

Speculation is no substitute: a defence of Iraq Body Count

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse the evidence behind recent published claims that the media-based surveillance methods employed by Iraq Body Count (IBC) grossly underrepresent the number of Iraqis violently killed when compared to credible studies.

These claims are shown to be based on speculation, misinterpretation of other studies, and a series of basic errors in arithmetic, analytical rigour, and citation. Stripping these away restores a large degree of convergence between the best sources of evidence, namely the Iraq Living Conditions Survey (to May 2004), the Johns Hopkins University study published in *The Lancet* (to Sep 2004), the Iraqi Ministry of Health (to at least 2005), and Iraq Body Count (ongoing).

We argue that this long-standing consensus should continue to inform analysis and debate about the human costs and implications of the Iraq conflict.

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1 Documenting civilian deaths: an ultimate moral responsibility

The most unacceptable and irreversible cost of the US-led invasion and continuing military occupation of Iraq is its vast and growing toll in human life, with Iraqi civilians making up the largest share.

The documentation of this toll is an inescapable moral responsibility which falls particularly heavily on the US and British people. It is our representatives who took the decisions that led to these deaths, funded by our taxes. We are the people who allowed President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair to return to power after their illegal invasion of Iraq. We thereby ensured a continuation of their policies, and so share in the responsibility for every one of these deaths, whoever pulled the trigger on the ground (or from the air).

For this reason a group of independent volunteers, made up entirely of UK and US citizens, have been keeping a record of media-reported civilian deaths continuously from the first day of the invasion to the present. This is the Iraq Body Count (IBC) project.

We have always recognised and made explicit that our media-derived database cannot be a complete record of civilians killed in violence, and have called for properly supported counts since the beginning of our own project.¹ What IBC continues to provide is an irrefutable baseline of certain and undeniable deaths based on the solidity of our sources and the conservativeness of our methodology.

1 A formal version of this campaign for a proper count was launched and is sustained by the <http://www.countthecasualties.org> website, launched in partnership with two other UK organisations concerned with Iraq's war casualties, and coordinated by Katy Cronin and the late Guy Hughes of the UK NGO Crisis Action. <http://www.crisisaction.org.uk/>

2 A misdirected campaign against IBC

“... we believe the honourable thing to do with your time would be to write a series of open and honestly self-critical press releases to all editors and news correspondents at all media outlets as a matter of real urgency ...”

Open letter from Media Lens Editors to Iraq Body Count ²

In recent months it has been claimed in a variety of published articles, and also in a coordinated campaign of emails to news media and websites who cite our work, that the Iraq Body Count is not simply an undercount, but a **gross** undercount, and that the likely death toll could be as much as five or ten times greater than the deaths recorded in our database.

It has also been argued that the use of IBC's cautiously-derived figures by the media is part of their project to conceal rather than highlight the civilian death toll, a particular contention in this regard being that our data systematically and severely underrepresent the proportion of deaths caused directly by US forces and air strikes.

It is further claimed that our failure to accept the views of our critics and to draw attention to IBC's alleged “massive bias and gaps” means that we are contributing to the project of concealing Iraqi civilian deaths.³ Finally, we are charged with the moral obligation to inform the news media and others who use our work that the claims of our critics are true.

Some supporters of this campaign have gone as far as suggesting that IBC should be closed down. Media organizations, and even many anti-war organisations, have been contacted with false and misleading information, combined with persistent appeals that they cease using or publishing IBC data.⁴

2.1 Character and tactics of the anti-IBC campaign

We do not object to careful and considerate discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of differing methods of researching this vital topic. We have welcomed such debate, and have participated in it long before the recent discussion arose.⁵

Many of these recent contributions to the debate have, however, been neither

2 “IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND” Media Lens, 14 March, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060314_iraq_body_count.php

3 Ibid.

4 See Appendix, 2.a.

5 See for instance “Counting the Human Cost”, our review of various counting projects as of June 2003: http://www.iraqbodycount.org/editorial_june1203.php

careful nor considerate. They have been inaccurate and exaggerated, personal, offensive, and part of a concerted campaign to undermine IBC's reputation among those who use our data. The most hostile comments have been placed in the public domain and promoted by a web-based pressure group called Media Lens, whose Co-Editors are David Cromwell and David Edwards.

The Media Lens campaign was launched in earnest by a series of "Alerts" on IBC titled "Paved With Good Intentions – Iraq Body Count."⁶

IBC would prefer to avoid a public spat with a group who shares our opposition to this war. Sadly, the content and tactics employed by Media Lens and its followers have been such that we feel our initial decision to largely ignore them is no longer tenable.⁷

The following quotes give some flavour of the character of the statements about IBC circulated by Media Lens:

"It is not rocket science to perceive obvious flaws in the IBC methodology – a glance at the database suggests that Iraqi civilians are somehow immune to the firepower of US jets, tanks, helicopters and artillery. Other studies, and simple common sense, suggest otherwise."

"Paved With Good Intentions – Part 2", Media Lens 'Alert', January 26, 2006.

"...you are mumbling about changing things in the future. Why are you even bothering? ... To put it bluntly, you've been rumbled, but instead of closing down the site, or updating and explaining the gross inaccuracy of your figures, you're just carrying on as normal. ... Shame on you."

Email to IBC from Martin Gibbons, made public by Media Lens Editors, March 14, 2006.

6 "PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS – IRAQ BODY COUNT – PART 1" Media Lens, January 25, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060125_paved_with_good.php
 "PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS – IRAQ BODY COUNT – PART 2" Media Lens, January 26, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060126_paved_with_good_part2.php
 "IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND" Media Lens, March 14, 2006. Media Lens, March 14, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060314_iraq_body_count.php
 "IRAQ BODY COUNT – A SHAME BECOMING SHAMEFUL", Media Lens, April 10, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060410_iraq_body_count.php
 Others contributions have included:
 "When Promoting Truth Obscures the Truth: More on Iraqi Body Count and Iraqi Deaths", Stephen Soldz, February 5, 2006. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=9660>
 "Learning to Count: The Dead in Iraq", Dahr Jamail and Jeff Pflueger, April 13, 2006. http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/041306J.shtml

7 See Appendix, 2.1.a

“[IBC are] ...basking in the glow of war apologists”

Posted to ‘moderated’ Media Lens message board by “Antony”, March 17, 2006.

“If IBC refuses to dramatically alter their figures to be more reflective of reality, I believe they are actively aiding and abetting in war crimes.”

Dahr Jamail comment, made public by Media Lens editors, March 17, 2006.

These comments are hardly consistent with Media Lens’ stated wish “to initiate a rational debate”.⁸ Our attempt to lower the temperature by seeking to conduct some discussions in private was rebuffed and loudly proclaimed to be “suggestive of something concealed”,⁹ and has merely led to an escalation in condemnatory rhetoric. We therefore have no choice but to deal with these attacks publicly.

We do so in the same manner we conduct our regular work and analyses – that is, with due care and close attention paid to the facts as they are known.

2.2 IBC’s response – and a precautionary note

If we ignore the tone of the above complaints we see that they contain three specific claims:

- ***we are grossly undercounting deaths***
- ***we severely underrepresent the deaths caused by the US military***
- ***we do nothing to advertise these gross errors, or correct them***

We deal with each of these major claims in turn, respectively in sections 3, 4, and 5 below. But before continuing we wish to issue a note of caution.

In introducing their first piece about us Media Lens state that IBC is “important, not least because it is often cited as a source in high-profile British and American media.” Media Lens considers it axiomatic that “the notion that Western media exercise ‘professional rigour’ is absurd.”¹⁰ Another contention is that the same media are “working mightily to keep the truth of [Iraqi] suffering from the public.”¹¹ Given this, it was perhaps inevitable that Media Lens would sooner or later target IBC, which has stated that it relies on the media’s professional rigour

8 See Appendix, 2.1.b.

9 See Appendix, 2.1.c.

10 Both in “PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS – IRAQ BODY COUNT – PART 1” Media Lens, January 25, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060125_paved_with_good.php

11 “Please be in no doubt that our concern is for the awesome suffering of the people of Iraq, and our belief that Western media and governments are working mightily to keep the truth of that suffering from the public.” “Exchange with John Sloboda”, April 7, 2006. Posted by Media Lens Editors to their public message board.

in reporting Iraq's civilian casualties. (We have discussed issues of reportage in a separate publication,¹² and will not repeat its points here.)

But it is not just generalised anti-media opprobrium that fuels the campaign against IBC and its media sources. A distinctive feature of this campaign has been the ardent promotion of US researcher Les Roberts as the authority on Iraqi casualties (Roberts was the lead author of a respected mortality survey by the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* in 2004¹³). It is the media's alleged failure to give Roberts and the *Lancet* study the priority they deserve, as well as the supposed role of IBC in drawing attention away from it, which is behind nearly every recent condemnation of IBC, many of which end with the demand that we give the *Lancet* findings from 2004, as well as speculative inferences drawn from them, preference over our own ongoing work. Insofar as Roberts has been first among these critics to dismiss IBC as the "source most favored by the war proponents",¹⁴ he has also set the tone of the current "debate."

However our rebuttal of our critics' positions should not be taken as a dismissal of the *Lancet* study which, as we have stated before, makes an important contribution to the world's outrageously limited knowledge of the war's impact on Iraqi mortality.¹⁵ This is particularly true of the excess deaths from disease which constituted some 14 percent of the *Lancet* study's widely publicised "100,000" estimate, providing a unique insight which is in urgent need of updating in a larger scale survey.¹⁶ What our analysis soundly refutes are misleading assertions about the *Lancet* study, including a few which, regrettably, emanate from those who should know better.

12 <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/onibc/>

13 "Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey" Les Roberts et al. *The Lancet* 2004; 364:1857-1864 <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673604174412/fulltext>

14 This assertion has been repeated in at least three separate Media Lens articles:
"PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS – IRAQ BODY COUNT – PART 1" Media Lens, January 25, 2006.
ZNet Commentary: Media 'Errors' And The *Lancet*. September 27, 2005.
"BURYING THE LANCET – PART 1" Media Lens, September 5, 2005.

15 In our dossier of "Dossier of Civilian Casualties in Iraq 2003–2005" we noted that "A highly creditable and often overlooked aspect of the *Lancet* survey is that it systematically obtained information on post-invasion "excess deaths" from all causes, including the everyday deaths that don't make the news. Such efforts should be joined." http://reports.iraqbodycount.org/a_dossier_of_civilian_casualties_2003-2005.pdf

16 Violence is the largest single cause of deaths (~58,000), followed by traffic accidents (24,000), and diseases (~14,000), in *Lancet*'s central estimate of 98,000 "excess" deaths. ("An Interview with EPIC Adviser Richard Garfield". Michelle Suwannukul, November 2004. <http://www.epic-usa.org/Default.aspx?tabid=440>) However these breakdowns (smaller subsets) of the *Lancet* mortality data are bounded by even greater uncertainty than the central estimate, and would require a much larger scale survey to investigate reliably.

The world has a pressing need to know the Iraq war's human costs, and no serious effort to document and publicise these costs should be maligned – but nor should speculation on these questions be raised to the status of holy writ.

3 Is IBC a “gross” undercount?

IBC and the most reliable commentators on our work have long been clear about the real limitations of our methods. The recent notion that these limitations are far more dramatic than was previously thought has other origins, however.

The relation of IBC to the three other credible sources on Iraqi casualty numbers, and of those sources to one another, hasn’t changed. What has changed since late 2005 is the claimed entry of additional studies into the equation, and a series of unexamined conclusions drawn from them:

“... there are now at least 8 independent estimates of the number or rate of deaths induced by the invasion of Iraq. The source most favored by the war proponents (Iraqbodycount.org) is the lowest. Our estimate is the third from highest. Four of the estimates place the death toll above 100,000.”

Les Roberts in response to *Independent* leader writer Mary Dejevsky, reprinted in “Burying the Lancet Part 1”. Media Lens, September 5, 2005.

“There are eight estimates out there of how many civilians have died, four of which are over a hundred thousand...”

Les Roberts, Newsnight, BBC 2. October 12, 2005¹⁷

“... as we have seen, the IBC figure is selective in its sources, is the lowest estimate of eight serious studies, and relies on “professional rigour” in the Western media that does not exist.”

David Edwards and David Cromwell. “Paved with good intentions: Iraq Body Count Part 1”. Media Lens, January 26th 2006

3.1 What is IBC being measured against?

Stephen Soldz, an ally in Media Lens’ campaign and one of IBC’s most vocal critics, explains:

“... as the fighting has intensified and as other estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths have become available, IBC’s low-ball estimates have increasingly been used to mask the true magnitude of the

¹⁷ “Transcript: Iraq: The Future – Jack Straw, David Aaronovich, Lindsey German, Fareed Sabri, Reg Keys, Sue Smith, Bayan Sami Abdul-Rahman, Lord Tim Garden, Les Roberts, Douglas Murray and Humera Khan” http://www.britainusa.com/sections/articles_show_nt1.asp?d=0&i=41069&L1=&L2=&a=40113&pv=1

*suffering, rather than as a call for better, more precise estimates. Such misuses of the IBC figures could only be avoided, or at least reduced, if IBC took every opportunity to prominently call attention to the fact that their estimates are nothing but rock bottom figures, almost certainly far below the true mortality figures. Indeed, a September, 2005 report by the Humanitarian Practice Network, *Interpreting and using mortality data in humanitarian emergencies: A primer for non-epidemiologists*, lists seven studies from which estimates of violent civilian deaths in Iraq can be derived.*

Since each study covers a different period and length of time, the results are standardized as “violent deaths per day.” Of the seven studies, IBC has the lowest estimate, at 17 deaths per day, followed by 22 deaths per day estimated by the Iraqi Ministry of Health. Two studies produce estimates of 50 and 56 violent deaths per day. The Lancet study leads to an estimate of 101 violent deaths per day, while two other studies generate even higher estimates of 133 and 152 deaths per day. Thus, as suggested by our analysis, the IBC estimates are far below those from most other sources and cannot credibly be taken as being anything but rock-bottom minimums. [Thanks to Les Roberts for calling my attention to this report.]”¹⁸

Described as a “sensitivity analysis” comparing the effectiveness of various sources in measuring deaths in the Iraq war, the table ranking the seven “estimates” referred to above was compiled by Les Roberts and published in September, 2005 in Humanitarian Practice Network Paper no.52, (hereafter HPN 05)¹⁹, a publication of the British think tank, the Overseas Development Institute. This table repeats statements made in an earlier essay by Roberts for MIT’s Center for International Studies published in July, 2005 (MIT 05)²⁰, which has gained wider exposure through a republication on the progressive news-oriented website Altnet.org²¹.

The table as originally published in HPN 05 is titled “Estimates of violent deaths per day in occupied Iraq”, and is reproduced below as Table 1:

18 When Promoting Truth Obscures the Truth: More on Iraqi Body Count and Iraqi Deaths, Stephen Soldz, February 5, 2006. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=9660>

19 <http://odihpn.org/documents/networkpaper052.pdf>

20 http://web.mit.edu/cis/pdf/Audit_6_05_Roberts.pdf

21 <http://www.altnet.org/story/31508/>

Table 1 (facsimile of Table 6 in HPN 05, page 30)

Source	Date of information	Violent deaths per day implied
Iraq Body Count	3/1/03 – 2/1/05	17
Iraq Ministry of Health ⁶⁸	4/5/04 – 5/05	22
NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq (unpublished)	2004	50
Iraq Multiple Indicator Rapid Assessment (IMIRA) ⁶⁹	3/1/02 – 5/30/04	56
<i>Lancet</i> research (violent deaths only) ⁷⁰	3/1/03 – 9/21/04	101
Mental health study, 2004 ⁷¹	2003 – 2004	133
Iraqi Kaffi	3/03 – 10/03	152

The table (hereafter referred to as the HPN table) contains information on seven sources, as Soldz correctly states. Roberts and others quoting him regularly describe IBC as being the “lowest of eight” or elsewhere “at least eight” studies, but Roberts has to our knowledge never done more than **allude** to an eighth study in public. We deal in the main text only with the seven studies exposed to scrutiny in this table.²²

Unfortunately, the HPN table is so riddled with errors and inconsistencies as to make it hopelessly inadequate as a reliable comparison between the studies listed – and nor can it provide any credible basis for the sweeping critiques of IBC which directly or indirectly stem from it.

These are the most obvious problems:

3.2 IBC’s critics understate our death-rate by almost a factor of two

The IBC per-day death rate in the HPN table is given as 17, when it was in fact 32 for the time-frame in the table – an under-calculation of IBC’s per-day rate by almost 50%.

This factor of two error repeats the declaration in MIT 05 of “an oft-cited Iraqbodycount estimate of about 500 violent deaths per month in the entire

22 We believe the study alluded to may involve a figure of 128,000 deaths. We discuss it in Appendix 3.4.b after dealing with the sources in the HPN Table. However there are other sources that might have found their way into this table, but did not – e.g.:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,1073070,00.html> “Up to 15,000 people killed in invasion, claims thinktank”. Suzanne Goldenberg, *The Guardian*, 29 October, 2003. (Study by Project on Defense Alternatives, <http://www.comw.org/pda>)

<http://civilians.info/iraq/> “IRAQI CIVILIAN WAR CASUALTIES Covering the period of March 21 – July 31, 2003” Raed Jarrar, country director of CIVIC survey (<http://www.civicworldwide.org/>)

country" (17x30=510). Seen in this grossly mistaken light, IBC is only 11%, 13%, and 16% of three of the remaining six sources in the HPN table, lending credibility to Roberts' accompanying remarks in HPN 05 that "the IBC monitoring network cannot be more than 20% complete", as well as his oft-cited comment that IBC figures are "too low, most likely by a factor of five or ten."

These erroneous figures have been used as the basis of many claims about the extent of an IBC undercount, which claims are therefore equally in error. At our request the 17 deaths per-day error has now been corrected in the PDF version of HPN 05, but six months have elapsed since it first appeared, during which claims of our undercount based on this wrongly calculated "sensitivity analysis" have been insistently made and fairly widely circulated. The 500 per-month claim in MIT 05, as also repeated on Alternet, has not been corrected.

We are disappointed that so many vehement and otherwise energetic critics of IBC failed to take the trouble to check even this simple statistic, especially given the seriousness of the subject matter. It was left to us to prove this large and easily verified error to the authors before it was corrected in a revised version.²³

The version of the HPN table revised for April 2006 is reproduced as Table 2 and now reads as follows.

Table 2 (facsimile of Table 6 in HPN 05, page 30, corrected version, 2006).

Source	Date of information	Violent deaths per day implied
Iraq Ministry of Health ⁶⁸	5/4/04 – 5/05	22
Iraq Body Count	1/3/03 – 1/2/05	32
NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq (unpublished)	2004	50
Iraq Multiple Indicator Rapid Assessment (IMIRA) ⁶⁹	1/3/02 – 30/5/04	56
<i>Lancet</i> research (violent deaths only) ⁷⁰	1/3/03 – 21/9/04	101
Mental health study, 2004 ⁷¹	2003 – 2004	133
Iraqi Kaffi	3/03 – 10/03	152

As can be seen from Table 2, when this correction is made IBC is no longer "the lowest estimate", and IBC's per day rate becomes about one-fifth (rather than one-tenth) of even the table's highest entry. (It is only this corrected table that we discuss from here on when reference is made to "the HPN table").

But the problems with the HPN table go far beyond this single (albeit serious) error.

²³ We would like to particularly thank Francesco Checchi, a co-author of the HPN paper (though not of this section), for his help in this regard.

3.3 IBC's critics overlook that deaths-per-day vary over time

The average per-day rate figures provided in the HPN table take no account of the fact that death rates have varied greatly, with the result that the different per-day rates in the table cannot be directly compared to one another.

Even if all the studies were equally effective in recording deaths, they would produce different per day rates simply because they cover different periods – some, for instance, are concentrated around the massive slaughter of the invasion phase, while others miss it completely.

As an ongoing project which began a little before the March 2003 invasion, IBC is the only source which covers the entire time-frame. If the object is to draw conclusions about IBC then one can readily compare it to each of the other sources over the equivalent period.²⁴

When comparisons over the same date ranges are undertaken, rather than against an arbitrary one for IBC, the per-day death rates for IBC exceed that of one study (Ministry of Health), provides a rate exceeding half of two other studies, and provides a rate of at around one-third of the remaining studies (see Table 3 below). Thus, when like period is compared to like period there is no longer any comparison source for which IBC's number provides only one-fifth the number, let alone one-tenth.

24 A total for deaths throughout any period covered by IBC can be obtained by sorting the database at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database> by date (most recent first).

Table 3: IBC per-day rates compared to other sources in HPN Table

Comparison source as presented in HPN table			Iraq Body Count	
Date range	Source	"Violent deaths per day implied"	Reported violent deaths per day during the <i>same</i> period	As a percentage of comparison source
5 Apr 04–1 May 05	"Ministry of Health"	22	31	140%
1 Jan 2003–30 May 2004	"IMIRA"	56	34	61%
1 Jan 04 – 31 Dec 02	"NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq"	50	29	58%
1 Mar 2003 – 31 Oct 2003	"Iraqi Kaffi"	152	50	33%
1 Mar 2003 – 30 Sept 2004	"Lancet"	101	32	32%
2003 – 2004 [Mar 20, 2003 –Jan 1, 2004]*	"Mental health study, 2004"	133	41	31%

**For this calculation we used the date range between March 20, 2003 and January 1, 2004, for reasons explained in Appendix 3.4.2.a, although a much shorter date range could have been chosen (thereby leading to a higher IBC per-day rate as a result of the weighting of deaths towards the invasion phase).*

It can be seen from this that the claims made by Roberts, uncritically accepted and repeated by other critics, that "the IBC monitoring network cannot be more than 20% complete" and that IBC-derived totals are "too low, most likely by a factor of five or ten" cannot be sustained by the data he himself provides. If the highest of the estimates in the HPN table is a credible one (and we will examine that claim next) then the worst one can say of IBC from this only slightly more rigorous, but much fairer, analysis is that it is lower than some (but not all) other studies by a factor of two or three.

3.4 Three of the studies do not qualify as rigorous contributions

Three of the estimates in the HPN table do not stand up to even basic academic or technical scrutiny and must be removed from consideration.

3.4.1 “NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq”: a “personal communication”, and “unpublished”

We have searched in vain for any account besides Roberts’ of an “NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq” (NCCI) study estimating 50 violent deaths per day in Iraq. The closest it receives to a citation in HPN 05 or MIT 05 is that it is a “personal communication” from a member of staff – in HPN 05 it is simply described, in brackets, as “unpublished”, and apparently remains so to this day.

The NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq is indeed a respectable organisation. But Roberts provides no discussion whatsoever of the methods used. For all we know this number may combine openly-available data from IBC with information on combatant deaths from other sources.

Until someone puts citeable evidence of this study and its methods into the public domain, our conclusion is that NCCI as cited in MIT 05 (“personal communication”) and HPN 05 (“unpublished”) has no place in a table that purports to be a serious academic analysis of a subject as important as mortality estimates.²⁵

3.4.2 “Mental Health Study 2004”: not the source of “133 per day” estimate

The estimate of 133 violent deaths per day for the “Mental Health Study” is, according to Roberts, to be found in a paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM). In fact, nowhere in the cited paper is there any reference to an estimated per-day rate of violent deaths, whether 133 or any other number, and there is nothing in HPN 05 or MIT 05 to explain how this 133 per-day rate is derived.

It is deeply misleading to cite the undoubtedly “prestigious” NEJM as the source of a specific per-day mortality estimate. This false citation lends an entirely spurious credibility to un-stated and untested assumptions (we test some possible ones in Appendix 3.4.2.a and find them extremely wanting). The “Mental health study,

25 A series of publications focusing on the activity of anti-occupation forces from The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), authored by Anthony Cordesman and colleagues, has since late 2004 been making use of a “rough” set of statistics (not since updated) covering “insurgent” attacks between September 2003 and October 2004, and sourced to the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI). These provide a record of less than 10 Iraqi deaths per day. E.g. *The Developing Iraqi Insurgency: Status at End-2004*, December 22, 2004. (p. 4) http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/iraq_deviraqinsurgency.pdf

2004" estimate contained within the HPN table must, at the present time, be rejected as a properly defined contribution to the study of Iraqi mortality rates.²⁶

3.4.3 "Iraqi Kaffi/People's Kifah": no such study as described

The mis-spelled "Iraqi Kaffi" study in the HPN table refers to a report of 37,000 Iraqi civilian deaths from the "People's Kifah", a political group in Iraq, and is correctly cited as such in MIT 05. The table describes the study as covering the period from March to October 2003. This is indeed how it was reported on July 31, 2004 by the English language edition of *Aljazeera*:

An Iraqi political group says more than 37,000 Iraqi civilians were killed between the start of the US-led invasion in March 2003 and October 2003.

*The People's Kifah, or Struggle Against Hegemony, movement said in a statement that it carried out a detailed survey of Iraqi civilian fatalities during September and October 2003.*²⁷

The report then lists in detail the deaths recorded in various towns, eg., 6103 in Baghdad, 2009 in Mosul, and so on.

However, on August 21, 2003 the very same detailed town-by-town figures, as well as a total of 37,000 civilians killed, originating from the same political party and spokesperson, were published on the website of Jude Wanniski, a retired *Wall Street Journal* reporter. Wanniski reproduced in full an emailed communiqué from the party spokesperson which stated:

*The above figures were the actual civilian deaths killed violently since the beginning of the invasion of Iraq in March this year and until the middle of June (including those killed after the fall of Saddam's regime and who in a way of another caught between gunfire of the US troops and the Iraqi resistance).*²⁸

If we give preference to the unedited words of the spokesperson, then this survey covered the period from 20 March to mid-June 2003, not to October 2003. In any case, it is impossible for data published in August 2003 to have been collected in September and October 2003.

It is clear that neither Roberts nor the champions of his analysis are aware of the provenance of this report, which – if correctly cited – provides a rate of 422 (civilians-only) killed per day, not 152 as given in the HPN table. It is surprising that

26 See Appendix, 3.4.2.a

27 "Iraqi group: Civilian toll over 37,000". Al Jazeera, July 31, 2004. <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/66E32EAF-0E4E-4765-9339-594C323A777F.htm>

28 "Civilian War Deaths in Iraq", August 21, 2003. <http://www.wanniski.com/showarticle.asp?articleid=2855>

this survey should have been given such cursory treatment before being added to the table, particularly considering that it provides the table's highest entry.

Even if this date discrepancy is overlooked, full details of the survey's methodology (including reliability of data-gathering methods, checks for double and triple-counting etc.) have never been described. It is therefore not possible to give this survey the same weight as studies whose methodologies are clear and auditable.

We return to examine two of the above sources (namely, "Mental health" and "People's Kifah") for compatibility with other work in section 3.6, below. For discussion of the likely eighth study alluded to by Roberts, see Appendix 3.4.3.a.

The four studies which are shown in Table 4 below, Iraqi Ministry of Health, IBC, IMIRA (more often referred to as ILCS – standing for "Iraq Living Conditions Survey") and Lancet, are the only remaining sources which merit consideration as serious contributions to the understanding of Iraqi mortality totals (although even the Ministry of Health study has not been properly cited in the HPN table²⁹).

But problems remain. Another crucial difference concealed in the HPN table is that the sources **measure different categories of victim**.

3.5 Studies with different inclusion criteria are not directly comparable

It is unacknowledged by Roberts that some of the studies include combatants, or victims of crimes, and other categories not included by others. Therefore their per-day death rates are bound to differ.

Table 4

Study	"Violent deaths per day implied" (HPN 05)	Data include invasion-phase civilian deaths	Data include post-invasion phase civilian deaths	Data include invasion-phase Iraqi military deaths	Data include post-invasion phase combatant deaths	Data include victims of crime	Number of victim categories in study
Ministry of Health	22	no	yes	no	yes	no	2
IBC	32	yes	yes	no	no	yes	3
IMIRA (ILCS)	56	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	4
Lancet	101	yes	yes	no/yes*	yes	yes	4/5

*See section 3.7 below and note on Iraqi military in Lancet, Appendix 3.7.c.

29 See Appendix, 3.4.3.b.

Table 4 above shows the categories of deaths included in each of the four serious mortality studies available. The final column shows the number of different categories contained in each study. It is obvious that, as the number of categories of victim is increased, the total recorded or estimated deaths should also increase, along with the derived per-day rate. It is, therefore, to be expected that the Lancet (with 4/5 categories) will show the highest per-day rate of the four studies, that the Ministry of Health (with only 2 categories) will show the lowest per-day rate, leaving IBC and ILCS falling somewhere between these two extremes, in a rank order determined by the relative proportion of combatant deaths and deaths from crime.

In light of this, the particularly harsh light that critics shine on IBC (but not on Ministry of Health or ILCS) is hard to fathom. In a Media Lens-published email correspondence with a columnist for the Independent newspaper,³⁰ Les Roberts has claimed that the differences between Lancet and ILCS are largely explainable by differences in methodology, and that therefore they are broadly consistent with one another, pointing to a similar underlying phenomenon. If the substantial difference between the Lancet and ILCS estimate is not proof that ILCS is a “gross underestimate”, then there is no basis for applying a similar judgment to IBC.

3.6 Legitimate comparisons between studies and the strength of ILCS

ILCS, which improves on the Lancet survey in several respects, is strangely under-emphasised by Roberts, Media Lens and their followers.

One of the most extraordinary and inexplicable features of the debate about Iraqi mortality estimates is the almost total neglect by most commentators of the ILCS study in favour of the Lancet study.³¹

A simple comparison of the Lancet study and ILCS, both household cluster-sampling surveys, suggests that ILCS should be taken very seriously indeed. Table 5 below shows the main data that are relevant to a comparative assessment of the two studies, and Figure 1, further below, shows their effect on estimates drawn from the studies.

30 “BURYING THE LANCET – PART 1” Media Lens, September 5, 2005. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/05/050905_burying_the_lancet_part1.php

31 See Appendix, 3.6.a.

Table 5

Survey characteristics	Lancet study (Roberts et al.)	ILCS (IMIRA)
Number of clusters sampled	33	2,200
Number of households per cluster sampled	30	10
Total number of households sampled	990	22,000
Number of governorates sampled	10 out of 18 (11 if Anbar/Falluja included)	All 18
Sampling rate across the population	~ 1 in 3,000*	~ 1 in 200**
Number of violent deaths recorded	~ 21 (including 7 from crime)	~ 130 (only war-related)

*Survey assumed a population of 24.4 million

**Survey assumed a population of 27.1 million

The ILCS survey is superior to the Lancet's on sample size, geographical distribution of samples, and number of deaths recorded. As a result its 95% confidence intervals are far smaller. The confidence interval is the key indicator of the reliability of the study. ILCS has a confidence interval of 11,000 (end-points 8,000 – 194,000). Lancet has a confidence interval of 186,000 (end-points 8,000 – 194,000). All other things being equal, the central ILCS estimate of 24,000 to late Spring 2004 should be taken as the best available estimate of violent, conflict-related deaths to that point in time.

Given the high reliability of its estimate, ILCS can be quite confidently used as a test of other sources. Another source which includes fewer categories of deaths or spans a shorter period than ILCS but reports a higher number of people killed can be considered to almost certainly be an over-estimate. This description fits the two highest entries in the original HPN table we have already rejected for other reasons. "Mental health study", which was the second highest entry in the table, includes no combatants, spans a shorter time-frame, and includes only civilians killed by US ground forces. Yet its total of ~38,000 deaths is higher than the ILCS central estimate of 24,000 and well outside the ILCS confidence interval. Similarly the HPN table's highest entry, "People's Kifah", reported 37,000 deaths, despite this number's consisting solely of civilians killed over a much shorter period than is covered by ILCS, and can also be set aside on this basis.

Finally we may ask how two of the recognised studies compare to ILCS.

3.6.1 IBC compared to ILCS

Our earlier analysis has shown that IBC's figures are 61% of ILCS (see Table 3). However, there are two issues that remain:

1. **ILCS includes combatant deaths, while IBC does not.**
2. **IBC includes criminal murders, while ILCS does not.**

There is no reliable way to determine from ILCS data how many Iraqi combatants were killed, either during the invasion or after it. However, excess deaths from crime are recorded by IBC and can be removed from its figures. When these deaths are excluded, IBC's total for the same period is 10,593, or about 44 percent of the ILCS estimate. Even under the extremely conservative assumption that less than 3,000 of the ILCS total are combatants (including Iraqi military killed during the invasion), IBC has caught over half the ILCS estimate. So, when appropriately compared to ILCS, the worst one could say of IBC is that its count could be low by a factor of two, a far cry from factors of "five or ten."

3.6.2. Lancet compared to ILCS

Comparisons between the Lancet study and ILCS have been attempted in the past, one of the best-known being by British activist Milan Rai. His analysis concludes:

"If we crudely scale up the UNDP [IMIRA] figure to take account of the longer Lancet time period, we reach a figure (33,000) which is exactly the Lancet-derived figure of 33,000 violent deaths due to military action."³²

This widely cited conclusion is wrong, for at least two reasons.

First, the correct Lancet figure for combat-related violence is nearer 39,000 than 33,000. The incorrect 33,000 figure was calculated and published by a blogger named Tim Lambert, and accepted uncritically by Rai. But data from the Lancet study itself shows that only a third of 57,600 violent deaths were due to criminal activity, leaving 38,400 combat-related violent deaths. A later re-analysis of Lancet data by the Small Arms Survey placed this figure at 39,000.³³

Second, the correct ILCS figure is probably nearer 28,000 than 33,000. This is

32 "Iraq Mortality". Milan Rai, October 14, 2005. <http://iraqmortality.org/iraq-mortality>

33 These data are provided by a paper from the Small Arms Survey (2005) – "Behind the numbers: Small arms and conflict deaths" which, on the basis of the Lancet study and personal communications from Les Roberts, derives "an estimated 39,000 deaths" based on 13 "excess deaths" from non-criminal violence. <http://hei.unige.ch/sas/Yearbook%202005/full%20chapters/09%20Conflict%20Deaths.pdf>

because the per-day death rate in the post-invasion period was much lower than during the invasion. Averaging across the whole period, as Rai does, gives an unrealistically high per-day rate for the post-invasion months over which the scaling-up was applied. ILCS does not provide its own time-distribution of deaths, but our own recalculation, which applies the Lancet time-distribution to ILCS, yields a scaled-up total of 28,165.³⁴

When these two corrections are combined, it is revealed that the Lancet estimate remains some 10,000 (35%) above the scaled-up ILCS estimate. A roughly calculated 95% confidence interval for the scaled-up ILCS estimate is 21,570–34,750. The Lancet central estimate of 38,400 comparable deaths lies well above this interval. (Other calculations making arguably more conservative assumptions show even greater discrepancy between the central estimates of the two studies.)³⁵

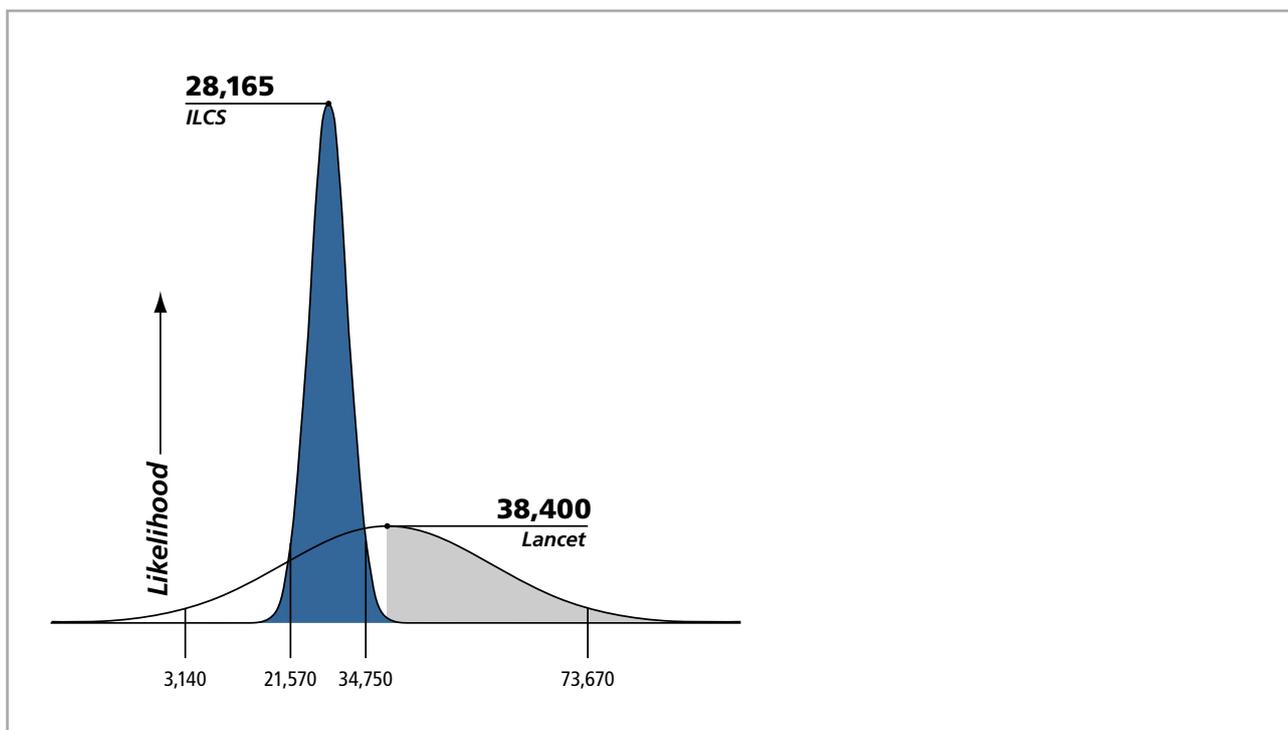


Figure 1: Probability density curves of Lancet and ILCS compared

Figure 1 displays the likelihood of all possible estimates for war-related violent deaths, for both Lancet and ILCS. The Lancet curve is relatively flat with a gentle peak at 38,400, spreading probabilities over a wide array of strongly diverging estimates ranging from 3,140 all the way up to 73,670 at 95% probability. By contrast, the sharp spike of the ILCS curve pinpoints the true number of war deaths within a narrow range near 28,165. It has been argued that the true number for

34 See Appendix, 3.6.2.a.

35 See Appendix, 3.6.2.b.

war-related violent deaths was likely higher than the number given in Lancet's central estimate,³⁶ but the ILCS data only allows for a one in a thousand chance that the true number lies within the upper half of the Lancet range (the area shaded in grey).³⁷

3.7 Needless confusion on the civilian/combatant question

One area of particularly needless confusion over an important issue is whether the Lancet study is an estimate of civilian deaths or includes combatants. Although usually ascribed to media misinterpretation of the report,³⁸ the confusion actually arises from contradictory statements made by its authors.

In the Lancet paper the authors clearly state that the study did not attempt to exclude any deaths, and straightforwardly acknowledge that:

“Many of the Iraqis reportedly killed by US forces could have been combatants.” (p.1863)

However, writing in MIT 05, Les Roberts himself refers throughout only to civilians, titling the piece “Do Iraqi civilian casualties matter?” and introducing his study as follows:

“The resulting report, published in the British medical journal, The Lancet, estimated around 100,000 and possibly far more civilians have died because of the invasion.”

Statements of this sort have been repeated widely. Media Lens themselves have added to the confusion by erroneously insisting that the Lancet figures contains only civilians.³⁹

Are there any grounds for believing that the Lancet study recorded only civilian deaths? It is theoretically possible that a study which doesn't deliberately exclude combatants has nonetheless recorded only civilians. This could be particularly so in a study which recorded no more than 14 people killed as a result of war-related violence (21 violent deaths less 7 criminal murders). But, on several occasions on the public record, Les Roberts and his co-authors⁴⁰ have themselves made it clear

36 See Appendix, 3.6.2.c.

37 These figures are produced assuming that both curves follow normal distributions with 95% confidence intervals as specified within the two studies. The curves are probability density functions, i.e., the probability of any range of estimates, according to either Lancet or ILCS, is simply the area under the corresponding curve within this range. (We would like to thank Óscar Becerra of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC), for his assistance with Figure 1.)

38 See Appendix, 3.7.a.

39 See Appendix, 3.7.b.

40 “[Gilbert] Burnham acknowledged the study makes no effort to sort out combatants from

that there is no certainty on this matter: e.g.,

“I had the chance to present these results to about 30 officers from the Pentagon who were respectful, skeptical, and asked great questions at the end. For example, how did I know that these deaths weren’t combatants? (Answer: I didn’t, but most deaths were women and children so I suspect the majority were not.)”

Les Roberts, October 2005.⁴¹

Even if an exact breakdown cannot always be obtained,⁴² the issue of civilians vs. combatants killed in a conflict is one of the central concerns of war related mortality studies. The “majority” is not “all”, and an author cannot just say it is when it suits him. Such casual treatment of the subject as displayed by Roberts and his supporters does public understanding a disservice.⁴³

3.8 Conclusion: In sum, a baseless charge.

When like is compared with like, and blatant errors and misconceptions in the HPN table are corrected, IBC falls very much into the same range as the other serious studies. Indeed, there is no more reason to characterise IBC as a “gross undercount” of civilians violently killed than there is to call the Lancet study a “gross over-estimate” of deaths from combat.

It is not “probable” that IBC, which counts the dead and doesn’t estimate them, is at present an undercount: it is almost inevitable that it will be so, as we have insisted since our project began. But it is neither a fact, nor “likely”, nor “probable”, that this undercount misrepresents reality by a “factor of five or ten”,⁴⁴ or any other large factor arrived at by our critics via ill-informed speculation or an error-filled and unexamined “sensitivity analysis”.

civilians. It simply looked at total mortality.” “Counting the cost of Iraq War.” Peter Roper, Pueblo Chieftain, March 27, 2006. <http://www.chieftain.com/metro/1143442927/4>

41 “100,000 deaths in Iraq: A year later”. Les Roberts, October 26, 2005. <http://www.afsc.org/iraq/news/2005/10/100000-deaths-in-iraq-year-later.htm>

42 A large part of the difference between IBC’s Min and Max figure for reported civilian deaths results from uncertainty over the civilian status of the dead.

43 See Appendix, 3.7.c.

44 See Appendix, 3.8.a.

4 Does IBC under-represent deaths caused by US forces?

We have examined backward-looking critiques of IBC which misrepresented its effectiveness in the past. We now turn to conjectures about IBC's effectiveness in the present and in particular, whether its numbers show a "massive bias" towards under-reporting of deaths caused specifically by US forces.

One of these conjectures is based on a false, but widely accepted, claim derived from the Lancet study that more than 80 percent of violent deaths by September 2004 were caused directly by US forces, nearly all through air strikes and artillery. This belief was created by misleading statements from the Lancet's authors, and can easily be demonstrated to be false.

The other conjecture begins with the premise that some sizeable number of "mass killings" from the air "most certainly" must (not may or might) have occurred over a period in 2005, based on the number of US air strikes, but without attempting to determine what number of deaths these air strikes might be expected to produce, nor how many of these might be expected to be civilian.

Because IBC fails to confirm these two conjectures – one false to begin with, the other tenuous – our critics conclude that IBC is at fault, rather than questioning their own unfounded conjectures. We deal with these two conjectures in turn.

4.1 Lancet shows a similar proportion of US-caused deaths to IBC

When outlier data is excluded, as it was claimed to have been by the authors, Lancet's estimate shows 43 percent of deaths to have been directly caused by US-led forces, as compared to IBC's 47 percent over the same period.

In MIT 05 Roberts states that

"The resulting report, published in the British medical journal, The Lancet, estimated around 100,000 and possibly far more civilians have died because of the invasion. Our study was based on 988 household interviews in 33 randomly picked neighborhoods from across the entire country, and covered the period between on the beginning of the war (March 2003) and September 2004.

Most disturbing and certain about the results is that more than 80 percent of violent deaths were caused by U.S. forces [our emphasis] and that most of the people they killed were women and children."

The same breakdown is provided in more specific detail by the Johns Hopkins

University press release (regularly quoted by Media Lens and followers in their email campaigns) which accompanied the launch of the Lancet report, and reads:

*“The researchers compared the mortality rate among civilians in Iraq during the 14.6 months prior to the March 2003 invasion with the 17.8 month period following the invasion. The sample group reported 46 deaths prior to the March 2003 and 142 deaths following the invasion. The results were calculated twice, both with and without information from the city of Falluja. The researchers felt the excessive violence from combat in Falluja could skew the overall mortality rates. **Excluding information from Falluja, they estimate that 100,000 more Iraqis died than would have been expected had the invasion not occurred. Eighty-four percent of the violent deaths were reported to be caused by the actions of Coalition forces and 95 percent of those deaths were due to air strikes and artillery [our emphasis].**”⁴⁵*

The above quotes from Roberts and Johns Hopkins University appear to relate the figure of 84 percent of violent deaths to the violent deaths in the 100,000 estimate, which is how they have been widely understood. However this interpretation is mathematically impossible if, as stated, this is a percentage “excluding information from Falluja.”

The only way for US-caused deaths to predominate is if “information from Falluja” is **included** – and the only way they can amount to 84 percent of violent deaths, where 95 percent are from air strikes and artillery, is if the Falluja data is included in its **entirety**.⁴⁶

It should be appreciated that Falluja was excluded from the Lancet “excess mortality” estimate for sound scientific reasons. Falluja was an extremely unusual cluster (a classic “outlier”) relative to the rest of the country. For instance, there were twice as many violent deaths in the sample for this one Falluja neighbourhood as in the other 32 combined, and nearly six times as many deaths caused by US forces as elsewhere.

Roberts has described the exclusion of the Falluja cluster from the national estimate as “extremely conservative”, but its inclusion would have drastically reduced an already imprecise survey’s precision, providing an even more uncertain

45 “Iraqi Civilian Deaths Increase Dramatically After Invasion”. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (Press Release), October 28, 2004. http://www.jhsph.edu/PublicHealthNews/Press_Releases/PR_2004/Burnham_Iraq.html

46 The calculation is simple enough: 61 people were recorded killed by US forces altogether, including those killed in Falluja. This is 83.56 percent of all 73 post-invasion violent deaths recorded by Lancet (Table 2 p.1860). Of these 61 people killed by US-forces, three were killed by small arms fire and the remaining 58 “by helicopter gunships, rockets, or other forms of aerial weaponry” (p.1863, col.2). Fifty-eight is 95.08 percent of 61.

central estimate of ~285,000 deaths⁴⁷ than the published ~100,000. It would have required that about 1 in 100 Iraqis were violently killed in the 18 months prior to September 2004, more than two hundred thousand of them by US forces, nearly all by air strikes and artillery.⁴⁸

Any Falluja-inclusive estimate would also conflict drastically with other data, including the findings of ILCS.⁴⁹ Indeed, addition of all but a tiny fraction of the Falluja figures would push Lancet-derived estimates further beyond the generally convergent figures found across the four serious studies. It may have been possible, at the time of publication, to think of the Falluja sample as perhaps representing other high-violence areas passed over in the geographically limited Lancet sample. However, this position became untenable with the publication of ILCS in Spring 2005 because it sampled all of Iraq, including these areas, much more completely than the Lancet survey and found nothing so dramatic.

No argument has been presented in a peer-reviewed context as to why ~285,000 deaths may be considered a credible, let alone a “certain” estimate for country-wide excess deaths. It is hard, therefore, to see how Roberts can be “certain” that “more than 80 percent of violent deaths were caused by U.S. forces”. The latter claim depends entirely on the former.⁵⁰

What is the true proportion of coalition-caused deaths which can be derived from the Lancet study, when the Falluja data is excluded?

Of the 98,000 Lancet-estimated deaths applicable to the entire country outside Falluja, 57,600 were violent. Forty-three percent of the violent deaths were caused

47 The figure of 285,000 is from Roberts: *“Please understand how extremely conservative we were: we did a survey estimating that ~285,000 people have died due to the first 18 months of invasion and occupation and we reported it as at least ~100,000.”* BURYING THE LANCET – PART 1. September 5, 2005. http://medialens.org/alerts/05/050905_burying_the_lancet_part1.php

48 There are 24,000 “excess” deaths from accidents and ~14,000 from diseases in the Lancet study. Subtracting these from Roberts’ Falluja-inclusive ~285,000 estimate gives a violence-specific figure of about 240,000 Iraqi deaths (1 in 100 of a Lancet-estimated population of 24.4 million). Of these, 202,000 (84 percent of 240,000) would have to have been killed by US forces, 192,000 (95 percent) of them by air strikes and artillery.

49 The deaths that Falluja would have introduced into the Lancet estimate would have been almost entirely war-related deaths as also measured by ILCS. The estimate for these deaths to 25 May 2004, when the ILCS fieldwork ended, was 24,000. This means that the ~200,000 additional deaths of any Falluja-inclusive Lancet estimate would need to have occurred in the four months between ILCS and 21 September, when Lancet’s fieldwork was completed.

50 The same applies to another oft-repeated Roberts claim of a “robust” finding of “a 58-fold increase in death from violence, making it the main cause of death.” This can only be true if the Falluja data is treated as representative and included in full in a “~285,000” estimate. <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673605718675/fulltext#bib5> (free registration required)

by US forces, 67 percent of them by air strikes.⁵¹

Taking this legitimate percentage of national deaths by US forces and air strikes as determined by the Lancet study, we may now make a proper comparison with IBC.

In IBC's 2005 "Dossier of Civilian Casualties", which analysed media-reported deaths up to March 19, 2005, the proportion of deaths definitely attributable to coalition forces was 37 percent, 85 percent of these involving air-strikes (though not necessarily exclusively). This is not hugely discrepant from the Lancet estimate.

However, the date range in the two year IBC dossier is greater than that in the Lancet by some 6 months. Re-analysing the IBC data using the same date range as in the Lancet study yields a percentage of deaths attributable to coalition forces of 47 percent (8,814 out of 18,822 media-reported civilian deaths), a proportion slightly higher than Lancet's 43 percent.

In sum, when properly analysed, IBC and Lancet show broadly comparable proportions of deaths attributable to coalition forces, of between 40 and 50 percent for the time period of the Lancet study, and in both cases the majority of killings by US-led forces were caused by or involved air strikes.

4.2 Reported casualties for 2005 correlate to the number of air strikes

The level of air strikes post-invasion are far below the invasion phase, and reported casualty rates are correspondingly lowered.

Some IBC critics have introduced one more factor in support of the claim that IBC is a massive undercount. They claim that the media are seriously under-reporting deaths caused by US air strikes, particularly during 2005, and that IBC therefore mirrors this omission. Here is how Media Lens editors David Edwards and David Cromwell argue this:

"In December 2005, Associated Press reported that the US Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps had "flown thousands of missions in support of US ground troops in Iraq this fall with little attention back home, including attacks by unmanned Predator aircraft

51 The 98,000 excess deaths estimate contains 57,600 violent deaths, generated from a total of 21 reported violent deaths in their sample outside Falluja. The study reports that seven of these were criminal murders, two were caused by anti-coalition forces, and two were of unknown origin, which leaves at most ten that could have been caused by US forces – that is, less than half. On closer examination of the study we find that 61 people in the Lancet sample were reported killed by US forces, of whom 52 were killed in Falluja, leaving only nine who could have been killed elsewhere. Nine as a proportion of 21 is 43%. (Table 2, p.1860, and p.863 col. 2)

armed with Hellfire missiles, military records show”.... (‘Air Power Strikes Iraq Targets Daily,’ Associated Press, December 20, 2005) The aircraft included frontline attack planes. The number of airstrikes increased in the weeks leading up to the December 2005 election, from a monthly average of 25 in the first half of the year to more than 60 in September and 120 or more in October And yet, when we checked, the first 18 pages of the IBC database, covering the period between July 2005 and January 2006, contained just six references to helicopter attacks and airstrikes killing civilians.

“...the dramatic absence of examples of mass killing by US-UK forces suggests that the low IBC toll of civilian deaths in comparison with other studies is partly explained by the fact that examples of US-UK killing are simply not being reported by the media or recorded by IBC. Visitors to the site – directed there by countless references in the same media that have acted as sources – are being given a very one-sided picture of who is doing the killing.

“Given that the Lancet reported extremely high civilian casualties from airstrikes and artillery attacks, where are the civilians killed by the vast numbers of US airstrikes in 2005 ... ?”⁵²

We do not rule out the possibility of significant numbers of unreported civilian casualties of US military actions, as we made perfectly clear in responding to queries from Media Lens.⁵³ However, Media Lens simply begin with the premise that, in the first six months of 2005, there must have been some sizeable number of air strikes that each caused 10 or more (civilian) deaths, which they refer to as “mass killings”. While this is possible, it is highly speculative, and not at all certain.

Les Roberts contributed some of his own speculations about air strikes in a July 2005 interview, just after the period covered by Media Lens’ “test” of IBC. He had this to say:

“Someone in a think-tank in Washington called me up, must be two months ago, and said he had been speaking with some Senate staffers and they were all convinced that the Americans have cut way back on their use of airpower in urban settings as a result of our study, because they felt they were quite embarrassed and they weren’t sure it was wrong. And I sent an email to my colleague in Baghdad, Riyadh Lafta, and said do you think this is true? And he wrote back and said, you know, here on the ground, we have no idea out there, but my guess is it probably is true. No one’s talking

52 “PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS – IRAQ BODY COUNT – PART 2” Media Lens, January 26, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060126_paved_with_good_part2.php

53 See Appendix 4.2.a

*about helicopter gunships and bombs anymore. So it may be that our study has done what we most hoped it would: prevent Iraqi civilians who are non-combatants from being killed. And we may never know that, or we may not know that for five more years.”*⁵⁴

We don't know where the truth lies among these speculations about air strike deaths in this period of 2005, but then neither do the Editors of Media Lens, contrary to their premise.

Leaving the realm of conjecture, we may test this claim in a more rigorous fashion by making more detailed comparisons between known casualty and air strike numbers.

The Associated Press (AP) wire article⁵⁵ cited in the Media Lens quote above also contains the following reminder:

“Those [2005] figures pale in comparison to the aerial onslaught that was unleashed at the start of the war in March 2003”

This can be confirmed from the documentary record. During the first month of the invasion, according to official figures, there were 20,733 air strikes,⁵⁶ an average of 691 per day. The total number of reported air strikes for the whole of 2005 is 654 (according to reports in the Washington Post and London Times which improve on the detail in the AP report cited by Media Lens).⁵⁷

Thus there were more air strikes in a single day of the invasion phase than in the whole of 2005.

How many people were killed as a result of the 20,733 air strikes during the first 30 days of the war? Data provided in the Lancet paper (whose reported deaths are broken down on a month-by-month basis) allow one estimate to be calculated. This would suggest around 9,200 deaths,⁵⁸ that is to say, about 4 deaths for every 9 air strikes.

If this ratio were maintained into 2005, then 654 air strikes would be expected to cause around 290 deaths. IBC has recorded 185 (civilian) deaths from air strikes during 2005.

If these extrapolations are reasonable, then we may have missed 100 of these

54 Les Roberts, interviewed on NPR's "Worldview", Chicago, July 25, 2005. (Audio segment: 29'35") http://www.chicagopublicradio.org/DWP_XML/wv/2005_07/wv_20050725_1300_5220/segment_224220.ram

55 "U.S. Air Power Strikes Iraq Targets Daily". Robert Burns, Associated Press, December 20, 2005. <http://www.military.com/NewsContent/0,13319,83349,00.html>

56 'The Gulf War II Air Campaign, by the Numbers', Robert S. Dudley, Air Force Magazine, July 2003. <http://www.afa.org/magazine/july2003/0703Numbers.pdf>

57 See Appendix, 4.2.b.

58 See Appendix, 4.2.c.

deaths. A discrepancy of this sort, or even one several times greater, is not on such a scale as to justify the sweeping claims made by our critics that IBC provides “a very one-sided picture of who is doing the killing.” Neither, for that matter, is this discrepancy of a scale that would be visible to a sample survey such as Lancet’s.

Do these calculations provide a definitive account of the number of civilians killed by air strikes in post-invasion Iraq?⁵⁹ Of course they do not, but they are at least performed with reference to some relevant known data, and therefore provide a better guide than provided by any of our critics.

While it is probable that media reports currently undercount the civilian deaths caused by air strikes to some unknown extent, there is no clear evidence that they under-report these deaths more than any other category of violent death. If anything, under-reporting is more likely in those less “spectacular” unrecorded killings caused by occupation troops on a small scale, but frequent basis (such as at checkpoints), and also in those cases where the perpetrator is unknown.

4.3 Conclusion: IBC “cover-up” conjectures are without foundation

The claims that we are assisting a cover-up of US-caused Iraqi deaths by underrepresenting deaths from air strikes are no more than unproven conjectures. During the period of the Lancet study, IBC was reporting a higher proportion of coalition-caused deaths (47 percent) than was found in Lancet’s central estimate (43 percent) for the war in the whole of Iraq. More recently, there is no systematic data source against which IBC can be meaningfully compared, and so claims of a cover-up are speculative in the extreme, and certainly do not merit the wild and offensive accusations which have been levelled at us, and at the many press and media organisations and courageous reporters from whom our data is derived

⁵⁹ See Appendix, 4.2.d.

5 There are no “gross errors” that IBC needs to correct.

In one of their “Alerts”, Media Lens Editors David Cromwell and David Edwards state:

“It is remarkable that IBC – a deeply flawed website – has acquired this kind of reputation among journalists. In a recent article for the website AlterNet, Les Roberts wrote that the estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 civilian deaths commonly cited in the American press are too low, “most likely by a factor of five or ten”...

Only one conclusion can be drawn: that the journalists citing the IBC figures have not studied the IBC database and so have not seen the massive bias and gaps in reported deaths.”⁶⁰

There is another conclusion that can be drawn: that our critics have failed to see the biases and gaps in the positions which they so confidently promote as certain truth, and which would have easily been revealed by the exercise of some of that “professional rigour” which they assume is absent from the work of those they criticise. A less partisan and loaded approach to IBC might also have allowed them to enter into a constructive debate with us rather than a destructive public confrontation.

IBC’s work is not perfect, and neither is our website. We started our work with little conception of what would be involved, and no idea that our work would intensify continuously over the three years our project has been in existence. Our small volunteer workforce has been constantly taxed by the relentless inflow of press and media reports that need to be scanned, archived and analysed, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.

In the gaps between our basic tasks, we do what we can to update, improve, and explain our work, through the editorial content on our website, and in some cases, in direct cooperation with news organizations, guiding them on how to appropriately present IBC and its numbers.⁶¹

But this non-urgent work has always had to take second place to our primary data gathering tasks, and the continual updating of the database.

We cannot be held responsible for every misunderstanding or misuse of our data, deliberate or otherwise, given the hundreds if not thousands of sources that continue to use it. It lies well beyond the power of IBC to prevent politicians from lying, pundits from spinning the facts, or journalists from missing a qualifier about

60 “IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND” Media Lens, 14 March, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060314_iraq_body_count.php

61 See Appendix 5.a. for a case where Media Lens take credit for “(limited) progress” on a BBC web page produced in collaboration with IBC. The carefully-worded caveats on the web page were in place one month before the first Media Lens “Alert” on IBC.

our work. Nor, quite obviously, can we prevent external web pages which don't use our live-updating web counters from carrying out-dated IBC data. But we do at least try not to misunderstand or misrepresent it ourselves, and use careful phrasing in our communications and interviews to avert this where possible. The same cannot be said of some of our critics, as we have shown.

One example of the failure of our critics to check their facts comes in recent bouts of self-congratulation in which they take credit for "concessions" forced from IBC in the wording of our website and web counters "begrudgingly" emphasising that our numbers refer to reported civilian deaths. In fact the features they refer to have all been in place, unchanged, since 2003 and 2004.⁶²

Another example of failure to check basic facts comes in defamatory insinuations that we do not use non-Western or "Iraqi/Arab" media sources because of racist bias that means we don't consider them "credible".⁶³ Yet even a quick glance at our sources list reveals that we use many English-language versions of non-Western media sources on the Web. (Perhaps our critics have failed to notice that even relatively small non-Western media communicate regularly and effectively in English.)

A disturbing lack of care also infects the tactics and goals of Media Lens and its allies. It is "remarkable" indeed that IBC, the only organisation providing a continuing tally of Iraqi deaths, should be targeted and pressured to cease operation by members of a pressure group which aligns itself with the peace movement, just as post-war violence reaches unprecedented levels.

The purpose of this article has largely been to dispel myths and rumours fed by a misconceived campaign that cannot countenance the possibility that a media-based project like IBC's could provide anything but a distortion of reality, rather than – as a more sensible assessment might have it – a valuable if incomplete insight into it. We earlier summed up the scope of that insight in a few brief words in a presentation given to fellow researchers into conflict-related mortality and estimation methods:

"Assuming even the most pessimistic outturn for violent civilian deaths, our database must include a substantial proportion of all victims, certainly not less than 25%, probably significantly more than half."

John Sloboda and Hamit Dardagan, "On Iraq Body Count", Section 6.0.⁶⁴

There is some value in integrating incomplete or imprecise information from a

62 "IBC : "concessions" to critics, begrudgingly, and by stealth, but little clarity". Media Lens message post by "bern", March 30, 2006..

63 See Appendix, 5.b. Also see our "On IBC" presentation at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/onibc/>, slide 4.1.

64 Geneva, February 17, 2006. Online version released March 15, 2006. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/onibc/>

variety of sources. For the moment, that is the best that can be done. But this is no substitute for the properly funded, original research that will be required to arrive at a full accounting of the human cost of the “military solution” for Iraq. If the deaths of the victims of 9-11 can be honoured by the most complete listing possible, then why not the deaths of the victims of the Iraq war?⁶⁵

In the meantime, pointing to differences between existing inadequate studies in order to assert the superiority of one method and one study over others is the least productive activity that can take place.

When fundamental flaws in our analyses or interpretations are brought to our attention, we do, of course, attempt to prioritise their correction. However, we have demonstrated in this article that our critics have established no serious errors which require the kind of urgent action which they demand. Nor does anything we have done merit the charge that we are “amateurs”, a charge that has been freely broadcast in an attempt to discredit our work and the individual members of our team. The details of these further unsavoury developments are footnoted for those who care to track them.⁶⁶

We will continue to improve our web site, as and when we are able, and taking into account all valid criticism. But we will not do this based on the priorities and timescale demanded by uninformed and histrionic critics.

65 See sections 7 and 8 of IBC editorial, Feb 2004. http://www.iraqbodycount.org/editorial_feb0704.php

66 See Appendix, 5.c.

6 Getting back to the really important issues

“As the death toll in Iraq continues to grow, one question haunting the debate over the Iraqi chaos is the scale of this loss. Supporters of the continuing war seek to confuse and obscure the issue by presenting existing estimates as in conflict with each other. However, when we examine the best-known Iraq mortality estimates, we find that they tend to support rather than contradict each other. All known estimates agree that the death rate in Iraq, especially the rate of violent death, has increased dramatically since the invasion in March 2003. They all indicate that number of ‘excess deaths’ (deaths that would not have occurred if not for the war) is staggeringly high.”

Source: NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI), November 13, 2005.⁶⁷

We feel a deep disappointment that so many of our natural allies in the fight to bring peace and justice to Iraq have had their energies diverted into supporting concerted and baseless attacks on the work of the Iraq Body Count project and its personnel.

The vast majority of these attacks are premised on highly questionable speculations about the total number of Iraqis killed, placing far more weight on such speculations than on the undeniable details of recorded victims such as those appearing in the IBC database

Widely promulgated beliefs that the total number of Iraqis killed to date approach 300,000 in fact rest on crude extrapolations into the future from one estimate published in one of four available serious studies, the Lancet study. Maintaining such beliefs requires that the three other serious studies and their data-sources be set aside, and requires uncritical acceptance of all the claims made by Lancet author Les Roberts in a range of recent publications and “on record” statements.

In fact, as we have regrettably had to show, many of the key assertions made by Roberts are incorrect or misleading, and based on a mixture of elementary calculation errors, mis-citations, and errors of interpretation which, because of the high respect in which the original Lancet study is held, appear to have been uncritically accepted and promulgated by many of those who share our abhorrence for the damage the USA and its allies have wreaked on the Iraqi people.

Acceptance of bald assertions without proper critical scrutiny is always dangerous. It is doubly dangerous when such assertions are endorsed and repeated by individuals who have reputations for critical acumen (whether as intellectuals, or investigative journalists). This does not progress the cause of truth and justice.

⁶⁷ See Appendix, 6.a.

How is truth and justice best pursued for the victims of the vast miscarriage of justice that is the Iraq intervention?

We have consistently argued, from the outset of our work, that the efforts of independent fact-finders (whether based in universities, media organisations, NGOs, or in informal civil society networks) are simply stop-gaps for the properly-funded and coordinated study which only governments have the level of funds to resource, and the level of authority to commission.

The best that independent or survey studies (of the kind carried out by Lancet or IBC) can achieve, is to serve as a thorn in the side of those who would prefer that attention was placed elsewhere.

We remain such a thorn by constantly keeping the tragedy of the ever-mounting innocent death toll in the eye of the public, and in the face of those who could, if they chose, decide to do something about it.

Those who have the interests of this war's victims at heart should be collaborating on projects which bring us closer to the full truth and which work towards righting the wrongs that have been suffered.

We live in an information age. If we cannot muster all the resources at our disposal to discover and record the massive human impact of perhaps the greatest single military injustice perpetrated this century, then all our "information technology" counts for nothing. But in fact there are already many brave and hard-working people doing what they can to bring knowledge and understanding of this man-made disaster to the world. They, like us, work in an imperfect world with imperfect means. At IBC we do what we can to ensure that their efforts – all too often punished by tragedy – are collected, preserved, and given additional value as contributions to a bigger and increasingly detailed picture of the consequences of the Bush/Blair war on Iraqis.

Even if the conflict ended today, that picture would continue to emerge for decades to come. No one method or means will capture it completely. The truth emerges slowly – there is no magic means by which it will suddenly be exposed in its entirety. Some methods will reveal things hidden to others. We may reject those that are patently inappropriate, but never without due care.

But to put our faith in speculation is to give up before we've properly begun.

Appendix

2.a

Two examples of Media Lens' successful lobbying of peace groups are Stopwar.org (STW) and Irishantiwar.org:

"Dear STW

I notice that amongst your UK sites described as alternative to the corporate media, you list IBC. You must be aware that IBC has refused to engage with a number of criticism made of it's methodology which add up to the following in political terms.

- 1. A completely misleading view of civilian casualties*
- 2. A failure to repudiate the unscrupulous quotation of its low casualty count by the corporate media and politician, for example Jack Straw.*

I'd like to know whether STW has any statement on this. Also whether you have considered withdrawing your recommendation to IBC web side.

*Yours against the war on Iraq
"Bern"*

"Dear Bern

We have removed the IBC link from our web page.

*Best wishes,
Robin Beste*

"Stop the War Coalition"

"Stop The War Remove Iraq Body Counter" – title of post by Media Lens Editors to their public message board, reproducing the above exchange. March 28, 2006.

Also see "Why does Irishantiwar.org still have the Iraq Body Count on their home page?" <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/75331>

Irishantiwar.org responded to the Media Lens campaign by removing the IBC web counter, and replacing it with:

"250,000+ Number of Iraqis civilians killed by the war"

The stated source for this information repeats some of the errors we address in this paper ("U.S. invasion responsible deaths of over 250,000 civilians in Iraq". John Stokes (undated). <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article11674.htm>)

2.1.a

The Media Lens articles were so tendentious, careless, and condescending in tone that our initial reaction was to ignore the authors' largely rhetorical challenges and carry on with our work. We answered a flood of emails prompted by these "Alerts" by pointing correspondents to other viewpoints on IBC and assuring

them that we were taking all criticisms on board, and would implement those we considered valid. But we resolutely refused to rise to the Media Lens bait and become embroiled in a public row with what we imagined should be an allied organisation.

Unfortunately this merely prompted Media Lens to step up their campaign and begin portraying IBC as not just incompetent dupes, but also irresponsible for refusing to "engage" with them on their terms ("IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND" etc.). We had, it seems, failed to respond appropriately to the Media Lens Editors "injecting a sense of moral urgency" in us.

Media Lens' proclaimed intention "to initiate a rational debate on issues that could hardly be more serious" with IBC is hardly sustainable in the light of tactics employed on the moderated message-board whose content they control. Much of the anti-IBC hysteria has been whipped up via this board, partly by means of the Editors' practice of posting a steady stream of emailed denunciations of IBC while delaying, suppressing or deleting expressions of support.

One poster noted the charged atmosphere on the message board and commented:

"Maybe [IBC] just don't believe anything needs to change.

I don't think I can presume to tell anyone what their moral responsibilities are... but I would suggest that perhaps we have done this debate to the point where the personal insults are rising, and actual meaningful debate is dropping.

Let's leave this whole thing alone for a while, what do you say?"

Posted by user "Aly", April 7, 2006.

This received the following response from the editors:

"It's not possible to "leave this whole thing alone for a while" – politicians and journalists are doing anything but. They are working flat out, relentlessly, to obscure from the public the reality of the horror that is being inflicted on Iraq. To the extent that they are successful, that suffering will continue and intensify – to the extent that the public is aware and protests, that suffering will be reined in and may eventually be terminated. To the extent that they are successful, further horrors inflicted on countries like Iran, Syria and Venezeula become very much more likely. The stakes could hardly be higher."

Such hyperbole has been typical of this Media Lens campaign, which has strenuously sought to associate IBC with all manner of nefarious wrongdoing **without ever establishing any actual harm we have done the anti-war cause.**

Indeed, we have ourselves observed one instance of a vigorous challenge to the Media Lens Editor's treatment of IBC being promptly deleted from their board:

"The problem is hypocrisy"

“You eds really ought to be ashamed of yourselves for this latest fallacy.

Basically your rubishing of [IBC member] Josh is based on his ability to play a musical instrument.

The hypocrisy is borne out of the fact that you yourselves refuse to accept that your lack of journalistic experience or expertise fails to disqualify you from commenting on the corporate media.

I am well used to the double standards here. Removing posts from Josh while failing to rein in Gabriele’s ill-mannered, ignorant and patronising posts.

However, even you the editors must be able see the basic irrationality of your position.

Moreover, as you have yet to provide an honest answer as to whether you can prove that IBC has harmed the anti-war movement, you are in no position to chide others about lack of responses.

Yours in absolute disgust.

“Eamon”

Posted by Eamon Brennan [not associated with or known to anyone in IBC] on April 9, 2006.

The post above was in reply to a spurious argument by the Editors that Josh was unqualified to correct a misattribution because he is not a “scientist”. It was deleted by the Media Lens Editors on the same day it was posted.

Perhaps the most prolific emailer associated with the Media Lens campaign is one Gabriele Zamparini, who operates his own blog and regularly takes media outlets and websites to task for their use of IBC data. Occasionally Zamparini will spot genuine errors in usage and so is justified in requesting corrections – however his suggested replacement material itself contains errors such as those we expose in this paper. And like the Media Lens Editors, Zamparini is apt to indulge in wildly overblown rhetoric on the subject of IBC:

“The damage that Iraq Body Count’s figures have done is huge, terrifying and shocking.”

(“Silence kills and silence is complicity – a ‘follow-up’”. April 14, 2006. http://www.thecatsdream.com/blog/2006/04/silence-kills-and-silence-is_14.htm)

Zamparini further resembles the Media Lens Editors in dodging requests that he support such startling claims with quantifiable evidence of actual “damage” done by IBC: <http://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=8579803&postID=114501196894343349>

2.1.b

“We have attempted to initiate a rational debate on issues that could hardly be more serious – it is quite wrong for this to be described as an “attack” on IBC, as Prof.

Sloboda has done in correspondence with John Pilger. If Prof. Sloboda is dedicated to truth, as you say, then there is no reason for him to refuse to respond to the very simple questions we, Stephen Soldz and John Pilger have raised.”

Response to email on IBC, Media Lens Editors, March 22, 2006. Posted to the Media Lens public message board by the Editors.

One of the difficulties in engaging properly with Media Lens is that much of the heat they generate among their followers (and they among themselves) is unarchived – accusations are made, enrage the convinced, then disappear before they can be properly addressed (assuming one had the time to address them all).

A supporter of IBC’s work independently produced the following compilation based on three weeks of monitoring the board. Below are extracts (the longer version of this list – itself only partial – is available on request). The comments are all the compiler’s, but entirely accurate.

Smears and misrepresentations of IBC as posted on the Medialens website, 14/3/06 – 11/4/06 (a partial list)

“It is bad enough to the Iraqi people to have so much suffering; to ignore their suffering compounds the errors made in Iraq Body Count”.

(Email to IBC from ‘Sarah Meyer’, posted by Medialens editors, 14/3/06).

“Right now they [IBC] are having a negative impact, their methodology is useless and so are their numbers”.

(Posted by ‘antony’, 17/3/06).

“Well I will continue to beleive [sic] they are driven by ego until someone can provide an explanation explain [sic] as to why they are continuing with a methodology that is unscientific and is used by apologists for the war and why they are rubbishing the Lancet which has stood up to worldwide scrutiny and rigorous peer review”.

(Posted by ‘antony’, 17/3/06).

“IBC co-founder John Sloboda claims: ‘all but a handful of media commentaries use our figures – appropriately – as a means of highlighting the tragedy of the civilian death toll.’ ... This is a remarkable observation. All too many media reports have mis-used the IBC figures, giving a distorted, under-reported picture of the suffering of Iraqis and the extent of the war crimes of the West”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 18/3/06. Misrepresentation – John Sloboda’s quote truncated, with effect of changing its meaning).

“[IBC] surreptitiously present the caveats that highlight the shortcomings of their methodology...”

(Posted by ‘JK’, 18/3/06. Misrepresentation – “Surreptitious” means “underhand” and “kept secret”).

“...the IBC project is providing powerful propaganda for

people responsible for horrendous war crimes”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 23/3/06. Misrepresentation – IBC don't "provide" propagandistic misuses of their work).

“There is a major story here – the IBC figures are deeply misleading”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 24/3/06, quoting an email from David Edwards to Steve Herrmann of BBC. Misrepresentation – IBC figures are not misleading in themselves).

*“IBC must launch a more aggressive educational campaign to teach people about *why your statistics are misleading* and direct people to other counts such as the Lancet study. Your reluctance to do this in light of the way that IBC is being used as propaganda in the US is suspicious”.*

(Email from Jeff Pflueger to IBC, posted by Medialens editors, 27/3/06. Misrepresentation – IBC statistics are not misleading in themselves; “suspicious” an insinuation).

“And the fact that IBC shows up as #2 when I do a Google search on Iraq War simply pisses me off; your Google ranking rests on the shoulders of all of the websites hosting your counter – most often sites opposed to the war. These sites and their webmasters need to be informed that they are at this point assisting the US government in their campaign to make the US people think that the war really ain't that bad”.

(Email from Jeff Pflueger to IBC, posted by Medialens editors, 27/3/06. Insinuation that IBC counters contribute to the view that the war “ain't that bad”).

“Since IBC has not done a very responsible job of educating people about your data, we were forced to take your counter off of DahrJamailIraq.com”.

(Email from Jeff Pflueger to IBC, posted by Medialens editors, 27/3/06).

“The IBC method is akin to placing jugs in a leaky shed and publishing the figures in bold type with a small note at the bottom saying ‘it was even wetter outside’. If the data is flawed it should not be released”.

(Posted by 'mpk', 28/3/06).

“I am left with the distinct feeling that the IBC would prefer that their figures got press coverage, even if it is propaganda-supportive coverage, rather than the likely zero coverage they would get if the limitations were 100% clear. Their desire to feel like they are doing something (intended to be good) has blinkered them to the reality that they might actually be now providing support for that which they aim to oppose”.

(Posted by 'puerhan', 28/3/06).

“Unfortunately it is IBC that has introduced the most acrimonious element into the debate by making

exaggerated and false claims that they are subject of a ‘witch hunt’.”

(Email from 'Bern' to Stop the War Coalition, posted by 'Bern', 29/3/06. False claim – IBC introduced no acrimonious element).

“We have invited IBC repeatedly to respond to the specific issues we have raised in our alerts (including issues raised by Stephen Soldz), they have not even acknowledged receipt of our emails and Media Alerts”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 29/3/06. False claim – IBC did respond).

“What does this ‘exercising’ amount to? Very little, judging by IBC’s inability/unwillingness to respond to reasonable questions”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 5/4/06, in response to comment by John Sloboda: “We have always publicly acknowledged that our numbers must underrepresent [sic] the true figure. The question of by how much is one that exercises us, as it does many others”).

“But if you think that you can give a realistic picture through IBC’s numbers, you must be living in another world ... The refusal of IBC to answer the many questions coming from many sides is outrageous. The Iraqi civilian deaths are not private property of Iraq Body Count”.

(Posted by 'gabriele', 5/4/06).

“Bottom line is that IBC is not a count of anything useful – the number you publish IS USELESS and the name IBC utterly misleading”.

(Posted by 'antony', 6/4/06).

“Carry on, populate your database – but stop undermining the work of others who are trying to accurately measure the total cost in human life”.

(Posted by 'antony', 6/4/06). [Who is trying to actively measure Iraqi casualties now, other than IBC? HD, JS JD.]

“If you do not understand that the thrust of the current criticism [sic] of IBC is that their failure to; [sic] address gaps in their methodology, reframe their positioning as a count of Iraqi deaths (stop the counters, change the name) and respond to people who misrepresent their numbers – that this undermines the work of those who are trying to produce an real account of the actual numbers of Iraq’s [sic] killed as a result of our invasion then you are just not listening”.

(Posted by 'antony', 6/4/06. Claim that IBC “undermines” work of others doesn't follow from IBC's alleged “failures”).

“I think that the IBC are stuck and the question now is how best to deal with them from the point of view of combating the war in Iraq”.

(Posted by 'Gerry', 8/4/06).

“The most recent letter from John Sloboda really acknowledges a crisis for IBC. The subtext seems to be ‘we are unable to answer your critique but we are going to carry on anyway’”.

(Posted by ‘dan’, 8/4/06).

“So on the extremely urgent and serious matter of the analysis of the mass death of Iraqi civilians under military occupation – a highly specialised and extremely complex field of scientific inquiry – we are expected to accept comments made by a guitarist and assistant researcher as a credible source”.

(Posted by Medialens editors, 9/4/06. Misrepresentation – point in question was about attribution of a quote).

“I think the pressure should be kept up, if only to educate JS [John Soboda] and the IBC on basic statistical analysis”.

(Posted by ‘smash’, 10/4/06).

“Basking in the limelight is for superstars, not concerned human-rights, and anti-war activists”.

(Posted by ‘dereklane’, 11/4/06. Claim that IBC are “basking in limelight”).

“IBC happily cite press coverage that blatantly misrepresents their work ... IBC are not only failing to rebutt [sic] misuse of their work, but are actively endorsing such misuse by pointing to it uncritically from their own website”.

(Posted by ‘Ron F’, 11/4/06. Misrepresentation – IBC don’t “actively endorse” misuse of their work).

2.1.c

“Dear John [Sloboda]

I did you the courtesy, as you suggested, and read your “presentation” to a conference [http://www.iraqbodycount.org/onibc/]. It answers none of the questions raised about IBC’s appropriation by defenders of the Iraq invasion, including George W. Bush. Neither do the other pieces you recommend to people who write to the IBC. Why do you waste time and not answer valid criticisms? This surely suggests something concealed. And who is the “highly respected” member of the anti war movement [who defended IBC]? There are plenty of similar voices who support the Democrats’ position in the US or hope Blair will see the light. This anonymous person also apparently disapproves of a public debate, preferring a quiet word between Media Lens and IBC, which the public would not know about. Such a shame becoming shameful.

best wishes

“John [Pilger]”

Response to email, March 16, 2006. Posted to the Media Lens public message board by the Editors.

3.4.2.a A discussion of “Mental health study, 2004”

The citation provided by Roberts for the entry in the HPN table described as “Mental health study, 2004” is:

Hoge CW, Castro CA, Messer SC, et al. “Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care.” New England Journal of Medicine. 351 (July 1, 2004):13-21.

[This article may be consulted at <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/351/1/13> (online) and <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/reprint/351/1/13.pdf> (printable PDF).

Nothing further is said about it in HPN 05, where it is presented in the HPN table as the second highest of “various estimates of the number of violent deaths occurring in occupied Iraq.” Reference to MIT 05 provides no further clues about the author’s reasoning, but does indicate that the figure of 133 deaths per day is comprised of non-combatants killed by US soldiers:

“A report in the New England Journal of Medicine in July 2004, based on interviews with returning U.S. soldiers, suggests an unintentional non-combatant death toll of 133 deaths per day.”

A hint as to what NEJM data might have been used is in a third paper of March, 2005 where Roberts wrote that

“Time will reveal a more precise estimate of the death toll from the war in Iraq. According to a July 2004 New England Journal of Medicine article, 12% of returning army ground forces and 24% of returning marine ground forces report that they were responsible for the death of an Iraqi non-combatant.” “Civilian deaths: a murky issue in the war in Iraq”

(ODI HPN Network paper 29, p. 29 (Mar 2005) <http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2706>)

We presume these figures derive from Table 2 of NEJM which shows that each respondent was asked whether they had been “responsible for the death of a noncombatant”.

We were unable to find these percentages in the NEJM study, but in an interview with Socialist Worker magazine (23 April 2005) Roberts gives a different set of figures:

“[Q.] Are there other surveys of death rates in Iraq? Do they back up your findings?”

In a very prestigious journal called the New England Journal of Medicine there was an article published on 1 July 2004. Military doctors interviewed soldiers returning from Iraq. ...

Among other things they found that 14 percent of the ground forces in the army had killed a non-combatant and 28 percent of returning Marines had killed a non-

combatant.

If you work through the numbers you come up with a figure pretty darn close to our estimate in the Lancet."

(http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php4?article_id=6271)

These percentages can be found in Table 2 of the NEJM paper. This is headed "Combat experiences reported by members of the US Army and Marine Corps after deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan", and the percentages are given as part of a much larger set of data derived from debriefing interviews with the participants in the study.

Again without revealing the method involved, Roberts mentions a specific number of deaths with regard to the NEJM in an editorial, apparently re-posted complete to the Richmond City Watch bulletin board on September 12, 2005 but not available in its original form to our knowledge:

"Peer reviewed articles go unreported, such as one from US Military researchers published in the New England Journal of Medicine indicating 14% of Army and 28% of Marine returnees believe they accidentally killed a non-combatant while in Iraq. That corresponds with 4000 accidental killings a month which are simply not mentioned in the US press but reported daily in the Middle-east."

(<http://www.richmondcitywatch.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=18221&sid=0d3e05efb82f97e85fc85526ead776bc#18221>)

4,000 dead per month correspond to the NEJM-imputed "estimate" of 133 per day, but we are left none the wiser about the length of time over which this rate of killing is supposed to have extended (does the present tense indicate it is ongoing?) or the total number of deaths caused by it, nor how the figure of 4,000 is derived from 14 percent or 28 percent.

The NEJM paper (p.14 col.2) provides the following information about the period of study:

"The study groups included...894 soldiers from an Army infantry brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division, whose responses were obtained in December 2003, after their return from an eight-month deployment to Iraq; and 815 Marines from two battalions under the command of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, whose responses were obtained in October or November 2003, after a six-month deployment to Iraq. The 3rd Infantry Division and the Marine battalions had spearheaded early ground-combat operations in Iraq, in March through May 2003. All the units whose members responded to the survey were also involved in hazardous security duties. The questionnaires administered to soldiers and Marines after deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan were administered three to four months after their return to the United States."

This is translated to "2003-2004" in the HPN table. One may infer from this that no allowance has been made for the statement that "questionnaires were administered ... three to four months after [the respondents'] return to the United States." Given that the final interviews were in December, the latest date on which any of the interviewed Army members could have seen action in Iraq was three months earlier, i.e. during September 2003. Members of the Marine battalions were interviewed during October and November, so for them this reduces to August and July 2003. Thus September 2003 would be a somewhat more appropriate maximum date than is given in the "Date of information" column of the HPN table - but it would appear that it is the final dates of interviews, rather than of the respondents' active service in Iraq, which inform the "2003-2004" date range in the table. Another possibility is that these dates are being largely disregarded and that some estimated level of killing during a period dominated by the ground invasion is being extrapolated forward, perhaps indefinitely (see the Richmond City Watch quote above).

In attempting to appropriately compare IBC's per-day rates to the NEJM-imputed "133 per day" date range in our Table 3 (in Section 3.3 of our main text), we assumed that the commencement date in "2003-2004" was the date of invasion, 20th March, but were forced to take on board the almost certainly erroneous interpretation by Roberts that per-day rates experienced during and close to the invasion could be extended to 2004. A somewhat more credible date range extending only to the end of September would have produced an IBC per-day rate of 53, or 40% of 133 (10,393 deaths ÷ 195 days).

There are 287 days between March 20, 2003 and January 1, 2004, which means that at 133 deaths per day the date range given in the HPN table would produce a total of 38,171 deaths. This serves merely to produce a total from a somewhat dubious date range indicated in the HPN table and a per day rate that, as things stand, is itself only conjectured.

Before the HPN 05/MIT 05 claim of 133 violent deaths per day can be accepted as a serious estimate rather than unexplained speculation, at least the following questions require addressing:

1. What assumptions have been made about the number of days over which the NEJM-reported killings took place?
2. What assumptions have been made about how the participants in this study interpreted the phrase "responsible for" in relation to Iraqi deaths?
3. What assumptions have been made about the average number of deaths caused by each US military personnel reporting "responsibility" for an Iraqi death?
4. What assumptions have been made to take account of the possibility of double counting and more (i.e. that two or more military personnel were co-responsible for the same Iraqi death)?
5. Why have Iraqi combatant deaths been excluded from the estimate? Other entries in the HPN table containing both

combatants and non-combatants are included in their entirety. Why not this one?

6. What assumptions have been made about the total number of US military active in Iraq for the period under question (to provide the correct “scaling-up” factor for this sample)?
7. What assumptions have been made about the representativeness of these military units (rather than of the respondents within them), bearing in mind the temporal and geographical location of this sample in comparison to the relevant data for the entire US military?

It is not our responsibility to conjecture as to how these questions might have been addressed, if at all, in deriving the HPN table estimate. However, even allowing that these issues have been addressed rather than glossed over with a misleading “prestigious” citation, the figure of 133 deaths per day, far from being “pretty darn close” to Lancet’s, is on closer examination utterly inconsistent with it.

The first problem is that 43% of violent deaths in the Lancet estimate were caused by US forces, and 33% of these by ground forces (as shown in section 4.1 of this article). This means that for consistency with Lancet, the ground forces-caused deaths cited should constitute about 14% of Lancet’s 101 violent deaths per day. Instead, at 133 per day, the number assigned to “Mental health study” is some ten times higher.

Second, in Table 2 of the NEJM study it is also shown that 48% of Army personnel, and 65% of Marines, report being “responsible for the death of an enemy combatant” (compared to 14% and 28%, respectively, for noncombatant deaths). If the killing of non-combatants by US ground forces “suggests an unintentional non-combatant death toll of 133 deaths per day”, then the two to three times higher number for combatant deaths easily “suggests” a combined number several times higher than 133 per day.

This multiple of 133 – let’s say it was no more than 266 – would have to constitute just 14% of Lancet’s violent deaths per day, as noted above. To accommodate this number Lancet’s per day rate would have to be 1,900 and not 101.

Furthermore, none of the other entries in the HPN table that include combatants show a per-day rate anywhere close to 266, or the total that this per day rate would have produced by 2004 (~76,000 deaths). ILCS, for instance, is 32% of this total despite covering a longer period, and without being limited to deaths caused by US ground forces alone. (We discuss incompatibility with ILCS again in Section 3.5.) This strongly suggests that extrapolation from a study not in any way designed to address the problem of estimating civilian casualties is simply unsound and untenable.

In summary, the NEJM paper does not contain a published estimate of Iraqi mortality rates. Such an estimate is neither proposed nor suggested by the authors of the NEJM paper. And calculations taking Roberts’ NEJM-imputed “estimate” at

face value show it to be at severe odds with much more direct estimation methods, and certainly no support for his own Lancet estimate, or any kind of guide for evaluating IBC.

3.4.3.a A discussion of “Iraqiyun”, the possible “eighth estimate”

The frequently alluded to but so far undeclared “eighth estimate” may be a figure of 128,000 deaths attributed to the “Iraqiyun humanitarian organization” in a brief three-paragraph report by the UPI news agency/*Washington Times* on 12 July, 2005. <http://washingtontimes.com/upi/20050712-090927-2280r.htm>

This is suggested principally by a references made by Roberts in an emailed exchange with John Rentoul, a columnist for the Independent newspaper, reproduced by Media Lens in BURYING THE LANCET – Update, September 12, 2005. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/05/050906_burying_the_lancet_update.php

“I also realize there was a study that came out with a 128,000 violent death estimate last July. I have only seen the press summaries and would be keen to read the actual report if you have it.”

Using the techniques employed in the HPN table, and assuming it covers the full period from March 20, 2003 to July 11, 2005 (a period of 848 days), 128,000 deaths would produce a violent deaths-per-day “estimate” of 151.

Setting issues of sourcing and detailed description aside, how does the Iraqiyun total actually compare to other sources? We compare it in turn to ILCS, Lancet, and Ministry of Health.

ILCS’s averaged per-day estimate is given as 56 in the HPN table; Iraqiyun’s average is 2.7 times higher at 151. (Iraqiyun’s time-frame is about twice as long as ILCS’s: 848 days as compared to 433 days. To force the two to be consistent one would have to assume that only 24,000 of Iraqiyun’s deaths happened by May 25, 2004, the end of ILCS’s time-frame. The remaining 104,000 deaths in the Iraqiyun total would then have to occur between this date and the end of Iraqiyun’s time-frame on July 11, 2005, a period of 412 days. Under this assumption, in the first half of its 28-month time-frame Iraqiyun’s deaths per day rate would have averaged 56, and in the second, 252.)

However, it may also be that the Iraqiyun figure includes criminal murders (though apparently not all – see below). ILCS contains no criminal murders, so we will perform the calculation again, based on the assumption that as many as one third of all violent deaths are from crime (as observed independently by Lancet and IBC), and increasing ILCS accordingly. In this case, ILCS’s total would become 36,000 and its per-day rate 84, still only a little over half of Iraqiyun’s. (In this scenario, 92,000 of Iraqiyun’s deaths would have to happen in the second half of its time-frame, a period of 412 days, which translates to a rise from an average of 84 deaths per day in the first half to 223 deaths per day in the second.)

The above calculations come before we allow for the statement

in the UPI report that

“The 128,000 figure only includes those whose relatives have been informed of their deaths and does not include those were abducted, assassinated or simply disappeared.”

If Iraqiyun therefore represents some sub-set of the ILCS figure, then the difficulty of reconciling the two will be greater than has been indicated above.

We may perform a similar comparison involving Lancet. In Lancet there are 57,600 violent deaths by September 21, 2004, presented as 101 deaths per day over a period of 571 days covered by the study, as given in the HPN table. Iraqiyun’s per-day rate is 151. (We may again force consistency between the two figures by assigning the same rate as Lancet for the period shared by both sources and a different one for the period covered only by Iraqiyun. Thus if we subtract 57,600 for the period shared with Lancet from Iraqiyun’s total there remain 70,400 deaths which would need to have occurred in the 293-day period following Lancet. This produces a rate of 240 deaths per day ($70,400 \div 293$). Under this assumption there would have been more violent deaths in the ~10 months after the Lancet survey than in the preceding 18 months covered by Lancet, despite the earlier period having included the invasion phase. This again ignores any correction that might need to be made to account for the possibility that Iraqiyun should perhaps represent only a sub-set of the Lancet figure.)

Turning to the reported details of the study itself, we find that description of the Iraqiyun project is very sketchy, being restricted to three brief paragraphs. However by all appearances it is a count, not an estimate, of those deaths about which “relatives have been informed”, presumably by officials. There is also the qualification that the figure “does not include those were abducted, assassinated or simply disappeared.” In this respect it can be most closely compared to the figures produced by the Iraqi Ministry of Health (MOH) for conflict-related violence recorded in hospitals up to at least 2005 (which may however include some deaths where relatives could not be identified). The HPN table’s figure of 22 deaths per day, though inaccurately sourced (see 3.2a), is roughly in line with various reports from the MOH during the period cited. The Iraqiyun figure of 151 per day is not remotely consistent with it.

A further possibility is that 128,000 is a total that includes non-violent as well as violent deaths. If so, then it represents a large undercount when compared to Lancet, since the expected overall mortality rate in Iraq is considerably higher. Lancet, for example, estimated that before the invasion “crude mortality rate was 5.0 per 1000 people per year” (p. 1860) – which translates to 122,000 Iraqis a year, or about 10,000 a month, dying under normal circumstances in Lancet’s assumed population of 24.4 million. Thus there would have been 280,000 deaths from all causes in the 28-month period covered by Iraqiyun, whether or not there was a war. Therefore if Iraqiyun’s figure includes non-

violent deaths then its number as currently presented is too low to assess deaths due to war.

Finally, no sign is given in the UPI report that Iraqiyun’s number was derived from an “excess mortality” calculation as performed in Lancet – rather, the reverse: “the toll includes everyone who has been killed since [March 2003]” (excepting the abducted, etc., as indicated above).

<http://washingtontimes.com/upi/20050712-090927-2280r.htm>

3.4.3.b

The per-day violent death rate cited in the HPN table for the Ministry of Health is footnoted as “Provided by R. Garfield, a consultant to the Iraqi Minister of Health, 3 June 2005. Confirmed by the *Washington Post*, 3 June 2005”.

However, the only *Washington Post* article with a date of 3 June 2005 that discusses cumulative Iraqi deaths is an article by Ellen Knickmeyer entitled “Iraq puts civilian death toll at 12,000”. The first paragraph of this story reads:

“Insurgent violence has claimed the lives of 12,000 Iraqis over the past 18 months, Interior Minister Bayan Jabr said Thursday, giving the first official count for the largest category of victims of bombings, ambushes and other increasingly deadly attacks.”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/02/AR2005060201098.html>

There is no mention of the Ministry of Health anywhere in this article, and no suggestion that the figures quoted by the Interior Ministry come from the Ministry of Health. Informed followers of casualty record-keeping in Iraq will know that the Ministry of Health only began collecting and collating post-invasion records of conflict-related deaths and injuries across the country from April 2004, not December 2003 as is implicit in the statement made by Interior Minister Jabr to the *Washington Post*.

Thus, the HPN paper leaves a reader relying on an unverified personal communication to support the assertion that these figures derive from the Ministry of Health.

This is a very puzzling lapse since, in fact, there are very detailed published accounts of Ministry of Health data which the HPN paper could have cited, but does not.

For instance, one detailed account is provided in a Knight Ridder report dated September 25th 2004, and entitled “Iraqi civilian casualties mounting”. This provides monthly breakdowns and governorate by governorate totals for the months of April to September 2004 (<http://www.w3ar.com/a.php?k=1693>)

There is another problem with the HPN table entry for the Ministry of Health. The *Washington Post* article cites 12,000 deaths occurring over 18 months (December 2003 – May 2005), which does indeed yield a per-day rate of 22. However, the date span given in the HPN table is only 12 – 13 months (04 April 2004

– May 2004), and there is no information provided as to why a 12 – 13 month span rather than an 18 month span was cited, nor how the 18-month total provided by the Interior Ministry is disaggregated to provide a total for just these 12 months.

In sum, although the Ministry of Health has provided fine-grained information about civilian deaths over periods which overlap with the Lancet time-frame, the HPN table appears to make no use of these, and derives its estimate in a manner which is hard to verify.

3.6.a

Discussion of ILCS (Iraq Living Conditions Survey, also known as IMIRA [Iraq Multiple Indicator Rapid Assessment] or the UNDP study, published May, 2005, <http://www.iq.undp.org/ILCS/overview.htm>) has been minimal among IBC's critics and generally falls into two contradictory camps.

The first camp asserts (wrongly – see section 3.6.2) that ILCS perfectly corroborates Lancet, and ends discussion of ILCS there. As an example:

“Except the UNDP study supports the Lancet number. ... There is nothing wrong with talking about the confidence interval, there is everything wrong with misrepresenting it. Furthermore Tim Lamberts work on the convergence of UNDP and Lancet actually shows that both studies come out with similar conclusions, I can't do the maths but this should of course narrow the confidence interval and does so around the Lancet number.”

Posted to Media Lens message board by user 'antony', April 6, 2006.

Others have also assumed this analysis to be accurate, including Milan Rai, followed by Noam Chomsky. Though this assumption is unwarranted, their overall analysis of the studies (including IBC) is fair-minded and inclusive. Unlike IBC's current crop of critics, both these writers apparently value a pluralistic examination wherein data from different studies and methods can be used to arrive at a more complete understanding.

The second camp sees ILCS as contradicting Lancet and attempts to quickly dismiss ILCS on spurious grounds, some of which would also require dismissal of the Lancet study. Independent journalist Dahr Jamail, who has managed to produce a fairly complete synthesis of this camp's views in a recent article, writes:

“One survey, aside from figures from the US-controlled Iraq Ministry of Health, posted figures which correlate with those from IBC. The Iraq Living Conditions Survey, conducted by a Ministry under the US Coalition Provisional Authority in April and May of 2004, cited 24,000 “war deaths.” The survey has been cited as credible simply because it was published by the UN Development Program, despite the fact that the designer of the survey, a Norwegian, stated that the number was

certainly an underestimate. Over half the deaths reported in this survey were in southern Iraq, which suggests that it logged deaths caused by the initial invasion rather than the bloody aftermath as most of the other surveys note. In addition, this survey is now nearly two years out of date. The most violent last two years of the occupation have not been covered.”

[Learning to Count: The Dead in Iraq – By Dahr Jamail and Jeff Pflueger. http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/041306J.shtml]

We may put aside Jamail's first claim that Ministry of Health and ILCS figures “correlate with” those of IBC and the implication that, if this is so, there must be something wrong with them [see Section 3.6 for our own discussion of the correlation between ILCS and other studies].

This cavalier dismissal of ILCS stands in sharp contrast to the unreserved endorsement given to the Lancet study's methods just a few paragraphs earlier:

“Any attempt to gauge mortality in the midst of a conflict will be marked by a degree of uncertainty, but what should be beyond dispute is that the Lancet study is based on sound methodology.”

Thus the credibility of the Lancet study is “beyond dispute” while ILCS is “cited as credible simply because it was published by [UNDP]”.

The credibility of ILCS arises from the survey methods used and its vastly larger sample size than any other recent study in Iraq. This is in principle a survey no different from Lancet's. The questions were mostly different, but the precision of the answers obtained to Lancet-equivalent questions was far higher.

It is also not the case that the designer of ILCS simply stated “that the number [24,000] was certainly an underestimate”, nor that this in any way related to the “credibility” of ILCS. The report of the study states:

“The question asked in ILCS was formulated and posed in a relatively standard way typical to large surveys and censuses (UN 1983). The question underestimates deaths, because households in which all members were lost are omitted. It is therefore common within demographic studies to use a correction for this, based on a number of assumptions derived from stable population theory (UN 1983). This has not been attempted here, as it is unlikely that the assumptions are satisfied. It is not common to make this correction in epidemiologically oriented studies, and this was not done in the Roberts et al. study.”

Analytical Report, p54.

The author is speaking here of household-based survey methods, which are inherently unable to survey households that have lost all members – which limitation is equally true of Roberts' Lancet

study, as is noted in the text above.

The professional caution of the author in describing this inherent flaw is examined no further by Jamail: what is the possible size of any resulting underestimate? Is the ILCS more, or less, likely to be affected by this flaw than Roberts' Lancet study? Why was no correction attempted in either study? These questions are left hanging.

We may also ask what, exactly, is the drawback of the far more geographically complete ILCS survey having adequately recorded military deaths in the south of the country. Jamail's implied criticism appears to be inspired by IBC's July 2005 dossier, which noted that:

"UNDP [ILCS] also includes military deaths in its count (which IBC does not), which may partly explain UNDP's greater weighting toward the south of the country, which was the most intensely contested route of the ground invasion."

"A Dossier on Civilian Casualties 2003 – 2005". July, 2005. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/press/pr12.php>

How can this adversely affect the ability of ILCS to record deaths subsequent to the invasion?

It is already established that the ILCS survey covered about 14 months, and Lancet's, about 18. Naturally, Lancet should be weighted somewhat more towards the post-invasion period than ILCS. Jamail concludes his swift dismissal of ILCS by saying:

"In addition, this survey is now nearly two years out of date. The most violent last two years of the occupation have not been covered."

But when the invasion itself is taken into the reckoning, the most violent period "of the occupation" should be within and not outside the first 14 months or so covered by ILCS, which included both the unequalled carnage of the invasion and the first siege of Falluja. This will be particularly true of any survey that includes Iraqi military killed. In any case, the Lancet study is itself only a few months longer. Why is this not a factor in its disfavour?

Given Jamail's doubts regarding a major formal study, it is surprising to see his completely uncritical references to two sets of figures (from the Iraqiyun organisation [discussed in Appendix 3.4.b] and the People's Kifah [discussed in Section 3.4.3]), both of which are far more questionable than the ILCS estimate. Neither of these sources provides any proper discussion of its methods and, on closer examination, each lies far outside the error bounds of both ILCS and Lancet. We must wonder if Jamail's inconsistency arises from a mistaken assumption that these sources actually support Lancet.

3.6.2.a

Of the 14 violent conflict-related deaths reported by Lancet, five took place during the 42-day invasion phase of March-April 2003,

and nine took place in the remaining 510 days covered by the study. Dividing up the Lancet central estimate of 38,400 according to this 5:9 ratio yields 13,714 invasion-phase deaths, and 24,686 post-invasion deaths. Thus the average Lancet-derived per-day death rate during the invasion-phase was 327, but the post-invasion average death rate dropped to 48 per day (a ratio of approximately seven to one). Applying this same ratio to ILCS divides its 24,000 total into 10,169 deaths occurring during the invasion phase (representing a per-day rate of 242) and 13,831 deaths occurring post-invasion (representing a per-day rate of 35). If 35 deaths are added to the initial ILCS estimate for each of the 119 days by which the time-frame of Lancet exceeds ILCS, then this yields a scaled-up total of 28,165 conflict-related deaths in the Lancet period.

3.6.2.b

Another way to equalize ILCS and the Lancet study is to add the missing criminal murders to ILCS, based on their proportionate presence of 33% in the Lancet study. This proportion accords with another study, IBC, where crime is the cause of a little more than one third of deaths. This would raise the ILCS estimate to around 36,000 by the end of May 2004, and its roughly scaled-up confidence interval to between 27,500 and 44,000. 17 of Lancet's 21 violent deaths had been recorded by this point in time, or 81% of its total of 57,600. The corresponding Lancet figure at this point would therefore be 46,629, or over 10,000 above ILCS, and also outside its scaled-up confidence interval. These are conservative calculations in that the scaling-up of the ILCS figure will include Iraqi military killed during the war, whereas it is noted in the Lancet that most of these are probably not included in its estimate.

3.6.2.c

This argument was made by the Lancet authors in a letter to the UK Independent on Sunday newspaper.

"Falluja is the only insight into those cities experiencing extreme violence (ie Ramadi, Tallafar, Falluja, Najaf); all the others were passed over in our sample by random chance. If the Falluja cluster is representative, there were about 200,000 excess deaths above the 98,000. Perhaps Falluja is so unique that it represents only Falluja, implying that it represents only 50-70,000 additional deaths. There is a tiny chance that the neighbourhood we visited in Falluja was worse than the average experience, and only corresponds with a couple of tens of thousands of deaths. We also explain why, given study limitations, our estimate is likely to be low. Therefore, when taken in total, we concluded that the civilian death toll was at least around 100,000 and probably higher, not between 8,000 and 194,000..."

Les Roberts, Gilbert Burnham, Richard Garfield, letter to the Independent on Sunday, published December 12, 2004.

(Note that the deaths “probably higher” than 100,000 means deaths from war-related violence, since this is virtually the only kind that Lancet’s Falluja sample would contribute to an estimate.)

3.7.a

Here follows an excerpt from a transcript of a radio documentary starring Les Roberts in which confusion about civilians is attributed to “others” speaking erroneously “on [Roberts] behalf”:

“Several objections [to the Lancet] had merit though. First of all, the study makes no distinction between combatants and civilians. Les actually acknowledged this in the study itself, and went to great lengths not to claim, as others did on his behalf, that the study was a measure of civilian mortality. Certainly some of the people the Coalition killed, they intended to kill, but half of all the casualties were women and children. So even in the unlikely event that 50 percent of the men who died were actually fighting us, it’s still a large number of innocents.”

Appearance on NPR’s “This American Life” (#300 “What’s in a Number”) October 25, 2005 http://lesroberts2006.com/articles_details.asp?id=100

3.7.b

In a letter to the Guardian newspaper’s readers’ editor Ian Mayes, which they copied to their message board on March 27, 2006,, the Media Lens Editors took issue with a correction in the paper which failed to include this (erroneous) qualification, informing him that

“both the Iraq Body Count (IBC) and Lancet figures refer to Iraqi civilian deaths, not Iraqi deaths.”

Oddly, one of Roberts’ admissions that the Lancet survey wasn’t exclusively of civilians was published by Media Lens themselves:

“The civilian question is fair. About 25% of the population were adult males. >70% of people who died in automobile accidents were adult males. Presumably, they died more than other demographic groups because they are out and about more. 46% of people reportedly killed by coalition forces were adult males. Thus, some of them may have been combatants, some probably were not... perhaps they were just out and about more and more likely to be in targeted areas. We reported that over half of those killed by coalition forces were women and children to point out that if there was targeting, it was not very focused. Thus, we are careful to say that about 100,000 people, perhaps far more were killed. We suspect that the vast majority were civilians, but we do not say each and every one of the approximately 100,000 was a civilian.”

Roberts, email to Media Lens, published in “100,000 IRAQI

CIVILIAN DEATHS”. Media Lens Alert, November 2, 2004.

The email from Roberts doesn’t seem to have informed the title of this ‘Alert’, either.

3.7.c

An additional and significant qualification appears in the Lancet paper, where it is noted that:

“The requirement that the deceased reside in the house for more than 2 months directly before the date of death probably excluded most military casualties (p.1862 col2 para2)

Note that this caveat applies only to Iraqi military killed during the invasion, and not to other fighters killed thereafter. If correct – that is, if Lancet missed most of the Iraqi military killed during the invasion phase – then its central estimate would tend to be an over-estimate in relation to other studies, in particular ILCS. This is because it would completely cover only four rather than five of the categories of victims described in Table 4.

3.8.a

This particular misconception that has been fueling the anti-IBC campaign presents an interesting case of internet myth-making. It appears to have begun with these passages by Les Roberts appearing on the Altnet.org website in February 2006:

“The contrast between the graph showing 400 violent deaths a month in portions of Baghdad served by this morgue, and oft-cited Iraqbodycount estimate of about 500 violent deaths per month in the entire country, could not be more dramatic. ... It is ... probable ... that the estimates of 20,000 to 30,000 civilian deaths cited in the American press are too low, most likely by a factor of five or ten.”

(Les Roberts. “Do Iraqi Civilian Casualties Matter?” AlterNet, February 14, 2006; www.altnet.org/story/31508/)

The “factor of five or ten” speculation by Roberts was based on incorrect data and poor analysis, as we have shown in this article, and so is wrong. But it was uncritically seized upon and has in large part formed the basis of recent critiques of IBC:

“It is remarkable that IBC – a deeply flawed website – has acquired this kind of reputation among journalists. In a recent article for the website AlterNet, Les Roberts wrote that the estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 civilian deaths commonly cited in the American press are too low, “most likely by a factor of five or ten”.

(Media Lens. “Iraq Body Count Refuses to Respond”. March 14, 2006)

The claim has also been used by our critics to derive a supposedly current figure of “300,000” Iraqi civilian deaths (IBC’s then

current figure of about 30,000 multiplied by ten):

"In an article for the website AlterNet last week, Roberts argued that the estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 civilian deaths commonly cited in the American press are too low, "most likely by a factor of five or ten". In other words, Roberts is now suggesting that as many as 300,000 Iraqi civilians may have been killed since March 2003."

"Oil For The Killing Machine – The BBC On Iraq" – Media Lens Alert – February 21, 2006. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060221_oil_for_the.php

One of the campaigns' most persistent email crusaders, and regular Media Lens message board users, repeatedly sent this misinformation to anti-war groups and websites, in the case below to groups who were using a poster featuring IBC:

"According to Les Roberts ... there might be as many as 300,000 Iraqi civilian deaths. ... I urge you therefore to reconsider the use of that poster. The difference between 30,000 and 300,000 can no longer be ignored. Using that poster as well as keep referring to the IBC's numbers, would be a betrayal of our share ideals and values of peace and justice."

(Gabriele Zamparini – "Iraq: 'Why is the Left Understating the Carnage?'" March 15, 2006. <http://www.thecatsdream.com/blog/2006/03/iraq-why-is-left-understating-carnage.htm>)

Independent journalist Dahr Jamail has also begun citing the figure in his reports:

"The lead author of the Lancet report, Les Roberts, reported more recently on February 8, 2006, that there may be as many as 300,000 Iraqi civilian deaths."

(Dahr Jamail & Jeff Pflueger. "Learning to Count: The Dead in Iraq". Truthout/Perspective April 13, 2006.

Jamail manages to elevate the figure of 300,000 to the status of an "update" to the Lancet study of 2004:

"A report Oct. 29, 2004 in the British medical journal The Lancet had said that "by conservative assumptions, we think about 100,000 excess deaths or more have happened since the 2003 invasion of Iraq." In an update, Les Roberts, lead author of the report said Feb. 8 this year that there may have been 300,000 Iraqi civilian deaths since the invasion"

(Dahr Jamail. "Baghdad Morgue Overflowing Daily". dahrjamailiraq.com April 15, 2006)

Thus the myth of "300,000 Iraqi civilian deaths" was born and continues to be perpetuated, evidently without its origins ever having been properly investigated or its basis questioned. We hope this article will act as a corrective to those concerned to resume a serious discussion of the terrible toll unfolding in Iraq, rather than one founded on unexamined assumptions and baseless exaggeration.

4.2.a

"Your premise that there have been unreported mass killings caused by the USA in the first half of 2005 is a reasonable one and worth pursuing. If it can be supported by new evidence of specific events, such as those revealed in this Washington Post article regarding events in Husaybah in early November (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/23/AR2005122301471_pf.html) and which is currently in our pipeline, then these events will undoubtedly make it into our database. While our project is an ongoing and continual compilation of reported deaths, it is not unusual for us to add or amend incidents months after they occurred."

John Sloboda, in a letter responding to the Media Lens Editors, January 14th 2006, and reprinted in "Paved with Good Intentions – Part 2" http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060126_paved_with_good_part2.php

4.2.b

These reports have 25 air strikes per month to the end of August, giving 200 strikes; in September, 62; in October, 122; in November 120 ("Military Confirms Surge in Airstrikes". Washington Post, December 24, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/23/AR2005122301473.html>); the December figure comes from the London Times which reports an "expected" 150 ("US forces step up Iraq airstrikes". The Times (London), January 1, 2006. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-1965182,00.html>) Total: 654

An alternative report provides a single figure of 306 for the entire year: "In Iraq, strikes increased 7% from 285 [in 2004] to 306 [in 2005], with a surge before the December national elections, according to figures from U.S. Central Command." ("Pentagon boosts number of U.S. air missions". USA Today, Steven Komarow. March 15, 2006. http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20060316/a_airpower16.art.htm) If this is the correct number of air strikes, then IBC's coverage of the associated civilian toll will have been greater than is stated in the main text, where we restrict ourselves to a calculation based on a higher reported number of air strikes during 2005 (654).

4.2.c

Lancet's ~38,400 war-related deaths by September 21, 2004 are derived from up to 14 non-criminal violent killings, including 9 deaths caused by US forces, 6 of them (i.e. 67%) by air strikes. Five of these deaths occurred during the invasion phase which spanned March and April 2003 (Figure 2, p. 1861). $5 \div 14 = 35.7\%$; $38,400 * 35.7\% = 13,708$. If 67% of these are from air strikes then 9,184, or about 9,200, will have been killed in air strikes by a calculation based on published Lancet data. 9,200 deaths from 20,733 air strikes is equivalent to 1 death per 2.25 air strikes, or 4

deaths for every 9 air strikes.

4.2.d

Another, related way to examine these figures is by the number and type of munitions used. In the first 30 days of the invasion phase, 29,199 bombs were rained on Iraq; an average rate of 40 per hour. 19,948 of these bombs were “guided” and 9,251 “unguided”. More than 1,200 of the bombs were cluster munitions (<http://www.comw.org/pda/0402rm9.html>) yielding a further 240,000 “bomblets” (based on a typical payload of 200 per cluster bomb).

There are no complete reports for bombs dropped during 2005, but the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, which is “the lead Air Force organization in Iraq”, (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usaf/332aew.htm>) reported that it had dropped 138 bombs or missiles in the four months leading to mid-January 2006, and 14 between then and March 22. “U.S. warplanes lead ground troops to foe”. Associated Press, April 3, 2006. <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/12132811/>

This is less bombs in six months than were dropped on Iraq in an average six hours of “shock and awe” (and which average was sustained for 720 hours). This phase of the military intervention still remains the most intense period of massacre – of civilians and military alike – in Iraq this century.

5.a.

One example is “Iraq Body Count: War dead figures”, a BBC web page featuring IBC figures with the geographical distribution of reported civilian and police deaths from war-related violence (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4525412.stm).

This is regularly updated with new IBC data and has been added as an active link to many subsequent BBC news stories on Iraq, particularly those with a focus on casualties.

We worked closely with the BBC on their presentation and description of IBC data on this web page, although the final choice of wording and content was of course theirs. It was first published on December 14, 2005, one month prior to the first Media Lens piece on IBC. The Media Lens editors apparently first noticed the page in March 2006, and congratulated themselves on its wording, which they attributed to their pressure campaign against IBC.

“At least it mentions:

“Nevertheless, Iraq Body Count’s methods and its ability to compile accurate statistics have been questioned by critics, with some arguing that it has greatly underestimated the number of casualties.

“One study, published by the Lancet medical journal in October 2004, suggested that poor planning, air strikes by coalition forces and a ‘climate of violence’ had led to more than 100,000 extra deaths in Iraq.”

That is (limited) progress... There’s now a chance of a debate emerging. Well done everyone.”

“BBC online article on IBC”, posted by Media Lens Editors on their public message board, March 20, 2006.

Not a single word of the relevant sections of the BBC page had been changed since publication (the numbers were updated, and a temporary note added about the addition of large-scale Baghdad morgue data IBC recorded after first publication).

It is therefore the BBC and IBC (if anyone) who merit congratulation from the Media Lens authors, not themselves. Notice of their premature self-congratulation – first provided to their board on April 11, 2006, by an IBC supporter – has so far elicited no response.

5.b

This claim that we are an “Iraq Western Media Body Count” first appeared in “IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND” Media Lens, 14 March, 2006. More recently this theme has been elaborated into a charge of racism:

> credible compilation of civilian deaths that have been reported by recognized sources.

credible = western

not credible = Iraqi / Arab

Recognised = western

unrecognised = Iraqi / Arab

There’s only one word for that!

BTW – it is intolerable that sites like www.irishantiwar.org should still be giving it a prominent position on their front pages.

“credible because its western!”, posted by “liz” on the ‘moderated’ Media Lens public message board, April 11, 2006.

[It was this Media Lens subscriber’s lobbying which apparently led to the removal of IBC from the [Irishantiwar.org](http://www.irishantiwar.org) website.] IBC member Josh Dougherty responded to this post on the same day, as follows:

> There’s only one word for that!

Yes, misinformed.

IBC sources include:

Al-Jaz Al-Jazeera network

Al-Shar Al-Sharqiya TV

ALB Al Bawaba

AN Arab News

ArN Arabic News

AS Asahi Shimbun

ASB As-Sabah

AST Asia Times

AT Arab Times

BNA Bahrain News Agency

BT Bahrain Times

CD China Daily

eTN eTaiwan News

GDN Gulf Daily News

....etc. etc. etc.

This rebuttal hasn't prevented repetition of this fallacy by independent journalist Dahr Jamail ("Learning to Count: The Dead in Iraq". Truthout/Perspective April 13, 2006), nor has it led to any acknowledgement of possible error on their part, or the issuance of appropriate corrections, by Media Lens.

A logical fallacy peculiar to the Media Lens Editors' version of this critique is that there is a 'problem' in the fact that although there are many other sources in IBC's list, the majority of entries are based on reports from the three most active Western news agencies in Iraq. This is simply a reflection of the efficiency of these organisations in acquiring and transmitting these facts – facts whose publication by these major outlets should please, not dismay the Media Lens Editors. For more on this subject see our "On IBC" presentation at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/onibc/>, slide 4.1.

5.c

In a March 24 post to their message board titled 'The IBC "amateurs"', Media Lens Co-Editor David Edwards copied the content of an email he had sent to Steve Herrmann (Editor of the BBC News Website), citing a source "who prefers to stay anonymous":

"Dear Steve,

It baffles me that you would take IBC more seriously than you would the peer-reviewed Lancet report, which after all appeared in a major science journal. One of the world's leading epidemiologists told me the IBC is run by "amateurs". This is what he told me:

"IBC is run by amateurs. It is easy to calculate the sensitivity of their surveillance system. They would take another list or independent sample, and see the fraction of that sample that appeared in their data base. I have asked them to do this over a year ago, they have not.

"There are other databases out there (NCCI being the most complete), they could do a capture-recapture analysis (as lots of experts have been calling for) and see how many people have died but they have not." ...

There is a major story here – the IBC figures are deeply misleading.

Best wishes David Edwards"

Setting aside the gratuitous slur implied by the word "amateurs", there are two matters to set straight. First, we have not received a request as described above from any epidemiologist.

We did, however, receive an email from epidemiologist *Les Roberts* on October 11, 2005, which read as follows:

Dear Hamit,

I am sorry to be disturbing you but I did not have another contact at Iraqbodycount.

I have been invited to join Jack Straw for a discussion on the BBC tomorrow night. The Iraqbodycount number is constantly help up [sic] by the Blair administration as evidence that the Lancet article is wrong. Can you or someone at Iraqbodycount please either tell me the sensitivity of your surveillance network or the number of total deaths from all causes reported into the hospitals and morgues and other sources of your data.

Thanks a lot,

Les Roberts

We replied on the same day (copying to Lancet study co-authors Garfield and Burnham, who had been included in the CC lists of Roberts' email to us). Our reply read:

Dear Dr. Roberts,

We would love to sit down and discuss the detailed issues arising from our respective estimation methods. However doing so in an email 24 hours before a TV discussion is not going to allow us to do these complexities justice.

Are you in London by any chance? If so, my colleague and Iraq Body Count (IBC) co-founder Prof. John Sloboda could meet you tonight. Please let us know ASAP if this will be possible.

If you are going to offer your own analysis regarding IBC's numbers, please be advised that the information in your and Checchi's "Interpreting and using mortality data in humanitarian emergencies", table 6, page 30, is in error about the IBC per-day rate for the period given: this should read 32 per day and not 17. Moreover, matching IBC's per-day rates with the time-frames of other sources listed in the table would lead to a range of daily rates, since our rates vary significantly across time.

Best regards,

Hamit

We never heard from Roberts again.

Nor have there been other experts "calling for" further analyses from us, as was suggested by the anonymous writer. If any other epidemiologist has contacted us on these subjects, we never received the letter, and would invite him or her to step forward. We keep records of our correspondence as a matter of course.

To characterise the above exchange with Roberts as "IBC chose to

ignore the extremely important and very simple recommendations made by our expert source", (Media Lens Editors follow-up posting to their public message board, March 25, 2006) would be absurd.

The second matter to set straight concerns the purported value of our performing a "capture-recapture analysis". Such analysis would require comparison with another dataset that has similar characteristics, including the level of specificity, but it is unclear that such a dataset is available.

Other, less specific datasets that are in the public domain, and have been reported by the media (e.g. Ministry of Health and morgue data) have, where possible, already been incorporated into our totals or analyses (after adjustment for known or potential overlaps with existing data entries). It is a long-standing fallacy to assume that such sources hold information unavailable in IBC: <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/press/archive.php#pr10>

We would also like to ask what purpose was served by David Edwards' citing of this anonymous letter other than to impute, to the head of an international news gathering organisation that makes substantial use of our data, that we are incompetent and wilfully un-cooperative?

This anonymous slur has now been elevated to the status of a (still anonymous) "challenge" to IBC in the latest "Media Alert Update" (published by Media Lens on April 10th 2006) authored by "John Pilger and a leading epidemiologist" [sic] who ask:

'How many journalists are aware that IBC is not in fact run by professional epidemiologists? What would we say if, in discussing climate change, politicians and journalists consistently highlighted information supplied by a group deemed by professional climate scientists to be "amateurs"?''

This has now become an openly defamatory smear campaign against the individual members of the IBC team, whose obvious aim is to undermine our personal and professional reputations among those with whom and for whom we work. Yet it has no foundation. Could anything have been more amateurish than the "sensitivity analysis" on which this campaign against IBC has been built?

Perhaps the Media Lens editors, having initiated this baseless and ill-conceived campaign of misinformation, might feel compelled to follow their own advice given to us:

"...we believe the honourable thing to do with your time would be to write a series of open and honestly self-critical press releases to all editors and news correspondents at all media outlets as a matter of real urgency."

IRAQ BODY COUNT REFUSES TO RESPOND, Media Lens, March 14, 2006, http://www.medialens.org/alerts/06/060314_iraq_body_count.php

– or at least, write to those editors and outlets where they have

been spreading falsehoods.

6.a

The NCCI quote continues:

Iraq Body Count (IBC) compiled the first authoritative, and still constantly updated, estimate of war-related deaths in Iraq. In order to provide irrefutable, minimum figures for the death toll, IBC only records civilian deaths, which have been reported by two reputable English-language sources. IBC observed in its June 2005 report: 'The population of Iraq is approximately 25,000,000, meaning that one in every thousand Iraqis has been violently killed since March 2003.'

"HUMAN RIGHTS, HUMANITARIAN SPACE AND ADEQUATE RESPONSE: Iraq Mortality", NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI), November 13, 2005. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/KH11-6J52Q7?OpenDocument>