

# The War in Iraq and the War in the Media

How Editorial Influence Affects War Coverage

Chris Higginbotham  
15 October 2007  
JOMC 701  
Dr. Anne Johnston

## INTRODUCTION

Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know - fiction!

Stephen Colbert's words at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner were delivered in jest, but they represent a feeling that has proliferated through the public since the invasion of Iraq. Distrust of the media is a common subject, whether it be the left railing against Fox News and the giant media conglomerates or the conservatives bashing the "Clinton News Network" and the rest of the liberal journalists. A 2004 Pew Research Poll showed that 53% of Americans consider the media to be biased while only 29% think journalists go out of their way to remove bias.<sup>1</sup>

One of the common First Amendment theories holds that its main purpose is to foster a marketplace of ideas, in which the people can receive their information from a variety of sources, exposing themselves to diverse opinions from which they can make their own conclusions. The government takes steps to ensure the marketplace is preserved; administrative laws limit the number of media outlets one entity can own, and the courts have repeatedly held that the government cannot compel any media outlet to present a specific viewpoint. The addition of new media outlets available on the Internet and the thousands of satellite and cable networks add innumerable media outlets available for the public, meaning that information available should be diverse and plentiful.

For certain types of information that might be true, but one special exception is in the coverage of war. The government has no obligation to allow the media onto military bases or into war zones, which, as the scholarly literature reviewed later shows, has presented problems for journalists. Without complete access to the battlefield, journalists have few fact-checking options available for verifying information put out by the government and the military. Journalists that embed with the military, as about 800 did during the invasion of Iraq,<sup>2</sup> are limited in their scope, only seeing the areas of conflict entered by their host unit. Behind-the-scenes reporters, referred to by the military as “unilaterals,”<sup>3</sup> entered Iraq with no support, little access to transportation and had no protection or safe haven from the conflict. These factors limited the ability of journalists to report effectively on the conflict, and many scholars and members of the public felt the American media served only as a mouthpiece for the administration in the run up to the war and the initial stages of the invasion.

While the civilian media bears the brunt of the responsibility for these perceived shortcomings, there are other professional journalists who reported on the war whose behavior has not been studied by academia. All four branches of the armed forces have troops trained as journalists-- both broadcast and print-- and a sizable group of photographers. These service members deployed with the combat units to Iraq during the invasion and maintain a presence in the country now. Their stories go to unit and base newspapers throughout Iraq and video stories are broadcast on the American Forces Network and the Pentagon Channel. All these outlets are paid for by the Pentagon, as are the troops' salaries.

The difference between these military journalists and their civilian counterparts is their objectivity- not that the civilian media necessarily is objective, but military journalists rarely present bad news from the war front aside from reporting casualties. Some would go so far as to say military journalists merely create propaganda, although that's not their stated mission. For sure, military journalists enjoy little freedom of speech and if the only news available from the war was presented by military journalists, the marketplace of ideas would be rather sparse.

Somewhere between the civilian media and the military media lies *Stars & Stripes*, a newspaper subsidized by the Pentagon (the paper generates revenue from advertising and subscriptions, but not enough to meet operating costs), but in possession of more freedom of speech. In Vietnam, *Stars & Stripes* was staffed by military personnel, but now there are very few troops on staff and those that are do not wear a uniform. The reporters for *Stripes*, as it's known in the military, are civilian government employees who mostly report on beats based on geographic location.<sup>4</sup>

What this pilot study intends to find is how freedom of speech can affect reporting of war. Through the use of a content analysis, articles about the war from the *New York Times*, *Stars & Stripes*, and an as-of-yet unspecified military publication will be compared to see how the reporting differs, whether there is a presence of bias and whether the publisher (or sponsor) affects the type of bias present.

## **HISTORY OF THE MILITARY- MEDIA RELATIONSHIP**

Any history of the relationship between the military and the media has to go back at least to Vietnam. It was the war that the media brought into the living room of every American family that had a television. Many believe that the backlash in public opinion

against the war was caused by the media's unprecedented graphic coverage and that it ultimately led to America's defeat.

Many scholars see the two military interventions in the 1980s, Grenada and Panama, as the military's revenge for Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Journalists weren't on the ground in Grenada, creating a complete blackout in coverage. In Panama in 1989, the invasion was announced only hours before commencing, preventing journalists from being there for the onset of hostilities. The National Media Pool, born out of protests over the snubbing of the media in Grenada, was full of Washington experts who had little knowledge about the situation in Panama.<sup>6</sup>

The first gulf war was similar, with the military having great influence over where journalists went and what they saw, but more importantly, they controlled what was released. Walter Cronkite testified before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs that the censorship being exercised by the military would create a hole in history where the conflict should be.<sup>7</sup> Articles were submitted to military authorities for pre-publication approval, only to be returned after the information was no longer newsworthy.<sup>8</sup>

In looking at these major conflicts preceding Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, it's clear that there is a strained relationship between the military and the media. In Panama, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney said that he saw the information flow from the war as a problem that he didn't trust the press to solve.<sup>9</sup> Many scholars believe the control exerted by the military over the press was simply a way to prevent unflattering consequences of the war – civilian deaths, destruction, body counts - from being highlighted.<sup>10</sup>

But if journalists had been granted unfettered access to these conflicts, would they really have reported on everything they saw? Many scholars agree that it is the tradition of the media to adopt a pro-war stance when the nation mobilizes for war. As the nation's armed forces mobilized for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the press mobilized also. When the invasion began, over 800 journalists embedded with the military, not only to see the war firsthand, but to report live from the front.<sup>11</sup>

### **THE MEDIA AND OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM**

The embedded media program was a bold experiment for the military. Embedding journalists with military units provided a way to prove the United States didn't fight dirty or go after soft targets, as they were accused of doing in Afghanistan. But if the war had gone any less easily than expected, embedded reporters would have been right there to show it. Although there were rules in place to prevent the release of information like exact friendly unit locations, troop numbers or future plans, embedded reporters were allowed to report on friendly casualties and confirm any casualties they witnessed, opening up the potential for criticism if casualties grew above an acceptable level.<sup>12</sup>

There were also worries about how objective embedded journalists could be. Sleeping, eating and moving with the soldiers would undoubtedly lead to some sort of camaraderie, especially under fire, so would embedded journalists really be able to be objective in their reporting?

Also covering the war in Iraq were non-embedded journalists, the unilaterals. During the invasion, these journalists had no support from the military for food,

transportation, information or, more importantly, protection. But, more often than not, they were also farther away from most major military engagements.

Kuypers and Cooper studied how these two groups covered the early stages of the war for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The study shows that there were two frames that these two groups of reporters focused on- the strength of the Iraqi resistance and the response of the Iraqi civilian population to the American military.<sup>13</sup> Kuypers and Cooper found a significant difference in the coverage provided by these two groups.

When discussing the Iraqi resistance, embedded reporters, who probably witnessed more direct combat, commented on the ease with which the invasion advanced through Iraq.<sup>14</sup> The behind-the-scene reporters, on the other hand, highlighted what they called a surprising Iraqi resistance. They emphasized the loss of Allied vehicles and mentioned ferocious exchanges of fire.<sup>15</sup> The contrast between the two groups of reporters was similar as the Allies descended on Baghdad, with the unilaterals framing the upcoming fight as a “dilemma” for the invasion force, while the embeds commented on the Iraqi defenders mostly fleeing from combat.<sup>16</sup>

In stories about the Iraqi civilian response to the invasion, embeds were more likely to discuss positive interactions between civilians and troops. One can easily remember the civilians celebrating the fall of Saddam’s statue in Baghdad in April 2003. The unilaterals, who were more likely to see the aftermath of Allied attacks than direct interaction, focused on Iraqi resentment. In one report filed by a behind-the-scenes reporter, the correspondent says, “On the streets, children wave and smile at passing

British troops. At the now-empty police station, a banner hangs. Shame on America, it says.”<sup>17</sup>

This sign describes a major point that Kuypers and Cooper overlooked in their analysis. The embedded reporters witnessed direct interaction between the civilians and troops. Prior to the invasion, Iraqi propaganda described how American soldiers would pillage Iraq, torturing prisoners and raping women. Under these circumstances, it’s only logical for the civilians to be nice to the troops. Who would protest the approaching, heavily armed madmen your country warned you about?

So we know that reporters, drawn from the same two papers but seeing the war from different perspectives, covered the war differently. Was it because of an inherent bias among reporters? Government intervention? Bad reporting?

#### **THE CAUSE OF TWO FRAMES**

There are a number of theories as to why reports from Iraq were various in their take on the war. As Kumar points out, the embedded reporters never got to see the aftermath of their attacks, making them less likely to be exposed to civilian reaction.<sup>18</sup> The speed with which the invasion advanced made it impossible for military units to be stationary.

Kuypers and Cooper believe the differences in reporting had to do with the ability of embedded reporters to break away from what the researchers believe to be their normal editorial positions.<sup>19</sup> Upon seeing the troops in action, they were forced to break away from the anti-war stance adopted by the mainstream media.<sup>20</sup> They say that military intervention cannot be responsible because of the Department of Defense’s extensive regulations against interfering with reporters’ stories.<sup>21</sup> They conclude that embedded

reporters, who were in a better position to actually witness the war, reported it more accurately.

Many scholars disagree, pointing out that embedded reporters got the rosy side of the story because they were sheltered from the big picture and most of them left before the insurgency began.<sup>22</sup> Narasimhan Ravi, who conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage in the United States, England, Pakistan and India, found that patriotism played a role in coverage of the war in the U.S. and the U.K.<sup>23</sup> The *New York Times*, who Ravi says was opposed to the war early on, ceased its criticism of the war's justifications when the troops hit the ground.<sup>24</sup> This effect even took place with *The Dawn* of Pakistan, which Ravi says took the stance of identifying with the Islamic world in its coverage.<sup>25</sup>

But many scholars think it's more government intervention than any kind of bias that led to flawed coverage of the invasion and the buildup to it. Again, there is a history of perceived government intervention in media in times of war, both in misdirection and misinformation. Kumar discusses several reporters, including a senior BBC reporter, who said the misinformation in the invasion of Iraq was worse than past conflicts, including the first gulf war.<sup>26</sup> An example of this misinformation is the military's official announcement on March 21 that Umm Qasr, a small Iraqi town that played a major part in the resistance, had been taken. It hadn't. In fact, the fall of Umm Qasr was announced eight more times before it actually did fall.<sup>27</sup>

This surely can be considered an attempt at military manipulation of the news coming from the war, but shouldn't a properly functioning media be able to fact check the military's reports? Not necessarily. Again, the patriotic spirit has been shown to

have affected the media, so reporters may have been less enthusiastic about trying to disprove official reports. Also, the military was far more established in Iraq than was the media, with advanced communication technology available that the media didn't possess. The embedded reporters, who were able to get deep coverage of the war, didn't get very wide coverage due to their being able to move about the country only with the units they were embedded with.<sup>28</sup> Unilaterals, again, were limited by a lack of knowledge of upcoming operations and limited transportation. As far as the Iraqi media is concerned, Ravi says they lacked the credibility to shift public opinion.<sup>29</sup> It was just too difficult for the media to fact-check everything the military put out.

Regarding news reports in the buildup to war, the *New York Times* did publish a mea culpa, apologizing to readers for "coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been."<sup>30</sup>

#### **INTERNATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN COVERAGE**

After seeing a difference in coverage within the U.S. national media, one can reasonably expect to also see a difference in the way the international media covered the war. In a study of the German and American media's coverage, Wilhelm shows that the Germans focused more on the international aspect of the invasion of Iraq than did the American media. The study also shows that the American press spent more time presenting motivations for war.<sup>31</sup> Neither of these findings is very surprising. Since the Germans were not involved in the war effort, and actually were advocating against it, it hardly seems likely that the German media were presenting justifications for war. But this might help see part of what led to the rift between Europe and the United States that formed over the war.

In Canada, C.A. Farnsworth shows that the Iraq conflict dominated the Canadian press, getting six times more coverage than the war in Afghanistan (where Canadian soldiers were actually deployed).<sup>32</sup> His study also showed that Canadian television was more positive in its portrayal of Bush and his policies than the top three American networks.<sup>33</sup>

### **SUMMARY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

It's obvious that the role of the civilian media in Operation Iraqi Freedom has been studied extensively. There are several gaps in the research available though. One thing that hasn't been studied is how the media's coverage has been affected by changes in the progress of the war. Ravi showed us that the *New York Times* apologized for flawed coverage at the beginning of the war, and also told us that analysis of American newspaper articles reveals how easy it is to be positive about a war that is going smoothly.<sup>34</sup> So after the insurgency kicked off, the U.S. death toll hit quadruple digits and tours of deployed service members increased to more than one year, did the coverage become more critical?

What about the coverage of Pentagon-sponsored press? Deployed troops do have Internet access and the American Forces Network broadcasts civilian television news programs, but the easiest news sources for them to get their hands on are *Stars & Stripes* and their base newspaper. Are these media outlets providing objective news, or is the Pentagon subsidy based on delivering a slant beneficial to the war effort?

Studying and comparing the civilian media with the military news outlets will show how editorial influence and sources of funding can impact news coverage. Should the study prove that military journalism is slanted, as I think it will, it would raise many

questions about the existence of a military press. Should the American taxpayer really be paying for a propaganda network? Is it fair for the troops in the war effort to be subject to propaganda? Further research into how many troops actually read the *Stars & Stripes* and other military media outlets also begs the question of how effective these investments are. This study won't produce the evidence necessary to answer these questions, but they are good to ponder.

By comparing articles from these three media groups over the progression of the war, this study will show how success in war affects coverage of it. It will also show how Pentagon influence over media affects their coverage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study will measure newsworthiness and objectivity based on sources and time of publication. Therefore, we need to define the window of time to measure and what news sources to be used.

To measure how coverage changed over time, we will select several important dates over the lead up to and execution of the war. One of the most important events in the months before the campaign was Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech before the UN in February 2003. During the execution of the war, Bush's declaration of the end of major combat operations on May 1st and the announcement of the capture of Saddam Hussein on December 14th were two of the most important days. These three events also mark transitory periods in the overall campaign, making them good candidates for a study that measures changes in press coverage over time. These events will be the topic of the stories selected for the study, along with stories from November 30th, 2007. The reason

for this date is simply to add a more recent article into the study. This date also creates a larger gap over which to measure change.

*Stars & Stripes* would be used as one of the sources for articles in the study. A search tool on the newspaper's website<sup>35</sup> will be used to search the date ranges of each event to find an appropriate story for the study. For each event, the earliest and broadest of the articles will be used; these pieces represent the earliest announcement of the event for *Stripes'* readers

Selecting a source from the military's uniformed press is more difficult. Many of the military newspapers have relatively small archives. Also, since the military newspaper is usually more focused on local news, coverage of events in the theater are usually only covered in newspapers belonging to deployed units. Finding units deployed for all these events would be difficult and using different newspapers for each event lacks consistency and would therefore hurt the credibility of the study's findings. Therefore, this study will use articles from the Armed Forces Press Service, which mirrors the operation of a wire service in the civilian media. The downfall of the AFPS is that the writers are government-employed civilians, not uniformed service members. The issue of funding remains the same—the AFPS is sponsored by the Pentagon-- but one of the anticipated contributors to the lack of press freedom in the military is the chain of command.<sup>36</sup> The chain of command plays less of a role for government civilians.

For the civilian press, LexisNexis will be used to search for articles about the events listed above in the Washington Post. The Post is a common source for content analyses because of its outstanding reputation as a news gathering organization. The LexisNexis search will be similar to that described for the *Stars & Stripes*. A date range

consisting of the day of and the day after each event will be used for the search. The earliest and most general of the articles will be chosen.

The training of coders would be more difficult than selecting sources. Coders have to be trained to objectively categorize articles as positive, negative or neutral. An advantage in this study is that comparison is used, so instead of deciding if an article is arbitrarily positive or negative, a coder can look at a group of articles and decide if one is more positive or negative than another. Inter-coder reliability will likely be higher in judging trends over time and comparison between news sources than in the categorization of single articles as positive or negative.

Some crucial elements for coders to pay attention to would be the words used in the articles. Words like “quagmire” and phrases like “failed policy,” “lack of exit strategy,” and “endless war” would almost certainly be found only in negative articles. More positive articles will refer to American troops as “liberators,” or focus on how the United States is “taking the fight to the enemy.” Trends can be noted as to whether news outlets put more emphasis on casualty numbers in more recent articles or if they emphasize the continual extensions of combat tours.

While this study does seek to test how ownership and funding can affect media coverage, it is not a study of the effects of corporate media. Studies in that area are increasingly relevant and too few in number, but this will not add to that dialog.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kuypers, J. A., & Cooper, S. D. (2005). A comparative framing analysis of embedded and behind-the-lines reporting on the 2003 Iraq war. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 6(1), 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Wilhelm, S. (2005). Covering the war in Iraq: Frame choice in American and German national newspapers. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Kumar, M. (2006). Media, war, and propaganda: Strategies of information management during the 2003 Iraq war. *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 61.

- 
- <sup>4</sup> Information about the paper can be found at <http://www.stripes.osd.mil>.
- <sup>5</sup> See Kumar, M. (2006). Media, war, and propaganda: Strategies of information management during the 2003 Iraq war. *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 50.
- <sup>6</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>7</sup> See Norris, M. (1991). Military censorship and the body count in the Persian Gulf war. *Cultural Critique*, 19, 224.
- <sup>8</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>9</sup> Kumar *supra* note 3, at 50.
- <sup>10</sup> See, e.g. *Id.* and Norris, *supra* note 5.
- <sup>11</sup> See Wilhelm, *supra* note 2.
- <sup>12</sup> See [www.defenselink.mil/news/feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf) for the complete list of guidelines for embedded journalists.
- <sup>13</sup> Kuypers, J. A., & Cooper, S. D. (2005). A comparative framing analysis of embedded and behind-the-lines reporting on the 2003 Iraq war. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 6(1), 3.
- <sup>14</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 4.
- <sup>16</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 6.
- <sup>18</sup> See Kumar, M. (2006). Media, war, and propaganda: Strategies of information management during the 2003 Iraq war. *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 61.
- <sup>19</sup> Kuypers & Cooper, *supra* note 9 at 7.
- <sup>20</sup> *Id.* Note that this is the only source that said the media was anti-war.
- <sup>21</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>22</sup> See, e.g. Kumar *supra* note 14, at 61; Ravi, N. (2005). Looking beyond flawed journalism: How national interests, patriotism and cultural values shaped the coverage of the Iraq war. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10(1), 58., Ricchiardi, S. (2007, April). Obstructed View. *American Journalism Review*, 29(2), 26.
- <sup>23</sup> see Ravi, N. (2005). Looking beyond flawed journalism: How national interests, patriotism and cultural values shaped the coverage of the Iraq war. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10(1), 59.
- <sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 60.
- <sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 59.
- <sup>26</sup> See Kumar, *supra* note 17, at 62.
- <sup>27</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>28</sup> LaFleur, 4.
- <sup>29</sup> See Ravi, *supra* note 18, at 59.
- <sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 46.
- <sup>31</sup> See Kuypers, J. A., & Cooper, S. D. (2005). A comparative framing analysis of embedded and behind-the-lines reporting on the 2003 Iraq war. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 6(1), 7.
- <sup>32</sup> See Farnsworth, C.A. (2007). Canadian TV news on Bush and Iraq: No more hostile than top us network. *Policy Options*, July/August, 91.
- <sup>33</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>34</sup> See Ravi, *supra* note 24 at 61.
- <sup>35</sup> <http://www.stripes.com>
- <sup>36</sup> Uniformed members of the military press are usually low-ranking. They typically have to answer to their commanders, who often are not members of the military press, about what they publish. This obviously creates a potential chilling effect.