

When reporters cloud the truth

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Searching the web for information about Western victims of kidnappings in Iraq has become an internet minefield. Instead of finding factual material, you are likely to stumble across wacky conspiracy theories, wild speculation, half-truths and untruths. Type into Google the name “Margaret Hassan”, the British charity worker kidnapped and killed in Iraq at the end of last year, and one of the first links offered will take you to an article questioning whether she was killed by insurgents. Perhaps, it suggests, she was really done in by forces with a vested interest in proving the “viciousness” of the Iraqi resistance. Another link – in the top 20 of more than 100,000 search results – points to a popular anti-war weblog run by American writer Kurt Nimmo, who leaves far less to the imagination. Nimmo writes: “I believe – admittedly without any evidence – that the abduction and apparent murder of Margaret Hassan was a counter-insurgency intelligence operation run by the Americans, the Israelis, or both.”

Search for “Nick Berg”, the American civilian whose beheading in Iraq last May was filmed and shown on the world wide web, and the very first link is to an article on a political electronic magazine, headlined, “Nick Berg’s Killing: 50 Fishy Circumstances, Contradictory Claims and Videotape Anomalies.” It claims that Berg’s videotaped execution was “possibly constructed by U.S. operatives” in an attempt to take the heat off the Abu Ghraib torture controversy, which made headlines days earlier. Another search result points to a conspiracy website speculating that Berg’s beheading may have been “committed by CIA-Mossad as a propaganda scheme to outrage Americans and Europeans”.

Now try looking for “Simona Torretta”, one of two Italian aid workers kidnapped in Iraq in September, and of the first 10 search results, five point to

an article, first published in *The Guardian* and then republished on various websites around the world, claiming that the kidnapping had “the mark of an undercover police operation”. It raises the possibility that the seizure of Torretta and her colleague Simona Pari (“the two Simonas”) was “not the work of Mujahideen, but of foreign intelligence agencies out to discredit the resistance”. Unlike Hassan and Berg, however, the two Simonas survived their kidnap experience and were later released – and in the eight months since have said nothing about being kidnapped by “foreign intelligence”, but instead describing their captors as “very religious and very political”.

Search for Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot. These two French journalists were held hostage in Iraq for four months before being freed just before Christmas. Again you will be directed to a website which wonders whether they were seized with the assistance of the CIA or Mossad in an attempt to embarrass the anti-war French government. Yet Chesnot and Malbrunot have said since their release that their captors were motivated “by an agenda of Islamic Holy War”.

And on it goes. The web is alive with whispers and rumours about the involvement of foreign intelligence in the kidnapping, and even killing, of Westerners in Iraq. Websites tell colourful stories about evil Americans and Israelis spiriting away journalists and aid workers under the cover of darkness and arranging for their executions, as part of a dastardly plan to discredit the insurgents and justify the ongoing occupation. And in each instance, the claims are made – as Kurt Nimmo admits of his theory about Mossad murdering Margaret Hassan – “without any evidence”. Instead, speculation is substituted for investigation and wild theorising for a cool analysis of the facts.

Of course, the web has long attracted every crank with a crackpot theory to set up a site and spout his theories to the world. In this case, however, blame cannot be pinned on the web alone. Rather, some very respectable anti-war journalists have been at the forefront of spreading unfounded theories about kidnappings in Iraq. In so doing they provide succour to the crankier conspiracy theorists out there and do a grave disservice to independent reporting.

One of the first to wonder out loud whether someone other than Iraqi insurgents killed Margaret Hassan was Robert Fisk, *The Independent's* foreign correspondent. On 17 November, the day after a video apparently showing Hassan being shot in the head was sent to al-Jazeera, Fisk penned a piece headlined: “Who Killed Margaret Hassan?” This presented only the flimsiest

of factual evidence: in the background to the video footage of Hassan being killed there was apparently “none of the usual Islamic banners”; there was also “none of the usual armed and hooded men” and “no Koranic recitations”. The rest of Fisk’s piece merely asked leading questions: “If anyone doubted the murderous nature of the insurgents, what better way to prove their viciousness than to produce evidence of Hassan’s murder? What more ruthless way could there be of demonstrating to the world that the U.S. is fighting [evil in Iraq]?”

Fisk is a fine journalist, but here he is employing a classic conspiracy theory tactic: asking shocking questions about what “may” have taken place rather than presenting evidence for what “did” feasibly take place. You see this on conspiracy websites all the time; questions such as: Was the destruction of the Pentagon on 9/11 an inside job? Is Elvis alive and well and living in Hartlepool, England? Is the Holy Grail buried on an island off France? (The answer to such questions is almost always the same: “No. Now stop being so ridiculous.”) By asking seemingly probing questions, the conspiracy theorist can present his theory as the result of critical speculation rather than mad myth-making.

Who needs evidence?

Kurt Nimmo, author of a collection of essays entitled “Another Day in the Empire” and a blog of the same name, effectively took Fisk’s theorising to its logical conclusion when he expressed his belief that Hassan was murdered by the Israelis or Americans. When I asked him to produce evidence for this theory, he replied: “I have no actual evidence... As a student of history, though, I know that organisations such as the CIA and Mossad have participated in criminal activity. I see no reason why they would play fair in Iraq.” Who needs evidence when you have a wild imagination and a firm belief in what your imagination comes up with?

Naomi Klein, the widely-read journalist and author, was the driving force behind the theory that Western intelligence forces kidnapped Simona Torretta and Simona Pari. On September 16, while the two Simonas were still in captivity, Klein and Jeremy Scahill, a reporter for the U.S.-based radio show *Democracy Now!*, published an article in *The Guardian* which argued that “nothing about this kidnapping fits the pattern of other abductions”. Torretta and Pari were taken from their Baghdad home/office in broad daylight, by heavily armed men, some of whom were wearing Iraqi National

Guard uniforms and who identified themselves as working for then prime minister Ayad Allawi. Klein and Scahill wrote of a growing belief in Iraq that the kidnapping was “not the work of Mujahideen, but of foreign intelligence out to discredit the resistance”.

But again, the journalists relied more on speculation than investigation. Speaking about this story for the first time since Torretta and Pari were released, Klein tells me that she and Scahill wanted to “get some of the theories that we were hearing into the public arena”. Yet she was in America, not Iraq, when she wrote the article. She collated the “suspicious things” about this kidnapping not by visiting the scene of the kidnapping, but from newspaper accounts. Klein says she was “forced to rely on phone interviews with Iraqis on the ground and mainstream news reports”, admitting that this was “far from ideal”. She sent me the news reports that apparently show there was something untoward about the kidnapping – a *Los Angeles Times* article that says the kidnappers claimed to be from Allawi’s office and a *Newsweek* piece describing how the kidnapping took place in broad daylight.

Yet even the authors of these articles who interviewed eyewitnesses to the kidnapping do not accept the theory that the two Simonas were taken by foreign intelligence. An *LA Times* reporter tells me: “I do not think that anyone truly believed that [the kidnappers] were working for Allawi. That was seen as a ruse to lower the guard of the doorman and gain easier access to the house.” A *Newsweek* reporter says eyewitnesses gave the impression that this was a well-planned operation carried out by insurgents and said all the men had Iraqi accents. “I didn’t find anything in my reporting that would hint at the involvement of an outside intelligence force in this kidnapping.”

Paola Gasparoli, a spokesperson for A Bridge to Baghdad, the Italian charity for which Torretta and Pari work, also disputes Klein and Scahill’s theory. “We have no evidence that [the kidnappers] were organised by foreign intelligence or anything like that. Most of them were not wearing Iraqi guard uniforms, they were wearing normal Iraqi clothing. They spoke in Baghdad-sounding Iraqi voices, they were not foreigners. Yes, they had sophisticated weaponry – AK47s and silencers on their pistols – but this is not strange. During my time in Iraq, I saw these kinds of weapons.”

Yet the idea that the two Simonas were kidnapped by foreign intelligence is still widespread on the web, eight months after they were released. Indeed, if you search for information about the kidnapping, you will be bombarded with the foreign intelligence theory, and will have to dig a lot deeper to find Simona Torretta’s own description of her captors as a “very religious and

very political group” who were “exponents of moderate Islam”. The theory put forward by Klein and Scahill, which is disputed by Torretta and Pari’s colleagues and by journalists who reported on the kidnapping, remains the dominant story on the web, while what appears to be the real story – that they were kidnapped by a religious/political group – remains effectively hidden.

Klein says there was a “personal motivation, to be perfectly honest with you” to publishing the theories about foreign intelligence. “[Torretta and Pari] are people we know, people we care about. If these theories were correct, then our report might have been helpful. The fear of being discovered might have been a disincentive [to the kidnappers].” This may sound noble, but surely it is incumbent upon journalists to investigate and test theories before publishing them? Klein and Scahill have inadvertently helped to distort the discussion of kidnappings in Iraq. Some of those who speculate all over the web about what happened to Margaret Hassan, Nick Berg and others cite Klein and Scahill’s work on the two Simonas as back-up to their own theories.

Evidence is laughable

The web-based conspiracy-mongers have had their greatest field day with the video showing the beheading of Nick Berg. They have examined the video in detail and come up with the following theory: Berg was executed by Americans inside Abu Ghraib prison in a bizarre bid to show the world how cruel and ruthless Iraqi insurgents can be. But again, their evidence is so flimsy it’s laughable. They point out that Berg was wearing an orange jumpsuit, like those worn by detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Is it seriously suggested that the Americans gave the same-issue jumpsuit to this American civilian whom they were supposed to be secretly murdering as they gave to prisoners in Guantanamo? The conspiracy theorists also point out that the white chair on which Berg is sitting prior to his execution is similar to a chair in one of the photos showing Americans torturing Iraqis inside Abu Ghraib. But surely there are thousands upon thousands of white chairs in Iraq?

Yet, remarkably, some of the theories about the execution of Nick Berg have been repeated in respectable newspapers around the world, including the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Asia Times* and *The Guardian*. Increasingly, on the issue of kidnappings and executions in Iraq, the line between journalism and conspiracy mongering – between political criticism of the war in Iraq and wild theorising over what is happening on the ground – has been blurred.

The anti-war journalists who crossed this line, however honourable their intentions, have confused rather than clarified the discussion on Iraqi kidnappings. And they have done the anti-war position no favours. We journalists who opposed the war criticised the Bush administration and the Blair Government for relying on hyperbole and speculation in their statements on Iraq. What a shame that some anti-war writers are now doing likewise in their criticisms of the war and occupation.