

# Censorship and Self-Censorship in Research on the Iraq War

By

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq:



At first it was a big success – for example, we rooted out Iraq’s WMD.



Then we started to lose control (I've switched to being serious now):

# Iraqi Insurgent Sniper Training



Gathered from a pro-insurgency militant website  
on 10 May 2005

“Another look into the mind of the enemy”

Note: Defense and the National Interest is posting this presentation to ensure the widest distribution to US forces, active and reserve. Before we received it, it was featured on US news services.

There was a national debate and we settled on a way forward:



This debate was informed by *opinion polling done in Iraq*. Indeed, we revel in the danger of sending locals into dangerous areas to gather our data:

## Iraq and Syria opinion poll - the world's most dangerous survey?

By Jonathan Marcus Diplomatic correspondent

- 9 September 2015
- From the section [Middle East](#)



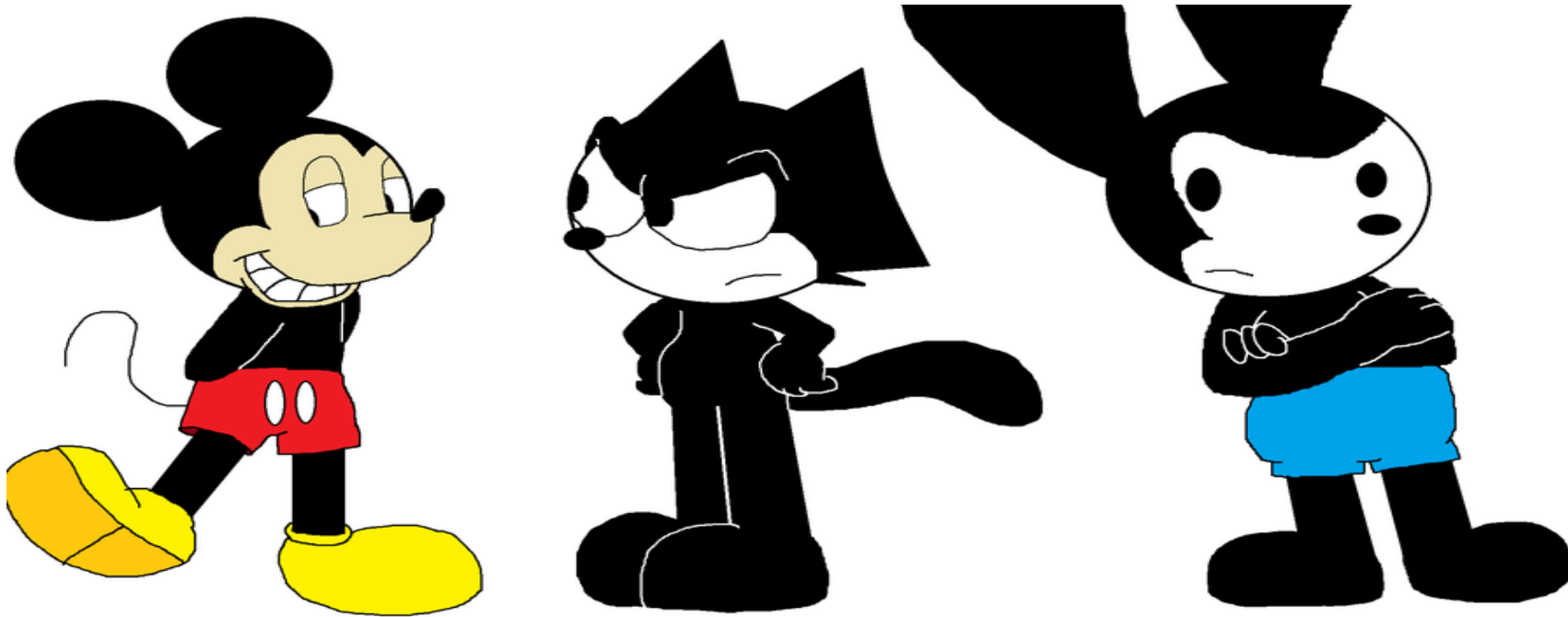
What if some of these locals decide to reduce their risks by making up some of the data?

Or what if some are simply corrupt and take the money and run?



It is reasonable to accept stronger quality compromises on data from war zones than we would on data gathered in rich countries under stable conditions.

But any such quality compromises should be *open and explicit*, not hidden.





The polling companies [D3 Systems](#) and [KA Research Limited](#) have fielded a number of surveys in Iraq since the invasion.

Some were for internal use only within the US government and must have informed US diplomatic and military policy:



Some got major public exposure, even winning an Emmy Award for ABC news:



Hardly any of the detailed micro data have been released for inspection.

Two datasets done by [PIPA of the University of Maryland](#) have been in the public domain and I have them.

Steven Koczela of The MassINC Polling Group obtained four datasets from the [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#) through a FOIA.

*The State Department has ignored a similar FOIA request (I didn't know that ignoring a FOIA was an option.)*

I have found evidence that many of the data in the six surveys I have are *fabricated*.

See my [conference paper](#) for a short summary of this evidence.

Here is the [original paper](#).

I will release various things over the next few weeks on [my blog](#).

I wrote up my findings in 2011 and sent the paper out for comments and refereeing, envisioning myself with a “revise and resubmit” and an inbox full of useful comments in a few months’ time.

In particular, I sent the paper to D3 for comment which, I thought, was a good thing to do for several reasons:

1. Having fielded the survey (together with KA) D3 is well placed to provide insights.
2. Sharing was a courtesy so that they would not have to improvise a response after I published the paper.

3. After seeing the evidence it seemed clear that D3 would want to investigate their Iraq fielding operations – it would be better to do this sooner rather than later.

What happened?

Censorship:



“Re: D3 Systems, Inc. v Michael Spagat and Steve Koczela”:

“This firm represents D3 Systems, Inc. (“Our Client” or “D3”). Our client has retained us to commence litigation against you and any entity with which you are affiliated (including....) seeking compensation for, and equitable relief to terminate, your distribution and publication of false and defamatory statements about D3 to its clients and others.”

Yikes.....



“Accordingly, WE HEREBY DEMAND, on and in behalf of our client that you:

1. IMMEDIATELY CEASE AND DESIST further delivery, dissemination, distribution and publication of the Subject Document and any of its content.
2. Deliver to this office within 8 days of the date of this letter a complete and accurate list of all parties to whom you have delivered, or requested publication of, all or any portion of the Subject Document. We note that you have refused to provide this information to our client and we warn you that your continued refusal to do so is not only further evidence of your intention to interfere with our client’s business relations, but also serves to exacerbate the financial damage your actions have inflicted on our client and therefore to increase the amount of compensatory and punitive monetary damages that our client will seek from you.
3. Deliver to this office within 8 days of the date of this letter a list of all individuals and organizations with whom you communicated, or from whom you received information, in connection with the preparation of the subject document.

This letter does not constitute an admission, waiver, agreement or forbearance of any kind. We hereby reserve all of our client’s rights and remedies.”

What happened next?

1. My College spent a lot of money on lawyers.
2. We decide to write back asking if D3 can point me to a specific problem in the paper. I will gladly correct any errors.
3. D3 and D3's lawyer do not write back with any specific suggestions.

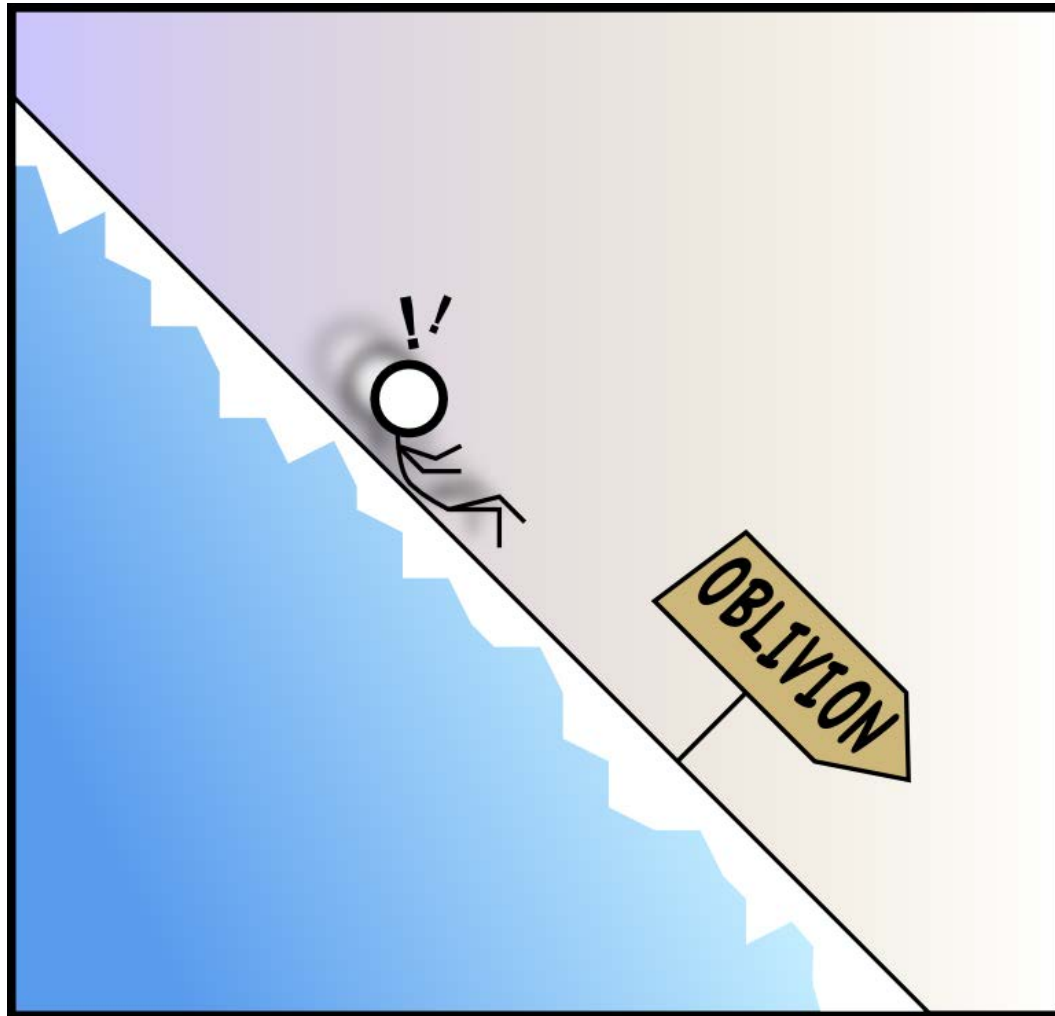
It was a bluff.

I regret to report that next came self-censorship.

My big mistake was thinking that somehow my next step had to be creating the most perfect paper the world has ever seen.

This stupidity interacted with personal and professional problems (....well....being Head of Department) that cut into my time, keeping me away from this work.

This is the slippery slope from censorship to self-censorship – don't follow me.



Recall that I have only been able to analyse six polls – many of the D3/KA Iraq polls remain out of reach, including the State Department ones and a series of polls sponsored by ABC, the BBC and other media organizations.

There is no way to really know how valid these polls without examining the data, however, they must be viewed as under a cloud as long as the data remain hidden.

It is also possible that many of the messages emanating from these polls are broadly accurate even if many of the data are fabricated.

The issues at stake include:

1. Academic freedom

Will all institutions be as supportive of expensive academics as Royal Holloway has been for me?

Will people lose promotions or raises over such threats?

Will people self-censor to avoid the threats in the first place?

## 2. Democracy

We have had public debates feeding into elections that have been informed by polling data from Iraq.

Diplomatic and military policy has also been based, in part, on such polling data.

But it is possible that many of these data are fabricated.

### 3. The historical record on Iraq

It is important to know as best we can how these data were really collected.

I reiterate the point I made in slide 21 – maybe the historical record in Iraq has not been badly distorted by polling fabrication.

But we need to have an open and honest assessment of the work of D3/KA there so that we can make this call.