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Mapping the War Reporting

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SUMMARY

Media coverage of the recent war in Iraq has become a subject of quite a bit of public discussion globally. Comparing this war with the Gulf War of 1990-91, there are differences in the ways in which reporting was done. Propaganda in the classical sense can be defined as "a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve the response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986: 16). Propaganda must be viewed within the context of the society which determines its character or direction, primarily in relation to the language and ideology which forms the core of everyday society. The joke that the war in Iraq would become the ultimate reality show has in some way come true. Its life-and-death scenes are re-created whenever possible in the same style as in the reality show "Survivor." The essay deals with the notion of "embedded" journalism and critically examines the current coverage of the Iraqi war.

Key words: war reporting, war propaganda, war in Iraq

I will watch none of TV's war coverage because 90 percent of it will be speculative. Why should we hear about body bags and deaths and how many, what day it's gonna happen? ... It's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?

Barbara Bush, in a "Good Morning America," April 13, 2003

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Media coverage of the recent war in Iraq has become a subject of quite a bit of public discussion globally. For example, comparing this war with the Gulf War of 1990-91, there are some differences in the ways in which reporting was done, most notably the shift in emphasis from press pools to “embedded journalism.” Thus, any analysis of contemporary propaganda is a very complex process, primarily because of the use of the mass media in the dissemination of propaganda messages. This is further complicated by the fact that the introduction of new technologies results in new channels of media, which demand specific new methods of analysis. I understand propaganda in a very classical sense: “a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve the response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 1986: 16). Further, Splichal (1975: 14) believes that the concept of propaganda has undergone crucial changes in the course of its development; thus, it became a reflexive aspect of political activity employed to perpetuate war along with the use of other means. In this sense, propaganda must be viewed within the context of the society which determines its character or direction, primarily in relation to the language and ideology which forms the core of everyday society.

How to understand, then, the essential historical contexts regarding the changes that contribute to a crisis in the role of the journalist/war reporter in the 1990s? One could discuss different developments in military and media technologies, in media economics and public relations industry that have all changed the practice of any mainstream commercial journalistic war reporting globally. Specifically, the US dominated mass media play a central role in the legitimization of the military discourse, especially crucial during the time of a conflict. In this paper, I will focus on the concept of “embedded journalism” and the debate about and around it.

Each war waged by the USA is historically linked to that particular war’s technological advances. The Civil War had the battleships Merrimack and Monitor, while Desert Storm had Patriot missiles. Especially the concept of embedded journalists follows neatly in the evolution of the United States’ treatment of media in wartime. During all US wars, from the Civil War through Vietnam, reporters accompanied troops into battle. However, many believed that wartime reporting during Vietnam helped fuel and trigger the anti-war movement. As a result of this, any access to the military during wartime diminished a great deal.

The first Gulf War brought to the core once again nearly forgotten issues of censorship, freedom of the media, etc., but in particular the issue of the power of the image and the responsibility of a war reporter. During the first Gulf War the media were afforded almost no access to the war’s progress. Only three

sets of seven reporters were allowed into combat zones during fighting in the Persian Gulf. Also, many reporters claimed that the military personnel reviewing their reports often suggested changes aimed at supporting the war effort. Coverage of the Gulf War was so limited that when Retired Army Major General Robert Scales, who wrote the official army history of the war, went looking for illustrations he could not find a single photograph of U.S. ground troops in combat.

In reaction to this and the first Bush Administration calling the Gulf war policies a “model for the future,” the press began to protest and push for changes in war coverage guidelines. These protests and negotiations eventually resulted in the wartime coverage by the so-called embedded journalists.

In the midst of confusing facts, then, the first television scenes of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were very clear and simple. Television did more than bring viewers closer to the front lines of battle than ever before, however. It looked at war through an entirely new lens. This time, the Pentagon took viewers and readers on an exciting ride-along with the warriors. Videophones, mobile phones and portable satellites brought the world a display of American power, but it was a sanitized and clean look, with no blood and tears. The centerpiece of war coverage for most networks and cable channels were their embedded correspondents, those on-air journalists who had trained with troops and were allowed by the Pentagon to accompany them as they invaded Iraq.

The question whether reporters and photographers in Iraq could maintain their independence and journalistic objectivity while accompanying the troops has been the subject of on-going debate. “What we are seeing is not the war in Iraq,” Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld warned Pentagon reporters. “What we’re seeing are slices of the war in Iraq” (in NYT, March, 2003).

A few journalists seemed so caught up in the spirit of battle that they sounded like sports reporters of a football match or the Super Bowl. We saw many portraits of hard-working reporters and dedicated military personnel. We heard anchors urging their correspondents to stay safe, and the correspondents wishing the soldiers well. The NBC correspondent David Bloom, in his helmet, bulletproof vest and sunglasses, delivered reports live on the move from a specially created army vehicle. Others reported from the flight decks of aircraft carriers, and even through gas masks.

“If the alternative is still pictures with a correspondent’s radio voice, then what technology and embedded journalists has given us is a window that is authentic and real,” said Dorrance Smith, who has worked as a producer at ABC and as an adviser in both Bush administrations. “It serves the journalists and the military’s interests” (in NYT, Stanley, March, 2003).

Thus, the most profound technological advancement of the latest Iraq war may not have had anything to do with American weaponry. Embedded journalists assigned to specific military coalition regiments filed reports with the immediacy never seen before in war reporting. However, while the embedded journalists provided a wealth of information that helped the average American understand certain aspects of the war, they did little to help the viewer understand the historical, economic, or political context, or the goals behind the war actions. "Under a Pentagon program unsurpassed in scope, some 777 journalists embedded with U.S.-led coalition forces during the war generated as many as 6,000 stories a week, making it one of the most heavily reported military conflicts in history" (Skiba, 2003). The 777 embedded journalists included 527 journalists who crossed in to Iraq, primarily with Army and Marine units; the others tended to be assigned to Air Force or Navy unit.

But did the journalists get too close and become too friendly with their sources? Did the situation on the ground prevent them from reporting objectively? Did they tell the facts, but somehow missed the truth? Did the U.S. Defense Department's ground rules prevent them from showing the complexity and ugliness of war?

"I think the embed program was a success for both journalists and for the military," Chris Tomlinson, the AP correspondent in Nairobi and an embedded journalist, claimed over a live satellite uplink outside the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad. "We were able to get an in-depth and accurate idea of what the military was seeing and what the military was doing. I was fortunate enough to be with a very courageous young officer with a frontline infantry company. He basically threw the doors open and said, 'Go where you want, do what you want, talk to who you want.'" (in Fehrenbacher, 2003). Some argue that embedding offered a unique insight into the war because it allowed the military personnel to open up to journalists, and subdued the animosity and stand-offishness that had been present in the past (in Fehrenbacher, 2003).

Part of the Pentagon's thinking held that embedded reporters would bond with the service members with whom they shared rations and dangers. Critics warned that embedded reporters would get too close to their subjects, with objectivity becoming a casualty. For example, although the journalists have unprecedented access to the military and its operations, there were restrictions which were agreed on before the war. Each embedded journalist had to sign a contract restricting when and what they could report. Details of military actions could only be described in broad terms and future missions and information on classified weapons could never be reported. Reporters were also prohibited from reporting aircraft and equipment numbers, troop numbers or locations.

The critics then raised questions such as how journalists reconciled the duty to report everything they knew with the constraints of working under a dictatorship? Why did media covering Washington or “embedded” with US troops so often act as cheerleaders for war? Critics of the embedded journalist phenomenon were further concerned with the journalists’ abilities to maintain their objectivity in an environment where their lives were in the hands of the soldiers they were there to report about.

Fox’s Rick Leventhal, whose enthusiastic reports from within the US marine corps triggered the dichotomy *Embeds or Inbeds*, was unrepentant. “It was difficult to keep your distance. We were dressed like them, living like them, eating with them and we were one of them.” However, the proponents of embedded journalism argue that the immediacy and proximity with which the reporters showed the war is reason enough to have them.

Although these points are valid, they miss one major problem in the embedded journalist operation. Regardless of how well the embedded journalists do their job, they will never be able to show the entirety of a war. The newsgathering capabilities of embedded journalists should be called into question. Since they were constantly on the move, there seemed to be very little time to gather information for their reports. This is another reason why nearly all reports were based on immediate action and information directly from the military.

This may seem obvious to some, and it may be argued that a war cannot ever be covered in its entirety. This indeed is true; however, people watching and reading the reports from embedded journalists may be so blinded by the proximity of these reports to the war’s action as to forget about what else may be going on away from the immediate proceedings of the war in front of them.

Concluding remarks

The joke that the war in Iraq would become the ultimate reality show has in some way come true. Its life-and-death scenes are re-created whenever possible in the same style as in the reality show “Survivor.” What viewers mostly saw in their reports were the correspondents themselves looking like contestants on a reality show Survivor – hungry, dirty, tired and stressed as they tried to keep up with the troops racing across the desert to Baghdad.

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Zala Volčič

Zemljovid ratnog izvještavanja

SAŽETAK

Medijska popraćenost nedavnog rata u Iraku postala je tema globalne javne rasprave. Uspoređujući taj rat s onim u Golfskom zaljevu 1990-91., vidljive su razlike u načinu izvještavanja. Propaganda se u klasičnom smislu riječi može definirati kao: "namjeren i sustavan pokušaj oblikovanja percepcija, manipuliranja kognitivnim, i izravno ponašanje kojim se želi postići reakcija koja produžava željenu namjeru propagandista" (Jowett i O'Donnell, 1986: 16). Propagandu treba razmatrati u kontekstu društva koje određuje njene osobine ili smjer, posebice u odnosu na jezik i ideologiju koja oblikuje jezgru društvene svakodnevice. Šala da će rat u Iraku postati najnoviji *reality show*, u nekom smislu postala je istinita. Prizori života i smrti iz tog rata su, kad god je to bilo moguće, re-konstruirani na isti način kao i prizori iz reality showa "Opstanak". Tekst raspravlja o današnjem novinarstvu i kritički propitkuje izvještavanje o Iračkom ratu.

Ključne riječi: ratno izvještavanje, ratna propaganda, rat u Iraku