are reasons to believe the approach in Iraq is generating different results than in Afghanistan. But I doubt that Medialens have looked into the matter in enough depth to know the reasons.

5. Medialens writes:

"...what IBC is doing to promote or reduce the confusion".

This is an unworthy insinuation, suggesting IBC are "promoting" confusion, but providing no examples of this.

6. Medialens writes:

"Well, the bureau chief of one of three Western media agencies providing a third of IBC's data from Iraq sent this email to a colleague last year (the latter asked us to preserve the sender's anonymity)"

Medialens cited anonymous epidemiologists in their earlier criticisms of IBC, and it was noteworthy then, as it is now with this anonymous "bureau chief" and "colleague", that these unnamed sources weren't able to send their comments directly to IBC (who would, of course, have treated them in confidence). In effect it amounts to 3rd-hand rumour-mongering.

7. Medialens writes:

"...a new ORB poll revealing that 1.2 million Iraqis had been murdered since the 2003 invasion"

This isn't accurate. A new ORB poll estimates (not "reveals") that 1.2 million had been murdered. I mention this as Medialens make a big issue of the importance of accuracy (eg the need to distinguish "deaths" from "reported deaths").

8. Medialens writes:

"Why is it important for IBC to challenge the methodology and conclusions of epidemiological studies published in the Lancet..."

IBC didn't challenge Lancet 2004, so Medialens are wrong to write "studies" (plural). And IBC's expressions of scepticism over Lancet 2006 are no more out of place than those from Jon Pedersen of the UNDP Iraq study, demographer Beth Osborne Daponte, Fritz Scheuren, a past president of the American Statistical Association, Professor Hans Rosling and Dr Johan Von Schreeb at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Oxford physicists Neil Johnson and Sean Gourley, Debarati Guha-Sapir, Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), etc, etc.

9. Medialens writes:

"...as data collectors, IBC are not in a position to comment authoritatively on the impact of violence on the capacity of journalists to report accurately from Iraq. As data collectors, they have no more insight, no deeper understanding, than anyone else."

One could equally argue that Medialens "are not in a position to comment authoritatively" on this matter. All they (or anyone else, including leading epidemiologists) can do is quote the findings of a few researchers. In other words, it's not really an argument.

10. Medialens writes:

"Secondly, while IBC's self-described task does indeed require only "care and literacy", does not the task of challenging peer-reviewed science published by some of the world's leading epidemiologists require very much more? Does it not, in fact "require statistical analysis or extrapolations,"..."

Not necessarily. It doesn't require "statistical analysis" to observe that half a million death certificates are missing if the Lancet 2006 figure is believed. It doesn't require epidemiological expertise to observe that there have been contradictions in the accounts of the Lancet team's description of sampling, or that the sampling methodology as

published wouldn't give you "random" street selection. You don't need professional qualifications to appreciate how important random sampling is, etc.

The rhetorical basis of the Medialens alert is: "how dare these data collectors tirelessly and vigorously criticise an epidemiological study". It's a rather feeble and misleading argument - based on one innocuous comment made by John Sloboda after being subjected to an email bombing accusing him of being an "amateur" and an "apologist" for war crimes (as documented here: <http://tinyurl.com/ytb6yy>, p5, 36-38, 47).

I see something unpleasant and unworthy in the way Medialens have taken a single comment from John Sloboda and used it to insinuate that IBC are committing some major sins by publishing a few documents which express scepticism about the Lancet 2006 study. Remember that many others - including non-epidemiologists and epidemiologists - have expressed similar doubts and raised the same types of questions as IBC have done. Why aren't all these other people being subjected to a Medialens campaign?

Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by Eric Herring - 2007/10/11 19:12

Dear all

As I indicated in my earlier email, the issue of Iraq casualty reporting and estimation is an important one which falls within Naspir's remit, but I had had my concerns from the outset about whether it would be productive for Naspir to pursue this issues in the context of the Medialens (co-founded by Naspir members) critique of IBC (co-founded by a Naspir member).

Looking at these two posts, I think that continuing this here and indeed even having these posts remain in the forum can only be corrosive of Naspir, and so I feel the need to act in my role as moderator.

I have renamed the thread to something more neutral, namely, 'Iraq casualty counts and estimates'

I propose to do the following within three days of this post:

1. To delete all of the current posts from the forum.

2. To leave a 'spotlight' post at the top of the thread that says 'Naspir members are co-founders of Medialens and Iraq Body Count. Both of those organisations have taken different approaches to the issue of Iraq casualty counts and estimates, and you can read their views on their respective websites and elsewhere. Discussion of the issues related to Iraq casualty counts and estimates are welcome in the Naspir forums to the extent that they involve working together on the ground that we can agree on and internal disagreements that are pursued only to the degree that they are productive. Assessing where disagreement ceases to be productive is of course a matter for discussion and interpretation. While difference between the views of those involved with Medialens and Iraq Body Count can be part of a Naspir forum discussion of Iraq casualty counts and estimates, posting fundamental critiques of either organisation is not a helpful use of Naspir's forum facilities'.

I would emphasise that in this process I am not blaming or criticising anyone. I have found trying to work out the best way forward quite difficult and think this the least worst option.

I welcome views on the proposed course of action, on list and off list via moderator@naspir.net.

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by David Black - 2007/10/12 00:04

Just wanted to respond to Eric's suggestion:

I'm sympathetic to the aim of stopping debates sliding into slanging matches, but I'm a bit uncomfortable with the idea of stopping the discussion point blank and deleting the posts. There was a very clear and tangible reason to cut debates short on the email list: namely, the traffic to everyone's inbox generated by multiple responses. On the forum, though, I'd say it's different, since one can choose to follow a certain thread or not. Obviously, the issue of the content of the discussion is still significant in its own right, but the imperative to halt it is less acute, or, at the very least, of a different nature.

I'm not convinced that a robust back 'n' forth on this kind of issue between parties with pretty well-entrenched positions on the matter is necessarily "corrosive" to NASPIR (isn't that the form that most political debate takes?), providing, of course, that it doesn't get personalised, made deliberately offensive, etc. And I'd agree that the question of deciding when a debate becomes "productive" or unproductive is a very, very tricky area indeed - possibly too tricky to proceed on the basis of, without some kind of clear, agreed mandate to do so.

It does seem absolutely fair enough, though, that some ground rules for forum discussion should be agreed on, and I'd propose that we debate that on a thread in the relevant section of the forum, with a view to arriving at some guidelines, or clarifying any that already exist (sorry, I haven't checked this). Things like avoiding personal insults are probably fairly easy to reach a consensus about. On the other hand, a policy on what kind of critique of another organisation is permissible is probably a more nuanced issue: members have genuine commitments to the organisations of which they are members and that needs to be respected, but, at the same time, it also seems fair that where there is a legitimate critiques of the work or methods of another organisation, which might be relevant to the discussion, that should get an airing too. Some guidelines for moderation are probably a good move too, in order to stop moderators getting stuck in a uncomfortable 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' position.

Others may disagree, or have a different take on the matter, and these are precisely the kind of points that could be brought into a debate about the guidelines for posting and moderation on the forums, which would help us to come up with a clear and effective way of addressing situations like this.

Cheers,
David

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by Eric Herring - 2007/10/12 09:14

Thanks for your input, David. I won't take precipitate action.

There is a 'Rules' link near the top of the forums page and I have posted an item recently on our forum rules here:

http://www.naspir.net/component/option,com_fireboard/Itemid,17/func,view/catid,19/id,82/#82

The essence of it all is that discussion is fine, while using Naspir facilities for attacks on, and campaigns against, members and their activities are not. There are inevitable and sensitive issues of interpretation of course.

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by Anna Stavrianakis - 2007/10/12 18:22

Dear all, I'd like to chip in to this thread with one process point and one comment on the Media Lens-IBC debate.

On process – I agree with David that no moderator action needs to be taken. My understanding of the Forum space is that it allows people to engage in debate as and when they please, so as to avoid clogging up people's inboxes and to create space for more sustained engagement. If this thread becomes a back-and-forth between only a few people, so be it – it's up to members to decide what they want to get involved in. I think moderator involvement only needs to come if there are potential libel issues or personal attacks (i.e. infringement of the posting guidelines).

On the ML-IBC debate: I find both initiatives enormously useful and would like to thank both sets of people involved for their time and effort. I also think that different initiatives are designed to do different things, and I think this is the root of the dispute over the true number of Iraqi deaths.

I do not think that "anything goes" when conducting (empirical) research or that all research is of equal value. That's why it is important to debate method, sources etc and why it's not OK to applaud research just because it suits your politics. I do think, however, that there is room for a variety of initiatives on something like trying to establish the death toll of the Iraq war, and I welcome the work by IBC as well as the Lancet and ORB. I find the different results they come up with useful as best and worst case indicators and as evidence of how difficult empirical research can be.

What I find distressing is the tone of the debate in which organisations attempt to discredit each other – the Media Lens

media alert posted at the start of this Forum thread being the main example I am focusing on, as David Cromwell posted it to presumably inform and stimulate debate. I do not find the tone helpful for either establishing empirical truth about Iraqi deaths, or for contributing to public understanding. For me, it would be a really valuable contribution if we could have interventions that said "if you use this methodology, you get this result; if you use another, you get a different result" – this would help people understand the difficulties around establishing empirical truth, that there are genuine and honest differences of opinion and approach, and that real-world politics is messy.

As Eric posted in the 'Forum rules' section, Media Lens themselves advise that "When you are writing a post, think about whether it could come across as aggressive or disrespectful." I think this is a useful reminder for us all. We are all, in our own ways, trying to conduct progressive research, and yes there are going to be differences between us and even conflict when we think there is a lot at stake. I think conflict can be a good thing and am not seeking to smooth it over; but for me, the real issue is the difficulties around establishing what is happening in Iraq and this should be our focus.

Best wishes
Anna

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by Eric Herring - 2007/10/12 18:31

Thanks to all who have emailed me or the forum with your views. There is, fortunately, consensus that further action by me with regard to previous posts is unnecessary.

However, I do think I need to emphasise the following:

The Naspir forums must not be used as a platform to campaign against the work of fellow Naspir members. It is that shift from a discussion or vigorous disagreement with to a campaign against that gives even the most politely-worded critique the appearance of an attack.

Posts should not be framed as if the views being discussed are of outsiders if they are actually Naspir members: if the material is being reproduced from another place, it should be reframed so that it reads as it is once posted here - an engagement between Naspir members.

Members should take care with the tone of their disagreements and especially those that can easily be read as imputing sinister intent – 'insinuate', 'misrepresent', 'outright falsehood', 'at best, a gross exaggeration'. This is directly violation of our existing, agreed forum rules.

new publications - January 2008

Posted by John Sloboda - 2008/01/11 00:20

NASPIR members who have been tracking the issue of civilian casualties in Iraq may be interested in two recent developments in relation to survey data on mortality from Iraq.

1. A new household survey has been produced by the World Health Organisation, and published in the New England Journal of Medicine today which provides a point estimate of 151,000 Iraqis killed by violence between March 2003 and June 2006.

See:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2008/pr02/en/index.html>

and:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13164-iraqi-war-death-toll-slashed-by-three-quarters.html>

2. The Washington-based "National Journal" published a set of articles and resources on January 4th, which provides new information about the Johns Hopkins University (Lancet) study of 2006 (that estimated 600,000 Iraqis violently killed over the same sampling period as the WHO study). This includes summary conclusions from a new academic study on the Lancet

data which claims "numerous mathematical and procedural errors in the Lancet II article". The researchers concerned go on to say: "its corrections will likely lower the estimate of dead Iraqis to 450,000"

See:

<http://news.nationaljournal.com/articles/databomb/index.htm> And the response from the Lancet authors is at:

http://www.jhsph.edu/refugee/research/iraq/national_journal.html

Re:new publications - January 2008

Posted by Eric Herring - 2008/02/15 21:23

More of relevance to this thread

bw

Eric

http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/columns/shoptalk_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003711142

Counting Iraqi Casualties -- and a Media Controversy

The author commissioned the "Lancet" study recently attacked in a National Journal report and by the Wall Street Journal. He calls the criticism a "hatchet job," fraudulent or based on innuendo.

By John Tirman

(February 14, 2008) -- (Commentary) One puzzling aspect of the news media's coverage of the Iraq war is their squeamish treatment of Iraqi casualties. The scale of fatalities and wounded is a difficult number to calculate, but its importance should be obvious. Yet, apart from some rare and sporadic attention to mortality figures, the topic is virtually absent from the airwaves and news pages of America. This absence leaves the field to gross misunderstandings, ideological agendas, and political vendettas.

The upshot is that the American public—and U.S. policy makers, for that matter—are badly informed on a vital dimension of the war effort.

As an academic interested in the war's violence, I commissioned a household survey in October 2005 to gauge mortality, and I naturally turned to the best professionals available—the Johns Hopkins University epidemiologists who had conducted such surveys before in Iraq, Congo, and elsewhere. Their survey of 1,850 households resulted in a shocking number: 600,000 dead by violence in the first 40 months of the war. The survey was extensively peer reviewed and published in the British medical journal, the Lancet, in October 2006.

The findings caused a ripple of interest (in part because President Bush, during a press conference, called the results "not credible") and stirred a very lively debate among the few people interested in the methods. By and large, however, the survey passed from public view fairly quickly, and the news media continued to cite the very low numbers produced by the Iraq Body Count, a U.K.-based NGO that counts civilian deaths through English-language newspaper reports.

Another survey, this one undertaken by a private U.K. firm, Opinion Business Research (ORB), found more than one million dead through August 2007. Yet another, a much larger house-to-house survey was conducted by the Iraq Ministry of Health (MoH). This also found a sizable mortality figure—400,000 "excess deaths" (the number above the pre-war death rate), but estimated 151,000 killed by violence. The period covered was the same as the survey published in The Lancet, but was not released until January 2008.

The ORB results were almost totally ignored in the American press, and the MoH numbers, which did get one-day play, were covered incompletely. Virtually no newspaper report dug into the data tables of the Iraqi MoH report, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, for that total excess mortality figure, or to ask why the MoH report showed a flat rate for killing throughout the war when every other account shows sharp increases through 2005 and 2006. The logical explanation for this discrepancy is that people responding to interviewers from the government, and a ministry controlled by Moktada al Sadr, would not want to admit that their loved one died by violence. There were, instead, very large numbers of dead by road accidents and "unintentional injuries." The American press completely missed this.

What some in the news media did not miss, however, was a full-scale assault on the legitimacy of the Lancet article by the National Journal, the "insider" Capitol Hill weekly.

The attack, by reporters Carl Cannon and Neil Munro, which was largely built on persistent complaints of two critics and

heaps of innuendo, was largely ignored—its circulation is only about 10,000—until the Wall Street Journal picked up on one bit of their litany: that “George Soros” funded the survey. “The Lancet study was funded by anti-Bush partisans and conducted by antiwar activists posing as objective researchers,” said the January 9, 2008, editorial (titled “The Lancet’s Political Hit”) and concluded: “the Lancet study could hardly be more unreliable.” The editorial created sensation in the right-wing blogosphere and in several allied news outlets.

Let me convey what I thought was a simple and unremarkable fact I told Munro in an interview in November and one of the Lancet authors emailed Cannon the details of how the survey was funded. My center at MIT used internal funds to underwrite the survey. More than six months after the survey was commissioned, the Open Society Institute, the charitable foundation begun by Soros, provided a grant to support public education efforts of the issue. We used that to pay for some travel for lectures, a web site, and so on.

OSI, much less Soros himself (who likely was not even aware of this small grant), had nothing to do with the origination, conduct, or results of the survey. The researchers and authors did not know OSI, among other donors, had contributed. And we had hoped the survey’s findings would appear earlier in the year but were impeded by the violence in Iraq. All of this was told repeatedly to Munro and Cannon, but they choose to falsify the story. Charges of political timing were especially ludicrous, because we started more than a year before the 2006 election and tried to do the survey as quickly as possible. It was published when the data were ready.

The New York Post and the Sunday Times of London, both owned by Rupert Murdoch, followed the WSJ editorial and trumpeted the Soros connection and the supposed “fraud” which Munro and Cannon hinted. “\$OROS IRAQ DEATH STORY WAS A SHAM” was a headline in the Post, which was followed by a story in which scarcely anything stated was true.

The charges of “fraud” that were also central to the National Journal piece were based on distortions or ignorance of statistical method, such as random sampling and sample size, or speculations about Iraqi field researchers fabricating data. Nothing close to proof of misdeeds was ever offered.

The two principal authors, Gilbert Burnham and Les Roberts, parried the fraud charges effectively on their web site and in letters to the editors, but of course these are rarely noticed as much as the original charges. Those charges were wholly speculative and at times based on small irregularities in the collection of data, hardly a crime in the midst of the bloodiest period of the war. For example, some death certificates were not collected from respondents; about 80 percent of the time they were. (In the Iraqi MoH survey, death certificates were never collected, making their claims about violence v. nonviolent causes unconfirmable.)

In any case, the many peer reviews of The Lancet article, including one by a special committee of the World Health Organization, gave the survey methods and operations passing grades.

Munro then went on the Glenn Beck program and suggested the Iraqi researchers were unreliable (“without U.S. supervision”) and that the Lancet authors “made it clear they wanted this study published before the election.” Both of those assertions are untrue. Beck then repeated these allegations on his radio program, and added that there was no peer review of the fatality figures, another falsehood, and “we’re getting it jammed down our throat by people who are undercover who are pulling purse strings, who are manipulating the news.”

The charge, repeated in all these media, that the Iraqi research leader, Riyadh Lafta, M.D., operated “without U.S. supervision” and was therefore suspect is particularly interesting. Munro, in a note to National Review Online, asserted that Lafta “said Allah guided the prior 2004 Lancet/Johns Hopkins death-survey,” which he also had noted in the National Journal piece. When he interviewed me he pestered me about two anonymous donors, demanding to know if either were Arab or Muslim. A pattern here is visible, one which reeks of religious prejudice.

Munro had also ignored the corroborating evidence I sent him, the 4.5 million displaced (suggesting hundreds of thousands of fatalities, drawing on the ratio of all other wars); estimates of new widows (500,000 from the war); and the other surveys done in Iraq suggesting enormous numbers of casualties (ABC/USA Today poll of March 2007, showing roughly 53% physically harmed by war). When I mentioned these things to him on the telephone, he literally screamed that such data didn’t matter, that the Lancet probe was “a hoax.” Lancet article authors also cite several cases where they were misquoted. The National Journal’s editors have been informed of their reporters’ misconduct and errors, and have not responded.

So the smear is complete—a “political hit” by the “anti-Bush billionaire,” complicity by anti-war academics, fraud by Muslims devoted to Allah—and repeated over and over in the right-wing media. Little has of this has appeared in the legitimate news media, apart from right-wing columnists like Jeff Jacoby in the Boston Globe.

One might expect that such nonsense is obvious to neutral observers, but it constitutes a kind of harassment that scholars must fend off, diverting from more important work. Gilbert Burnham, the lead author on the Lancet article, runs health clinics in Afghanistan and East Africa, and is spending inordinate amounts of time responding to the attacks. Les

Roberts, a coauthor, and I have both had colleagues at our universities called by Munro to ask if they would punish us for fraud. The OSI people have also been writing letters to set the record straight. Most important, Riyadh Lafta, who has been threatened before, may be in more danger due to these attacks.

As to the issue of the human cost of the war, even the legitimate press that has avoided this kerfuffle might be intimidated from taking on the issue in depth. The fact that the National Journal hatchet job and the MoH survey appeared within days of each other sent a message to editors around the United States—one survey is “discredited” and one is legitimate. The treatment of the MoH survey that week often noted its death-by-violence number was one-fourth of the Lancet figure -- forgetting, again, that total war-related mortality were much closer in both, and congruent with other surveys. The New York Times did run an editorial in early February about the dead in Iraq — the 124 journalists killed in the war.

The topic of the war’s exceptional human costs, now inflamed by these calumnies, appears to be too hot to handle. Even with all this fuss in January, no explorations of the Iraqi mortality from the war have appeared in the major dailies. No editorials, no examination of the methods (or the danger and difficulty of collecting data), no sense that the scale of killing might affect the American position, or might shed some light on U.S. war strategy, or might point to honorable exits and reconstruction obligations. Remarkably, no curiosity at all about the dead of Iraq, and what they can tell us.

That, in the end, may be the biggest injustice of all.

*

To comment or read more, go to blog <http://gregmitchellwriter.blogspot.com/>

Links:

All the surveys can be found here <http://mit.edu/humancostiraq/>

The National Journal article, “Data Bomb,” is here <http://news.nationaljournal.com/articles/databomb/index.htm>

My annotated copy of "Data Bomb" and much more is here <http://www.johntirman.com/>

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by DavidE - 2008/02/15 22:17

With John Tirman's help, we have also analysed the National Journal's attack on the Lancet studies:

http://www.medialens.org/alerts/08/080122_all_smoke_no.php

It's not pretty!

Best wishes

DE

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by RobertJS - 2008/02/16 13:05

John Tirman writes that the WHO/IFHS study "found a sizable mortality figure—400,000 “excess deaths”..."

This is incorrect. No excess death figure was "found" or provided by IFHS. Simple extrapolations from the crude death rates supplied by IFHS should not be ascribed to IFHS in this way (for reasons made fairly clear by the IFHS authors - eg recall issues could lead to a spurious "excess" figure without "further analysis").

(The Medialens article, which echoes Tirman, is also incorrect to claim that the "excess mortality implied by is close to 400,000". IFHS does not "imply" such a figure, for the above reason. Note that the recalled death rate for the pre-war period was low compared to neighboring countries - the spurious component of the post-war rate increase could be substantial).

The direct comparison between Lancet 2006 and IFHS is as follows:

Lancet: 601,000 violent deaths

IFHS: 151,000 violent deaths

Some of the issues raised in the above-cited National Journal pieces are explored in depth in the following 50-page research paper by Professor Michael Spagat:

Ethical and Data-Integrity Problems in the Second Lancet Survey of Mortality in Iraq

February 2008

Abstract: I consider the second Lancet survey of mortality in Iraq published in 2006. I give evidence of ethical violations against the survey's respondents including endangerment, privacy breaches and shortcomings in obtaining informed consent. Violations to minimal disclosure standards include non-disclosure of the survey's questionnaire, data-entry form, data matching anonymized interviewer IDs with households and sample design. I present evidence suggesting data fabrication and falsification that falls into nine broad categories: 1) non-disclosure of key information; 2) implausible data on non-response rates and security-related failures to visit selected clusters; 3) evidence suggesting that the survey's figure for violent deaths was extrapolated from two earlier surveys; 4) presence of a number of known risk factors for interviewer fabrication listed in a joint document of American Association for Public Opinion Research and the American Statistical Association; 5) a claimed field-work regime that seems impossible without field workers crossing ethical boundaries; 6) large discrepancies with other data sources on the total number of violent deaths and their distribution in time and space; 7) two particular clusters that appears to contain fabricated data; 8) irregular patterns suggestive of fabrication in claimed confirmations of violent deaths through death certificates and 9) persistent mishandling of other evidence on mortality in Iraq presented so as to suggest greater support for the survey's findings from other evidence than is actually the case.

<http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhte/014/Research.htm> (Intro & supporting links)

<http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhte/014/Standards.pdf> (Paper - PDF file)

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by dcromwell - 2008/02/17 07:41

Tim Lambert has the following observations on Michael Spagat's recent work:

http://scienceblogs.com/deltoid/2008/02/spagat_goes_off_the_deep_end.php

In particular, Lambert notes of Spagat's approach: "doing this is dishonest cherry picking, especially when you are doing it to accuse researchers of fraud."

Also of likely interest to NASPIR members is the revised ORB figures reported here:

http://www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=88

They note: "we now estimate that the death toll between March 2003 and August 2007 is likely to have been of the order of 1,033,000. If one takes into account the margin of error associated with survey data of this nature then the estimated range is between 946,000 and 1,120,000."

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by RobertJS - 2008/02/17 11:21

I recommend that NASPIR members read the section of Professor Spagat's paper which deals with the sampling methodology of the Lancet 2006 study (starting p10). Note that in such surveys, randomness of sampling is all-important. <http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhte/014/Standards.pdf>

Sampling methodology is crucial also to the ORB poll. ORB effectively subcontracted the Iraq polling work to the Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies. The person conducting the research, Munqeth Dagher,

is reportedly a self-trained pollster who began his polling activities in 2003. Describing his early attempts at polling, Dagher says, "I knew that Baghdad is distributed into nine different areas, and how many citizens lived in each one. But to tell the truth, I didn't know anything about the real random systematic sample. We did it randomly by going to any house we wanted to go to. So it wasn't a perfect sample."
<http://www.opinion.co.uk/Documents/Polling%20in%20Iraq.pdf>

Will McLean comments: "ORB's core competency seems to be the familiar western opinion survey by random phone interview. That isn't actually very relevant to doing a cluster sample mortality survey in a war zone. And the survey work itself was done by an Iraqi firm, IIACSS, that didn't exist before 2003, founded by an Iraqi with apparently only limited formal training in survey methodology." <http://willscommonplacebook.blogspot.com/search/label/Iraq>

ORB originally stated that their survey was based on "a nationally representative sample." Later, they admitted that the survey was "undertaken in primarily urban locations". Given that about a third of Iraqis live in rural areas, this is a significant omission, which ORB failed to disclose when the results were first published. The follow-up survey mentioned in an earlier post was conducted to correct this omission (after ORB received criticism on this point).

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by RobertJS - 2008/02/17 15:40

Another study that may be of interest to NASPIR members is Estimating mortality in civil conflicts: lessons from Iraq by Debarati Guha-Sapir and Olivier Degomme (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Brussels):
http://www.cedat.be/Documents/Working_Papers/CREDWPIraqMortalityJune2007.pdf

Although it's several months old, it isn't well-publicised and will probably be new to many forum members. It's critical of the Lancet 2006 study, and estimates the "total war-related death toll for Iraq from the invasion until June 2006" at around 125,000. (Note: this is from prior to the release of the recent WHO study).

To preempt a certain type of comment, I should point out that due to its criticism of the Lancet study, the paper has already come to the attention of Tim Lambert's blog, which contains the following added comment: "the Guha-Sapir paper is RUBBISH. 5 full pages of criticism of the Lancet paper. a single page on the IBC, with basically NO criticism at all. (missing some deaths in certain governates, but can use ITSELF (!!!) to correct the data..)"
http://scienceblogs.com/deltoid/2008/02/spagat_goes_off_the_deep_end.php#comment-751438

Re:Iraq casualty counts and estimates

Posted by RobertJS - 2008/07/17 20:19

A substantial article, 'Wartime estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties' by the renowned demographer, Beth Osborne Daponte, may be of interest to some of you. Daponte's credentials should impress even the most demanding credentialist (she produced the most authoritative mortality estimates for the first Gulf War, for which she was nearly fired by the US government).

She writes of the limitations of the different studies conducted, and is critical of the Lancet studies - to the extent that she excludes the Lancet findings from her conclusion, which is as follows:

"Perhaps the best that the public can be given is exactly what IBC provides – a running tally of deaths derived from knowledge about incidents. While imperfect, that knowledge, supplemented by the wealth of data of the Iraq Living Conditions Survey and Iraq Family Health Survey (which have their own limitations), provides enough information in the light of the circumstances. At a later date, additional surveys can be conducted to determine the impact and/or do demographic analysis. But for now, the Iraq Body Count's imperfect figures combined with the date of the ILCS and IFHS may suffice."

[http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-868-p943/\\$File/irrc-868_Daponte.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/review-868-p943/$File/irrc-868_Daponte.pdf)