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Media, government and manipulation: the cases of the two Gulf Wars

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Abstract

This paper explores the bias and manipulation of the Western mass media during the Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003. The tactics of compliance and the ethics of the press and journalists are examined. The need for a pluralist press is extolled.

Keywords:

Gulf War, media, government interference, media compliance, media ethics, influence.

INTRODUCTION

It is assumed that in a liberal democracy the citizenry should be informed of the activities of its government so it can be accountable for them. Without an ability to know the actions of its representatives a true democracy cannot work as informed discussion cannot function effectively. This is the remit of a free press, which is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the populace is informed in a way that it is sometimes critical of the establishment. In a liberal democracy, the media should not be a tool of the government but an arbiter of it. It should provide as wide a view of the context of social and political issues as it can. Whilst individuals have the power to disseminate opinion and critiques of government policy and actions, they do not have equal power; therefore the balance of 'information power' should reside with a comparably influential independent third party that is, the mass media. The need for an informed population is especially pertinent in times of war where the need for national security and freedom of information tend to clash. This paper explores the ethical implications of the depiction of state violence in defence of national security using the examples of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (the Second Iraq War) to illustrate the dilemmas posed in these situations. It will be argued that the media reneged on its responsibilities by neglect in the first case and by complicity with Allied governments and their own business interests in the second. The subtext in this paper is that the media in a democracy should give to the public the full range of options and opinions on a topic to allow informed opinion to develop. The press should be investigative and independent. If this cannot be achieved by individual media entities then there should be an accessible range of outlets that have enough philosophical diversity to produce the same effect.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MEDIA IN WAR

During times leading up to or during conflict the media has a responsibility to inform the public in a way that allows them to make a rational judgement about government actions. However, most of the rhetoric at these times tends to be propagandistic and combative in nature. Kovarik (2006) describes an alternative journalistic style that avoids blaming people, or focusing only on the suffering of one group and asks questions that make uncover common ground. This approach was also promulgated by Chomsky (1994) who stated that there was a need for the media to propose peaceful choices and highlight the implications of war rather than just the more binary propagandistic approach. As well as the approach to presenting news, the integrity of journalists and media outlets reporting it should be maintained. Some reporters such as Anderson (1993) believe that the 'truth' must be told despite the consequences, whilst others such as Bell (1998) argue that, whilst he was trained to believe in objective, balanced and dispassionate reporting, this is was no longer his opinion and adds that, apart from the 'truth', reporting should also be principled. The implication of his argument is that a subjective, moral angle should be included. Ward (1998) counters this view with one that states that reporters must not be

moralising but dispassionate in the sense that preconceptions, interests, or passions must not bias their journalistic output.

THE MEDIA AND THE TWO GULF WARS

With these principles in mind, the behaviour of the media during the two Iraq Wars did not display balanced, dispassionate, or objective coverage of the violence taking place but one that supported a specific perspective of the ruling elite. The argument for this opinion is outlined below. In these two conflicts, the Allied governments and the military used tactics to frame the news so that the public were kept unaware of the reality of the fighting and its context. The tactic used by the military to control public perceptions in the Gulf War of 1991 was to form official 'press pools' through which all relevant information flowed. In the 2003 Iraq war, the information was filtered through 'embedded' reporters, vetted by the military, and then censured by the media outlets.

Emotion and strong symbolism were used by the media with regular abandon in both wars. Before the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, a weeping teenager (later to found to be a relative of an influential Iraqi exile) claimed that she had seen Iraqi soldiers throwing babies to the floor so they could transport the cribs back to Iraq – a potent and strong image designed to instil fury against Iraq (Knightley 2000). In 2003, key symbols were again used with the televising of the rescue of Jessica Lynch. Brown (2004) says these key symbols were used to "make grown men and women kill" (*ibid*, p.81) and the rescue of Lynch was "literally pregnant with meaning among the universe of symbols that are part of a grand narrative" (*ibid*, p.81). The reality of both situations was far removed from the reporting of them. In both these cases the media outlets took on board the official version of events on face value. With a little research, they could have exposed them as falsehoods. Of course, war always produces propaganda, but in both these wars the lack of questioning of official pronouncements by the news media was astounding. There was little media dissent from the interpretive framework provided by the government (Entman and Page 1994). The presentation of sanitized images was prevalent, whilst reporters were fed a plethora of spin terms and techno-specific images. Weapons and technology became the heroes and their consequences forgotten. As reporters were not allowed anywhere near any fighting, the media concentrated on 'sexy' weapons. Despite around the clock media coverage, it still lacked substance and came entirely from the perspective of the military that controlled both the content and the context. The media corporations, mostly CNN in this case, seemed complicit in this management of public perception by the authorities. The BBC took on its government's view entirely and even went to the ridiculous lengths of banning the playing of songs such as *Killing Me Softly with your Song*, *Everyone Wants to Rule the World*, and *We Can Work It Out* (Taylor 1992, p.24). Such actions do not indicate a free and fair press but one which was conscious of ensuring continued support for the war, or at least, not wanting to assist in producing antagonism to the official government line. Of course, in war the news media is partially a tool of government but it is problematic whether the media should be totally compliant and by doing so hide the implications of government policy.

This supportive media framework for the military also existed in the 2003 war, and so there was little need for the government or military to enforce too many controls as much of the censoring was carried by the editors and media owners anyway (Schechter 2005). Nevertheless, in both wars the military did set up systems to control the information flow to and from reporters. In both, only 'licensed' reporters were privy to official battlefield knowledge: 'pool' reporters in 1991 and 'embeds' in 2003. These 'official' reporters were treated less severely than independent 'unilaterals'. In fact, there is some evidence that these independent and non-controlled reporters were deliberately targeted by the military (Anon 2003a). An Australian Government report (Miskin *et al*. 2003) quotes Kat Adie who claims that the Pentagon was "entirely hostile to the free spread of information" and that they have gone so far as to bomb areas in which reporters are trying to get to the Iraqi side. Independent journalists were explicitly told that their press status meant little and they were to be treated as ordinary civilians with all the risks that this implies. A notable feature in both conflicts was the compliance of mainstream media chiefs and their reporters to this change in the accepted status of journalists. In 1991, pool reporters surrendered to their military minders and accepted the multimedia presentations without question, reporting the wonders of the technology to the detriment of the meaning of the conflict. The media became very patriotic in the first Iraq war, and the reporters themselves started to criticize and denigrate non-pool reporters. When any negative story

was written such as some reports about the bombing of a civilian shelter at Ameriyya, the 'patriotic' reporters gave these 'unilaterals' labels such as "disgraces to their country", "barbarians", "friends of terrorists", "appeasers" and "apologists for a dictator" (MacArthur 1993, p.159). This is hardly the response of a dispassionate press trying to seek out and expose the 'truth'. Such was the competition for 'pool' spots that journalists spent so much time fighting with each other that "they were unable to mount an effective opposition to the system" (Knightley 2000, p.490). For some journalists, the right to the privileges of the pool and its rules had made them forget the reason they were there: to inform the public. The consequence of this was that the public were only fed the information that the military wished to be released.

In the second Iraq war, the system of embedding reporters produced compliance from the reporters in a different way. Like the first Iraq war, all embedded reporters were selected by the military, and known or potential 'troublemakers' were excluded. However, by embedding the reporters with the troops the reporters became their own censors, even so there was still a vetting process by operational officers. The experience of sleeping, eating, and moving with a group of soldiers naturally bound the reporter to that group. The reporters became a part of the teams they were in. As such, they owed loyalty to those soldiers but, more importantly, saw the world only from their perspective. This was not the only problem with embedding. As the reporters only saw localized fire-fights at most, their reports could not reflect the 'big picture' needed to understand the context and larger issues of the war. Despite embedding, little footage of the actual fighting was ever presented to the public (Fiedman 2003).

As stated above, there was little difference in the output of different media outlets and their general support of the establishment view during the wars. However, there was an enormous difference in the context in which these two wars were fought. If the first Iraq war was the first television war (Carruthers 2000), the second could be called the first Internet war (Schwartz 2004). Television coverage was ubiquitous but highly controlled in both wars but the Internet was not. Although the Internet was not functionally a player in the 1991 war, it was present in 2003. Email and 'blogging' made their first tentative steps as an alternative source of news: certainly a more direct source of news but just as prone to bias and deception as conventional mechanisms. The second Iraq war saw the phenomenon of a competitive mass broadcaster in *Al Jazeera*. This station gave an Arab perspective to the war and although not widely seen in the West, it was thorn in the side of Western propagandists as it presented a different worldview of the conflict (Al-Arian 2004). Subsequent to the 2003 invasions, Arab based television stations using satellites and the Internet as a vehicle provided another source of information for the conflict in Iraq. The consequence of this is that the messages coming out of Western outlets have been moderated.

Whilst there was significant public opposition to the 1991 war in the US and Europe, the second war had global dissent. For instance, on February 15th 2003, an estimated 10 million people in 600 cities around the world marched against the impending war in Iraq. For unknown reasons these marches were largely ignored or downplayed by the mainstream media who only made passing reference to them. The obvious mass objections to the coming war made no change to the press coverage; the media was more interested in selling the establishment's message than reporting the news (Mantilla 2003). In fact, the demonstrations made little effect on policy as governments in Australia, the UK, Italy, and Spain carried on regardless – all with the tacit support of an unquestioning mainstream media.

The fact that the 2003 war came after the events of 9/11 also changed the behaviour of the media and its reporters (Anon 2003b). Whilst the reporting in the 1991 war was patriotic (as it is in most wars), the changed context of the post 9/11 war made media outlets and reporters very nervous about writing negative pieces that were in any way anti-government. There was a feeling that any negative commentaries would have been commercial and professional suicide especially in those nations with combat troops in Iraq. This was especially true in the United States. Thus, any dissenting voices tended to be ignored or ridiculed: they were associated with treachery.

A COMPLIANT MEDIA

It is interesting to question why was there so little antagonism between the media and the establishment despite the large amount of dissent amongst the general public. In both wars, the military had kept the information flow controlled and censored. In both wars, little substantive information came out (much as happened with the British press in the Falklands War). However, during the 2003 war the mass media did not seem interested in

news *per se*. It had become a profit and people seeking industry (Adie 2004). In this environment, the entertainment value of the news was all that was desired rather than its accuracy or depth. Mass media sponsors did not want news that disturbed their viewers, and so broadcasters such as Fox International were more than willing to support the 'national cause' and develop news broadcasts that were little more than very professional and entertaining propaganda.

The idea of embedding was not new but it did come out of the dissatisfaction of the pool system in the first Iraq war. A paper published in the military journal *Parameters* (McLane 2004) evaluates the embedding of reporters and its history. It is quite positive about the experiment and claims that the 'embeds' enriched reporting. Although it does comment that the reporters were compromised by their relationships with the troops, and also that their reports were too narrow. However, it claims that this process demonstrates a trend toward greater media-military cooperation, and that the media will have to have access to future military operations to reach a greater understanding of war operations. However, this is antagonistic to the media's function of dispassionately commenting on military actions.

McLane (ibid) does acknowledge that whilst there is a need to conceal military strength, locations and intent, this might conflict with the journalist's wish to report what is seen and heard. It critiques the press pools of the first Iraq war and says that the restrictions imposed by them were a form of indirect censorship. McLane claims that both the media and military units were pleased with embedding in the 2003 war, although there is some criticism of the 'Stockholm Syndrome'. Whilst McLane felt comfortable with the limitations of embedding such as the narrow frame of reference and subjectivity in reporting, many other commentators felt that embedding was just another way of limiting public access to information. Some lament that despite embedding, no visuals of any substance were shown of the fighting (Fiedman 2003). In other words, embedding did not deliver its stated potential. Even if the reports had been accurate, they only showed small slices of censored reality. Feldman comments that "it may have provided the Pentagon with exactly what it wanted" (ibid, p.29). An Australian Government report (Miskin et al. 2003) published before the 2003 war flagged that the likelihood of camaraderie between the journalists and the troops would likely corrupt the reports sent back. Thus, embedding was a combination of sensible precautions in a theatre of war, and an effective means of censorship by making the journalist totally dependant on the military. From the military worldview, embedding was a success; the loser was in depth and accurate reporting.

Lack of access to the battle fields in any meaningful way and the aggressive stance taken with 'unilaterals', and foreign stations such as *Al Jazeera*, stunted the quality of reporting of these conflicts. In an age of instantaneous electronic communications, this was a phenomenal achievement accomplished by strict censorship and a pro-establishment, perception management campaign run by the mainstream, Western mass media. In cooperation with the military, it succeeded in keeping the public ignorant of the real situation.

In all this, the media were either willing conspirators or negligently compliant. In an effort to curry favour with the ruling elites (of which the media owners were part), the press and television coverage was designed to influence rather than inform. This worked very well from the government and military perspective but was detrimental to impartial journalism. News had become entertainment and the media corporations had become compliant pawns of government. The extreme xenophobic nature of some of Fox Television's reporting did not lead to rational information being imparted to the public (Greenwald 2004). Whilst 'militainment' had developed in the 1991 war, it was developed into a fine art by 2003. The excesses of Fox News were not just the narrow censorship and jingoism of 1991 but a new form of propaganda that merged computer graphics and entertainment; reality and fiction were merged into one. The news had primarily become 'infotainment' where the information was short and stimulating but lacking in context and depth. Programmes were predominantly presented in 'episodic' rather than 'thematic' form (Inyengar and Simon 1994). It is a strange fact that a research project found that the more television coverage Americans watched, the more misperceptions they had about the real situation (Kull et al. 2003). Thus, the control function of the Fourth Estate seems to have been subverted to the detriment of public understanding. It had ceased to stimulate debate and had become a watchdog without a bark.

CONCLUSION

The media had an enormous impact on the public interpretation of events in the two wars discussed. Their behaviour surfaced many issues such as the conflict between the political needs of the leaders and operational security of the military, and the need for an informed public. At a lower level was the practice of the media to censor items not because of security issues but to protect the public's sensibilities. So for instance, the beheading of a hostage by terrorists would be stopped just before any offensive material would be shown. Smith (2007) argues that this can be done to maintain our illusions rather than our sensibilities. He quotes Martin Bell as maintaining that the television coverage of the war in Bosnia was "as close to reality as a Hollywood action movie." (*ibid*, p.2). Anderson (1993) argues that often much of this sensitive material should be shown despite the consequences and that the press should not censor itself. This is very relevant in the discussion of the coverage of the two Iraq wars which were sanitized and combat represented in glowing terms. Smith (2007) notes that in modern war, the reality is not like a movie and that on the battlefield the mortally wounded do not keep still. It is a mute point that it could be considered unethical not to present the cruel actuality of the situation to the public.

Perhaps the most fundamental danger to the ethical coverage of state violence is the progressive use by governments of influence campaigns prevalent in both these wars. The strategy of denial (the blocking of information to withhold the truth) and deception (an attempt to make someone believe something is not true) is becoming a favoured practice by governments (Godson and Wirtz 2002). These practices have developed in sophistication, and need equally clever journalists and media owners to counter them. In the two wars discussed, denial was almost complete in 1991 and so was deception in 2003 (with the complicity of media owners). The ethical responsibilities of the media were shunned and evaded in both wars.

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