

Embedded Reporting and Narrow News: A Matter of Professional Freedom and Responsibility

By Erik P. Bucy

Journalists have been on the battlefield to cover armed conflicts involving American soldiers since the rise of mass media. Matthew Brady's Civil War era photographs and Ernie Pyle's evocative World War II dispatches were landmark feats in war reporting made possible by direct access to the front lines. But never before have journalists been enmeshed with troops so fully as during the second war in Iraq.

The notion of embedded reporting—providing news media not just with access to the battlefield but actually including them in with troops—seems to have provided unprecedented access to developments at the front lines. At the same time, however, embedded reporting subjected journalists to some severe restrictions, a certain degree of prior-restraint, and cultivated a narrow, fragmented view of the war, raising issues of professional freedom and responsibility.

The military's decision to embed journalists with troops can be seen as part of a longer-term media management problem. During the Vietnam war, especially, the feeling in Washington was that news coverage of the war cast doubt in the public mind about the legitimacy of U.S. involvement.

Political scientists who have analyzed the Vietnam period of American history contend that negative coverage of the Tet Offensive, in particular, transformed a military victory into a troubling psychological defeat. Critical reports and graphic coverage of the war, so this argument goes, eroded support for American foreign policy and contributed to the sense of defeat.

The influence of this thinking can be seen in subsequent American military interventions, which have been characterized by a high degree of media management. Since Grenada, the Pentagon has artfully managed the electronic media to such a degree that only those images (tidy, technocratic, and usually of a sanctioned nonhuman target) favorable to U.S. objectives are broadcast.

The first Gulf War in 1991 demonstrated the degree to which news coverage of modern warfare has become orchestrated (although less than two years later, in Somalia, the media were curiously a step ahead of the Navy SEALs, waiting like a welcome party for the amphibious landing with lights, cameras, and microphones). But reliance on pooled reporting and videotape replays of precision smart bombs hitting their targets from a safe distance only forces reliance on military sources for information and takes the storytelling ability of individual reporters out of the equation almost completely.

The relationship between the military and the media has always been uneasy, due to their sharply differing institutional roles and aims. While the military sees information as a weapon to be used in the form of propaganda, journalists are charged with cutting through the half-truths of military spokespersons and reporting both sides of the story.

The military's new policy of embedding journalists with troops attempted to make up for excessive media handling during the Reagan and Bush (Sr.) eras. The Pentagon even reached out to diverse media outlets beyond straight news where public opinion is shaped, including reporters from MTV, *Rolling Stone*, *People* magazine, and *Men's Health* in addition to international media and the mainstream American press (Purdum & Rutenberg, 2003).

But the roughly 500 correspondents who covered Operation Iraqi Freedom (Rich, 2003) were not free—that is, not without prior authorization—to report the news as they saw fit, divulge

specifics about troop movements and locations, or state their true opinion, as Peter Arnett's and Geraldo Rivera's expulsion from the front lines demonstrated.

The precise guidelines that embedded journalists operated under were not routinely publicized but the *New York Times* summarized the most salient ground rules (Purdum & Rutenberg, 2003). The Pentagon's guidelines allowed journalists traveling with troops to report on:

- general troop strength and casualty figures
- confirmed figures of enemy soldiers captured
- broad information about previous combat actions
- the identities of wounded or killed Americans after a 72-hour embargo or until next of kin could be notified

Absolutely off-limits, unless authorized, was information about troop movements and locations. In addition, the Pentagon prohibited journalists from:

- reporting that might divulge details of future operations
- using private satellite telephones
- using personal cellphones
- carrying sidearms

Although stories were not outright censored and reporters were not required to submit scripts to military reviewers before being broadcast, each attached journalist was required to sign the guidelines in advance of being embedded, transforming their assignment into a contractual arrangement about what would (or wouldn't) be written or broadcast before any reports were filed. Local military commanders were also free to impose embargoes as they saw fit to protect operations.

In exchange, the Pentagon provided embedded journalists with protection and, for U.S. correspondents, some rudimentary military training before shipping out. Certain reporters were also given extraordinary access to unfolding operations, secret briefings, and satellite intelligence photos. However, the message of restraint was reinforced continuously.

Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke reportedly warned editors in a conference call in the early days of the war that some reporting had provided too much specific information about troop locations and movements. She also reminded journalists that, even if commanders on the scene divulged such news, it was up to the reporter to withhold it under the guidelines.

The message of journalistic complicity in national security was reinforced during Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's first televised war briefing. Behind him was the image of a little girl in pigtails, with the warning: "Don't kill her Daddy with careless words."

Whether the practice of embedding journalists with troops resulted in higher credibility reports or higher quality news is difficult to tell. Certainly the practice generated more immediacy than ever before, and it provided journalists with protection. But it also resulted in a certain degree of myopia, with up-close media coverage preventing news organizations from drawing broad conclusions—and forcing them to rely on the government for big-picture information.

Lewis Lapham of *Harper's* commented that scattered, incessant news reports from Baghdad were, for the most part, "blind to the hope of a coherent narrative."

Embedded journalists were only allowed to report on the battle looking through a narrow rear-view mirror, as it were, and with unprecedented access exercised (for the most part) unprecedented caution. Even the *New York Times* noted that the bulk of the war coverage was “so positive as to verge on celebratory” (Purdum & Rutenberg, 2003), if not jingoistic, as in the case of the FOX News Channel’s unabashed boosterism.

Many factors undoubtedly influenced the tone and substance of the war coverage, and reporters like Geraldo were rightfully reassigned for endangering lives, but news organizations should think carefully about whether the Pentagon’s restrictive conditions and contractual approach to the news truly serves the public interest.

Did the press, by giving up so much editorial freedom, maintain enough autonomy and professional responsibility? These issues should be thoroughly considered before news organizations agree to a new set of restrictive conditions at the outset of any future military engagement.

References

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