

TELEVISION: THE MODERN BATTLEFIELD

An Evolution of War Coverage
in the two Gulf Wars

Essay

by

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“The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses.”

- Stephen Crane

The Red Badge of Courage

Wars have always exerted, and probably will always exert, an immense fascination on the voyeuristic human mind. Whenever there is suffering in the world, whenever there is pain and sacrifice, we want to know about it. The two Gulf Wars have seen not only the first use of new technological advances in the art of destruction and murder, but also in the art of communicating same atrocities to millions of people around the world: the audience of the global village. An interval of a dozen years has brought the viewer from being placed in the tip of a warhead down to its target; ever closer are we guided to look at the face of war – sometimes at the loss of a broader perspective. But the most important evolution in war coverage might be the changed treatment of the media by the U.S. government, and how it altered and manipulated the perspective of the viewer at home.

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded its neighbour Kuwait.¹ Previously favoured by the U.S. government in its decade-long war with Iran (despite Saddam Hussein's history of human rights violations), Iraq's actions instantaneously instigated the United Nations' and the U.S.'s malcontent, though initially the two sought different solutions to the crises.² After what was the largest coalition of military forces since the Second World War had been deployed in Saudi Arabia during operation

1 Edward L. Ayers, Lewis L. Gould, David M. Oshinsky, and Jean R. Soderlund, *American Passages – A history of the United States* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), p. 1107.

2 Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 39-40.

“Desert Shield” in the months following the invasion, war was declared and “Desert Storm”, and with it the first Gulf War, commenced on 17 January 1991.³ After a ceasefire agreement had been reached on 6 April 1991, permanent no-fly zones were established, a disarmament plan was framed, and the economic sanctions set up immediately following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were upheld, to be lifted as soon as Hussein's full cooperation with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors was secured. It never was.

More than seven years and several minor military incidences later, on 15 December 1998, Richard Butler, then executive director of UNSCOM, pulled his inspectors out of Iraq after Baghdad had ceased to cooperate entirely amid charges of illegal spy operations allegedly carried out by the weapons inspectors. The following day, U.S. president Bill Clinton ordered operation “Desert Fox” to commence, again flying numerous air raid attacks on strategic targets.⁴ And on 19 March 2003, a U.S. led coalition attacked and invaded Iraq amid international controversy, with the distinct aim of ousting president Saddam Hussein; this time, the operation was called “Iraqi Freedom”.

During and in between both Gulf Wars (the second was officially declared over by U.S. president George W. Bush on 1 May 2004) the U.S. and world media played a decisive role not only in reflecting and commenting on public and policy makers' opinion, but also in creating and nourishing a common consensus on the justness and necessity of military action; a tactics labelled “manufacturing consent”. Not only were the media, especially TV networks – CNN at the forefront of global news gathering and distribution – accused at times of broadcasting a rather one-sided opinion on the issue, and therefore acting as propaganda machines for the U.S. government, but sometimes even charged with playing the reversed role – what Piers Robinson calls “The CNN Effect”: the accrument of public pressure on the government to be compelled to act in the first place.⁵ But some, especially CNN in their reporting of the Amiriya bunker incident of the first Gulf War – in which a supposed Iraqi bunker after being destroyed by U.S. bombs turned out to have been a civilian air raid shelter – were at times heavily accused by rivalling news agencies of un-Americanism and outright treason. And indeed: looking back and analysing the treatment of the media by government officials,

3 Ayers, Gould, Oshinsky, and Soderlund, p. 1108.

4 CNN.com, *The Unfinished War: A Decade Since Desert Storm*, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/gulf.war/unfinished/war/index.html> (18 March 2004)

5 Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The myth of news, foreign policy and intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

their impact on and role in the wars, and their influence on public opinion, emphasises this picture of media prominence, even though the overall strategy of how the U.S. deals with war correspondents and news agencies in times of war has undergone significant change.

During Desert Storm, the control enacted by the Pentagon over U.S. and international journalists was unprecedented in its rigorousness and efficiency. Hoarded together in “press pools”, correspondents attended daily briefings by military officials who declared the positive progress of the war and emphasised a since then highly criticised image of a clean and bloodless war by repeatedly screening footage of precise hits of so-called “smart” bombs of strategic military targets. This prevarication was uncovered soon after the end of the war, when it became publicly known that only a mere seven percent of warheads used in the air raids were “smart”, and that a stupefying overall figure of 70 percent of bombs dropped missed their designated targets.⁶

Outside the Pentagon-organised pools were those who chose to defy the imposed censorship and tried relentlessly to get “real” information on what was happening on the battlefield: the so-called “unilateral journalists”. But what little information they could acquire independently was often refused by the networks and newspapers due to their self-imposed censorship under the pretence of patriotism. And, as polls showed, the networks were supported in their view by the public, as the majority approved of and even called for more military censorship over news gathering and reporting at times of war.⁷ This self-prescribed patriotic duty of succumbing to one's leaders at times of military crisis stands in stark opposition to what should not only be one of the foremost duties of every citizen (and especially of journalists) in everyday governing issues, but particularly when one's own nation calls to battle: constant (self-)inspection of motive and justness into why and how war is waged. Since said analysis (to a certain extent) was only carried out after the fact, it could do nothing to prevent or change the way certain missions were conducted. However, one might argue, since the first Gulf War went by as quick as it did – with the land mission famously lasting mere 100 days – no type or depth of reporting could have had any significant impact anyway.

⁶ Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 125.

⁷ Andre Gunder Frank, Hamid Mowlana (ed.), George Gerbner (ed.), and Herbert I. Schiller (ed.), *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf – A Global Perspective* (Oxford: Westview Press, Inc., 1992), p. 15.

The second Gulf War saw the advent of a new type of coverage: “embedded journalism”. Even though journalists had accompanied troops under auspices of military commanders in land campaigns before, the level of involvement and intimacy with soldiers and their missions present in “Operation Iraqi Freedom” extended further than ever before. Undergoing special training in the months leading up to the war (after having signed agreements with the military on what could and could not be reported), correspondents were taught basic survival techniques and how to behave in a hostile environment to not endanger their own lives or that of military personnel. Distributed throughout the ground forces invading Iraq in early 2003, embedded journalists could seemingly report directly from the front lines of the conflict, live and without having to channel their reports through Pentagon officials. Combined with new technologies like mobile satellite uplink stations and exceedingly smaller and lighter digital cameras, the modern war correspondents claimed to be able to show the public the real face of war. As much as this kind of reporting conveys a significant advancement in the “openness” and ability of public scrutiny of military conflicts, it bears many disadvantages and inherent dangers.

Anyone ever having undergone military training knows that in the face of a common mission, a common goal, and the common sense of danger from a common enemy, a high degree of bonding with ones comrades is a natural human phenomenon. Therefore, civil journalists, during their training period to become “embedded”, and even more so on the battlefield – facing real dangers and real hardship – cannot but feel the same sense of belonging to their specifically assigned combat units. This sense of identification runs contrary to any ideological objectivity journalists should be striving for. Consequently, the embedded journalist becomes more military than civil; to his sense of patriotic duty as an American citizen is added the loyalty to his fighting comrades and their honourable sacrifices to the cause. Such a personally involved correspondent is likely to impose – if only unconsciously – a certain degree of self-censorship as he loses an otherwise healthy distance to his subject. He stops critically reporting the news, for he becomes part of the news.

Furthermore, the assignation of a controlled and limited number of “embedded journalists” to combat units by military commanders is in itself a powerful weapon of censorship. By openly acting in a forthcoming way to the correspondents – putting them where the news take place – one can

deliberately plan and choose the missions in which no reporters are present. And as the journalists are busy casting a light on the new close-up look at war, special operations can be conducted in the shadow of that very same light.

Any newly arrived technology is at first used as a toy by their early operators, who are so enthralled with its capabilities that they forget, or have to find out for themselves, what its real purpose is. Only after the initial childish curiosity is satisfied is the new apparatus pushed in the background and its intended use becomes more important as it begins to fulfil its potential. The same holds true for the new technology used by the correspondents in the second Gulf War. Equipped with the ability to report live from the battleground, journalists forget that their purpose and mission is not only to show pictures and let them speak for themselves, but to use those pictures as *one* resource in their effort to convey a true, interesting, and important issue or event. Technology can never replace professional investigative journalism.

Whether the new *modus operandi* of war reporting presents an advancement towards the tactical manipulation and censorship of information, or an important step towards clear, open, and unbiased coverage of military campaigning is, at this point in time, not entirely foreseeable. What it definitely does, however, is increase the chances of additional information leaking through as time passes and possible self- or government-censored “embedded” journalists decide to speak out and tell the world what else they saw and experienced in the deserts and streets of Iraq. Just as it had to after the first Gulf War, time will have to pass before those facts find their way to the surface of the public conscience. As the international protests against the second Gulf War marking the first anniversary of its start, and the voices questioning the justification of the war, clearly show: it has already begun.

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