



New Media in Modern War

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'Media war' and 'real war' is not the same thing, though viewers mesmerised by the television coverage of the Iraq War might be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Have we seen anything like this before - reports of battles beamed live into our living rooms from the front? Well, yes and no. To place the current media war into some kind of historical context, we need to look back to the Gulf War of 1991, which is usually described as the 'first live television war'.

People are fond of labelling things as a 'first'. Vietnam is often said to have been the first television war, although in fact television cameras covered the Korean War of 1950-53. However, very few people had television sets then so the public were only able to view the images via cinema newsreels. This coverage was often not seen until days or weeks after the events took place. Vietnam was actually the first colour television war, but the news film canisters had to be flown home before they could be broadcast. It took satellites, launched as part of the 1960s space race, to speed up transmission time. In the 20 years following the advent of satellites, there was a massive communications revolution, starting with fax machines and video recorders, then digital camcorders and mobile phones, and then of course the Internet.

The World Wide Web only began to circulate commercially in 1990, so it didn't feature much during the 1991 Gulf War. It was first used extensively as a war reporting tool in the Kosovo conflict of 1999, and has become an increasingly important news mouthpiece. In March 2003, when US television networks refused to air pictures of dead American soldiers killed in the Iraq War, they were on the Internet within hours.

Those pictures had been taken by Al Jazeera, the innovative Qatar-based Arab satellite television station, founded in 1995. The station, which came to the West's attention during the 2001-02 war in Afghanistan, plus others such as Abu Dhabi television, provided an Arab perspective on the war that wasn't present in 1991.

Is faster better?

Journalists 'embedded' with troops in Media Reporting Teams, or 'pools', must have their images and reports scrutinised by 'military minds' prior to

transmission. In 1991, the coalition armies moved so fast that the journalists were barely able to get their images and reports back to the Forward Transmission Units for the obligatory scrutiny. The result? We didn't see the ground war until it was virtually all over.

The 1991 Gulf War started with a five-week aerial bombing campaign followed by a short ground war lasting only 100 hours. The 2003 Iraq War started with a ground and air assault simultaneously. This time, embedded Journalists were equipped with technology capable of relaying live commentary of the war to the audience back home. We witnessed the 'Shock and Awe' bombing campaign as it happened and we saw live footage of reporters sitting on tanks during the rush to Baghdad.

Certainly, we have seen some of the most spectacular television coverage of war ever seen, but does it help the spectating public to understand what's actually happening? For the media, war is now about transmitting information fast and furiously in order to feed the plethora of 24/7 broadcasting stations that gulp down unverified reports that are often without context. It's difficult for audiences to fathom this snowstorm of information coming to them as it happens live from the battlefield. Experts such as retired generals and military analysts are brought in to try and make sense of the rapidly moving events. The Iraqi city Umm Qasar, for example, was reported to have fallen on nine separate occasions, and nobody really knows whether Saddam is dead or alive as a result of the opening night's 'decapitation strike'.

There has been much talk in both Iraq conflicts of this confusing 'fog of war', implying an inability to see clearly. But that is what real war is all about - masses of information coming in from all parts of the battlefield which the commanders must try to piece together like a giant jigsaw puzzle as quickly as possible. That's why it took a week for current coalition commanders to be reasonably confident about claiming that the first Baghdad market place bombing was not of their doing.

The journalists

In 1991, there were many complaints from reporters in the field that they were being manipulated by their military minders. Censorship became a much more controversial topic. Now the embedded journalists understand they cannot give out information that might jeopardise the location and plans of the troops. In fact, so did their 1991 counterparts. Indeed, then British General Sir Rupert Smith told the reporters in his pool the entire battle plan a week before the ground war began. So much for the myth that journalism is merely a recorder of war. Reporters are in a fact part of it.

Not every journalist covering the Iraq conflicts has been embedded. For

'unembedded' reporters, battlefields are especially dangerous - several were killed in the recent battles. In 1991, a CBS news crew was captured by the Iraqis as they roamed around the Kuwaiti border without any military protection. They spent the rest of the war in a Baghdad jail. This acted as a deterrent to other unembeds. In the 2003 war, foreign reporters have also been thrown into Iraqi jails, amidst claims that they were acting as spies, or perhaps it was because Iraqi officials didn't like what they were reporting.

Media influence

The 1991 Gulf War was a war of liberation for the Kuwaiti people. The coalition claims that the 2003 Iraq War is a war of liberation for the Iraqi people. Yet Iraqi propaganda maintains it's an invasion. This ongoing propaganda war is intensified by the immediacy of the coverage and the endless speculation that fills the 24/7 news cycle.

As the new coalition struggles with its campaign to 'win hearts and minds', it awaits a repetition of the 1991 uprisings. But then the old coalition failed to assist the rebels in overthrowing Saddam, and that failure informs the course of the current conflict in a way most people are only just beginning to appreciate. In 1991, the Shi'ite uprising in southern Iraq received little or no television coverage, though images from the Kurdish uprising in the north prompted a humanitarian relief operation (Operation Provide Comfort). It may be that too little television coverage is more disastrous than too much.

In the current conflict, the absence of any weapons of mass destruction, so far, has undermined the coalition's stated reasons for going into Iraq. Unless they are found, this war will remain highly controversial in Europe, including Britain. In wars of the past, our media have usually supported our boys (and now girls). They were wholeheartedly behind the first Gulf War, but the split in British public opinion over the rights and wrongs of the 2003 Iraq War is fully reflected in the British media today. The Mirror, for example has taken an anti-war position whilst its tabloid rival The Sun is pro-war.

In the past, as today, the media may not have been able to provide anything other than a confused representation of what is actually happening in the conflicts it reports. In 1991 it was accused of 'cheerleading' and many would say that was happening now in the US media, or rather certain sections of it. But in Europe and the Middle East, and indeed throughout the world, the global media landscape is now so varied that surely no one can any longer claim to have a monopoly on the truth? Now that would be a first.

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Resources

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Websites

Al Jazeera

[LINK](#)

English version of the Qatar-based Arab satellite television station which has provided a vital Arabic perspective on the latest conflict in Iraq. Arabic speakers can visit the mother site at [LINK](#)

Islam Online

[LINK](#)

04/article08.shtml

Informative article discussing how the war on Iraq has changed people's perception of the media, both in the Arabic world and in the West.

Global Vision: Free Press and the Face of War

[LINK](#)

Article by Paul Belden discussing the conflicting media coverage of the war and what he calls the 'Al Jazeera effect'.

National Review Online: War, Out of Context

[LINK](#)

owens032403.asp

Mackubin Thomas Owens, an expert on US civil and military relations, discusses the repercussions of embedded news reporters, in particular the danger of information being presented out of context.

BBC News: Arab Media go to War

[LINK](#)

middle_east/2889441.stm

BBC news article discussing the fact that, while CNN and satellite news came of age in the 1991 Gulf War, it is the turn of the Arab news stations in the recent conflict.

Arab News

[LINK](#)

Saudi Arabia's first English daily with lots of articles on the Iraq War.