

■ “The Military’s Media”

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Summary Overview

This article reprinted here examines the role of “embedded journalists” in the Iraq War. Embedded journalists travel with military units with the permission of the military service involved, and are given protection by these units. Thus, they can provide firsthand reporting of what goes on with the units to which they are attached. They are also briefed by military officers on the progress of the fighting. Jensen argues that in the Iraq War, the use of embedded journalists was problematic for several reasons. The journalists gave firsthand, on-the-scene accounts of the action, but rarely went beyond this to look at a bigger picture. He also charges that the journalists, perhaps fearing they might lose their access to the troops if they do not conform, reported only what the military wanted them to cover.

Journalists often did not feel free to raise any questions about the necessity or justification for the war.

Defining Moment

Journalists have often accompanied troops into battle, and, sometimes, even without official sanction were given inside information by commanders who wanted to get the story out to the public. But reporters often complained that their access to the front lines and to the troops actually fighting was limited. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. military adopted the policy of embedding approved journalists with military units, with the understanding that certain material involving troop locations and other security concerns was off-limits for the journalists. These journalists went



An embedded civilian journalist (on left of photo) taking photographs of U.S. soldiers in Pana, Afghanistan. (Staff Sergeant Michael L. Casteel)

through a vetting process before receiving permission to be part of this program. This procedure was developed because reporters had expressed much frustration concerning their lack of access to the troops during the 1991 Gulf War and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In Iraq, nearly 800 journalists were part of the formal embedding program; many of these were sent to some training by the U.S. military before the war began, to prepare them for being in the field with military units. Soon after the major conventional war fighting in Iraq ended in the spring of 2003, criticisms arose about how the embedding process had worked. These critiques focused on three major issues. First, how objective were the embedded journalists in reporting about troops they had lived with and with whom they had often developed close ties? Second, how free were these reporters to report what they wanted? Did fear of being expelled by the military command keep them from reporting anything that might be considered too negative? Lastly, while these embedded reporters often gave compelling coverage of the small part of the war they personally witnessed, how well did they cover the bigger picture or scope of the overall conflict?

There are inherent tensions built into the system of using embedded reporters. The military command and civilian leaders in the Pentagon believe it is necessary to control the flow of information, both to keep sensitive

data out of enemy hands and to prevent erosion of support for the war effort among the public. Journalists, on the other hand, believe they have the right to publish whatever they feel is worthwhile (although most had no problems with the legitimate regulations about protecting sensitive information). Furthermore, journalists do not want to be perceived as part of a propaganda machine operated by the military leadership.

Author Biography

Robert Jensen is emeritus professor of journalism in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas in Austin, where he taught from 1992 to 2018. Jensen was born on July 14, 1958. He grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, and graduated from Moorhead State University in Moorhead, Minnesota, in 1981. In 1992, he completed a PhD in Media Law and Ethics at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. Jensen has wide experience as a newspaper writer and copy editor, and has published several books as well as numerous articles in academic journals. His writings have focused on numerous social issues, including race, gender, and environmentalism. He is also a social and political activist, identifying with several liberal or progressive public interest groups. This article was published in the *Progressive*, a liberal opinion journal.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The Military's Media

by Robert Jensen

May 1, 2003

ONE OF THE FIRST REPORTS of the Iraq War from an embedded journalist has turned out to be remarkably prescient about the level of independence viewers could expect from U.S. television journalists. CBS News reporter Jim Axelrod, traveling with the Third Infantry, told viewers that he had just come from a military intelligence briefing, where “we’ve been given orders.” Axelrod quickly corrected

himself—“soldiers have been given orders”—but it was difficult not to notice his slip.

U.S. reporters weren’t taking orders directly from the Pentagon, of course, but one could forgive television viewers for wondering, especially early on. U.S. commanders may have had a few problems on the battlefield, but they had little to worry about from the news media—especially on television.

If the first two weeks of coverage was any indication, this war will be a case study in the failure of success of U.S. journalism.

The success came in the technological sophistication and deployment of resources: the ability of

journalists, demonstrating considerable skill and fortitude, to deliver words and pictures from halfway around the world with incredible speed under difficult conditions. The failure was in journalists' inability to offer an account of events that could help people come to the fullest possible understanding—not only of what was happening in the war, but why it was happening and what it meant.

First, clear criteria are needed to evaluate news media performance, based on what citizens in a democracy need from journalists: 1) an independent source of factual information; 2) the historical, political, and social context in which to make sense of those facts; and 3) exposure to the widest range of opinion available in the society.

News media failures on #2 and #3 are the most obvious. U.S. media provided woefully limited background and context, and the range of opinion tended to run, as the old joke goes, from A to B.

On television, current military officers were "balanced" with retired military officers. (A recent study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting noted that 76 percent of the guests on network talk shows in late January and early February were current or former officials, and that anti-war sources accounted for less than 1 percent.) So for the week before and after Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5 presentation to the United Nations—when a full and rich discussion about the war was crucial—there was no meaningful debate on the main news shows of CBS, ABC, NBC, or PBS. Studies of the op-ed pages of the *Washington Post*, often considered to be a liberal newspaper, showed that the pro-war opinions dominated—by a 3-to-1 ratio from December 1 through February 21, according to Todd Gitlin's analysis in *The American Prospect*.

The media didn't even provide the straight facts well. At the core of coverage of this war was the system of "embedding" reporters with troops, allowing reporters to travel with military units—so long as they followed the rules. Those rules said reporters could not travel independently (which meant they could not really report independently), interviews had to be on the record (which meant lower-level service members were less likely to say anything critical), and officers could censor copy and temporarily restrict electronic

transmissions for "operational security" (which, in practice, could be defined as whatever field commanders want to censor). In the first two weeks of the war, two reporters—*Christian Science Monitor* freelancer Philip Smucker and Fox's Geraldo Rivera—were removed from the field for allegedly giving too much information about troop locations on television.

After being confined to press pools with heavy-handed censorship in the 1991 Gulf War, news organizations were understandably grateful for the embedded system, and about 600 journalists signed up (other journalists—called "unilaterals"—were covering the war without military approval). But most of the reports sent back by those embedded reporters in the first two weeks were either human-interest stories about the troops or boosterish narration of the advance of troops. Not surprisingly, the reporters ended up bonding with the service members with whom they shared the hardships and risks of life in the field. As NBC News correspondent David Bloom, who died tragically of a blood clot in his lung, put it: "[The soldiers] have done anything and everything that we could ask of them, and we in turn are trying to return the favor by doing anything and everything that they can ask of us."

Beyond this abandonment of even the pretense of independence, much of the coverage was devoid of useful information. Consider this exchange on March 20 between CNN anchor Aaron Brown and Walter Rodgers, embedded with the Seventh Cavalry.

RODGERS: "The pictures you're seeing are absolutely phenomenal. These are live pictures of the Seventh Cavalry racing across the deserts in southern Iraq.... If you ride inside that tank, it is like riding in the bowels of a dragon. They roar. They screech. You can see them slowing now. We've got to be careful not to get in front of them. But what you're watching here...."

BROWN: "Wow, look at that shot."

RODGERS: "...is truly historic television and journalism."

Wow, we get it. Those are tanks: racing, roaring, screeching, firing shells. Historic. Wow, look at it. But what do we learn from it?

One way to judge the likely effects of the embedded system on the public is to pay attention to what military officials were saying. General Tommy Franks described the briefing podium at Central Command headquarters in Doha, Qatar, as a “platform for truth” (truth delivered on a set built by a Hollywood designer for a quarter of a million taxpayer dollars), but the goal of any military is not to distribute truth but to control the flow of information. Early on, U.S. officials judged the embedded system a success. “We’re seeing most importantly how well equipped, well trained, and how well led U.S. forces are; we see how careful they are in carrying out their duty,” said Bryan Whitman, a senior official at the Pentagon’s public affairs department. British Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon declared, “The imagery they broadcast is at least partially responsible for the public’s change in mood, with the majority of people now saying they back the coalition.” To a large extent, the embedded system served the Pentagon well as propaganda. It conveyed the Pentagon’s message, it touted the technological prowess of the U.S. military, and it fed the home audience a constant diet of U.S. bravery.

The other main sources of information for U.S. viewers were the statements of military officials. Televised briefings seem less central to the military’s information strategy than in the 1991 war, but the media still relied heavily on what the high command dished out. Given the fast-moving nature of war, we should expect some inaccurate information, but we also should expect reporters to be skeptical. Among the most embarrassing incidents was when U.S. journalists reported as fact the military’s claims that the people of Basra had risen up against Hussein’s forces within days of the war’s onset. Reporting of such “facts” was of great importance if the United States was going to convince the world that this was a war to liberate the Iraqi people—in which case it would help if the liberated appreciate their liberation and join in. But officials had to back off from that claim because, inconveniently, it wasn’t true at the time.

Those reports eventually were corrected, but—as anyone who has ever been on the wrong end of a false media report knows—the initial lie usually travels

further and with more effect on the public memory than subsequent corrections. These incidents also remind us that military officials don’t always tell the truth (little shock, and no awe, on that count) and that, for all their talk about being skeptical, journalists are an easy mark for government disinformation, especially in wartime.

As the U.S. military discovered that the attack on Iraq wasn’t going to be the “cakewalk” that some had predicted, journalists covered the debate among various politicians and generals about the wisdom of the war plan. But these debates over strategy and tactics don’t get at crucial issues about the legitimacy of the war. While U.S. reporters did ask Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld whether he had erred by not having more troops on the ground, they shied away from raising a question that gets at a fundamental U.S. hypocrisy. Rumsfeld condemned Iraq for videotaping interviews with captured American soldiers and airing them on state television, contending it was a violation of the Geneva Conventions. If U.S. military officials have such a commitment to those rules, why do they not do what they can to shield Iraqi prisoners from photographers, and why have they not called on the U.S. media to stop using such images? Perhaps more important, why does Rumsfeld refuse to even acknowledge the POW status of soldiers captured in the Afghanistan war? This incident jumped off the scale on the hypocrisy meter, yet the mainstream commercial press politely avoided or glossed over the questions.

Sometimes U.S. reporters seemed to be more hawkish than the generals. In the first two days of the war, TV journalists appeared overeager for the “Shock and Awe” bombing to start and even petulant that it hadn’t. While waiting, reporters and anchors fed the public gushing stories about the marvelous destructive capacity of the weaponry. Three days into the war, CNN’s Judy Woodruff ended a segment featuring an interview with an A-10 “Warthog” pilot with the comment, “We continue to marvel at what those planes can do.” Once “Shock and Awe” began, some on-air reporters appeared jubilant—as if they were watching a fireworks display and not weapons that kill people.

For several days in news conferences, reporters had also pressed officials to explain why Iraqi television facilities had not been bombed. When U.S. planes finally hit the station on March 26, Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke was asked why the station was considered a legitimate target. "Command and control," she said tersely. Everyone realized the Hussein regime had used television to disseminate state-dictated propaganda (which raises an interesting question about the status of private television stations that are full of state-encouraged propaganda), but U.S. officials had not demonstrated that Iraq's TV facilities were being used for specifically military purposes. Amnesty International and the International Federation of Journalists have called the bombing a potential war crime, but the U.S. news media reported the attack matter-of-factly.

Probably one of the most surreal moments on television recently came when Alan Colmes—the "liberal" on Fox's *Hannity & Colmes* talk show—queried "elder statesman" Henry Kissinger about the TV station bombing. Colmes mentioned that Amnesty International had questioned the attack, and then asked Kissinger if that criticism was fair to the United States. Kissinger, with no hint of irony, replied that he had "never heard the argument that you can't bomb the television or radio stations in a war of the other side." Colmes explained that some thought the station was "a civilian object and thus protected under the [Geneva] accords." Kissinger, again with a straight face, answered, "I think it's extremely dangerous for outside groups to turn these things into a legal argument."

The firing of Peter Arnett, one of the most experienced war correspondents in the world, became a major media story. Arnett has an overblown sense of his own importance and lousy political judgment. That's been true ever since he became a television "personality," and he's hardly the only one with those traits.

But Arnett's pomposity and hubris were not what got him fired by NBC and MSNBC's *National Geographic Explorer* after giving a short interview to Iraqi state television. When the controversy first emerged, NBC issued a statement of support, which evaporated as soon as the political heat was turned

up and questions about Arnett's patriotism got tossed around.

By going on Iraqi state television, which clearly was a propaganda vehicle for the regime, Arnett opened himself up to being used. That was a miscalculation.

Arnett compounded it by citing the "unfailing courtesy and cooperation" of the Iraqi people and the Ministry of Information. Certainly, Arnett knew that no foreign reporter could travel in the country without an Iraqi government minder and that the regime had kicked out some reporters.

Arnett likely was just being obliging. But his sin is one of degree; obsequiousness is common for reporters currying favor with sources.

If such criticism of Arnett was appropriate, we should also ask whether American journalists were overly deferential to U.S. officials. Consider George W. Bush's March 6 news conference, when journalists played along in a scripted television event and asked such softball questions as, "How is your faith guiding you?" Journalists that night were about as critical as Arnett was with the Iraqis.

Such performances left the rest of the world with the impression that American journalists—especially those on television—were sycophants, and Arnett's firing only reinforced that impression.

Every time the phrase "Operation Iraqi Freedom" appeared in the corner of the screen during an NBC report or journalists used it as their own, they were endorsing the Administration's claims about the motives for war. The same can be said for "coalition forces." Journalists' constant use of the term gives legitimacy to the Bush claim that a real coalition was fighting this war, when in fact it was a U.S. war with assistance from the British.

Reporting on Iraqi civilian deaths was notably skimpy or skewed. On the *CBS Evening News* one night, Dan Rather gave the death toll of U.S. and British soldiers, and then said the death toll of Iraqi soldiers and civilians was "uncertain." But reporting by non-U.S. media—especially Al-Jazeera and other Arab television networks—forced American reporters to mention the subject, though the images of the casualties were hard to find, and sympathy was often lacking.

On *Larry King Live* on March 29, CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer discussed the U.S. bombing of a Baghdad market that killed at least fifty people. His concern about the deaths seemed to be that “the pictures that are going to be seen on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia and all the Arab satellite channels are going to be further fodder for this anti-American attitude that is clearly escalating as this war continues.” Blitzer said the United States would “have an enormous amount of work to do to ... point out that if, in fact, it was an errant U.S. bomb or missile, that would be a mistake. It certainly wouldn’t be deliberate.”

Is this inevitable? Are we doomed to get home-team coverage of war from journalists at the dominant commercial media? A glance across the ocean suggests not. In Britain, some newspapers haven’t performed any better than U.S. counterparts, but there are also many mainstream journalists doing excellent work. Every day, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* (both available on the web) offer sharp-edged reporting and critical commentary. In briefings, the British

reporters consistently ask tougher questions of the generals. Brits are fighting alongside Americans, but these U.K. journalists don’t shy away from describing the horrors of war.

Robert Fisk, whose gutsy Middle East reporting for *The Independent* has made him something of a celebrity in left/progressive circles in the United States, described American journalism in a lecture in early February as increasingly “vapid, hopeless, gutless, unchallenging” since 9/11.

It’s hard to argue with him. When that U.S. bomb exploded in a Baghdad market, the U.S. military suggested it might have been the result of an aging Iraqi anti-aircraft missile. The reporter who found the remains of the bomb’s serial number, identifying it as a U.S. weapon manufactured in Texas by Raytheon, was not an American reporter, but Fisk.

[Source: *The Progressive*, <https://progressive.org/dispatches/military-s-media/>]

Document Analysis

Jensen is highly critical of how the American media covered the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and his views on this can be seen in his title: “The Military’s Media.” Jensen argues that while embedding journalists with the troops gave them access and support from the U.S. military, it also meant they were controlled in many ways by the military, and in many cases were reduced to being mouthpieces for the military, assuring that the public would see, hear, and read only what the military and its civilian supervisors wanted to be released. Early in his article, Jensen uses a strange phrase to describe the coverage of this conflict—he says it will be seen as “a case study in the failure of success of U.S. journalism.” Clearly, most of his article focuses on what he perceives as failures. He mentions briefly some successes: the technological sophistication of the equipment that could broadcast from halfway around the world was impressive, and the journalists worked with “considerable skill and fortitude ... under difficult conditions.” The failures he discusses in the remainder of the article are summarized on his first page—it was

“the journalists’ inability to offer an account of events that could help people come to the fullest possible understanding—not only of what was happening in the war, but what it was happening and what it meant.” He does not focus only on the embedded journalists—he notes that the coverage of events leading up to the war, originating in studios in the United States, failed to address the rationale for the war—there was “no meaningful debate on the main news shows” of the major U.S. television networks.

Jensen’s assessment of the performance of the embedded journalists focused primarily on the depth of their coverage, the limitations on their free expression of their views imposed by the military’s rules, and the question of objectivity. While dramatic, first-hand stories from the front lines were often broadcast, they often were simply human-interest pieces, or focused only on the narrow range of what the reporter had actually seen. Thus, little attention was paid to the broader, overall picture, and very little attention given to casualties among either the Iraqi military forces or the civilians. The embedding process gave the journalists access to the troops, but

also led to close ties developing between the military personnel and the reporters, which raises concerns about the objectivity of these reporters.

Essential Themes

A key theme that runs throughout Jensen's article is that with the access that embedded journalists were given to the battlefield and troops in the field, there were inevitably some limitations imposed on the journalists' freedom to report what they might wish to cover. Jensen clearly believes that because of these limitations, the coverage of the war was shallow and incomplete. The rules journalists had to follow limited their freedom to report whatever they wished. They could not travel independently of the units to which they were assigned, which Jensen takes to mean they also could not report independently. All interviews with military personnel had to be on the record, but Jensen suggests this might lead lower-ranking officers and enlisted men to be hesitant about what they might say—to avoid talking about anything controversial and certainly not to express criticism of their leaders. Military officials could also censor articles or broadcasts for reasons of "operational security," but Jensen alleges such broad terms really meant the censors could forbid virtually anything.

The theme of objectivity is also something Jensen stressed. The embedded journalists, spending long periods of time in stressful and sometimes dangerous situations with the troops, naturally came to identify with these men and women. The bonds formed may have made it difficult to maintain objectivity and a healthy skepticism when reporting about these people. Other authors, especially foreign observers, have suggested that American journalists became "cheerleaders"

for the troops with whom they worked, and often expressed an awed respect for the high-tech weaponry of the U.S. military.

Jensen poses the question: "Is this inevitable? Are we doomed to get a home-team coverage from journalists at the dominant commercial media?" He suggests a different outcome is possible, and points to the work of British journalists at the *Guardian* and the *Independent* (singling out *Independent* journalist Robert Fisk as a prominent example) who offered "sharp-edged reporting and critical commentary." Thus, while giving no concrete examples of what needs to change to achieve this, Jensen does hold out the hope that independent, objective coverage of military operations is possible.

—Mark S. Joy

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