

Journalism, Conflict and War: an introduction

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Everyone who has had anything to do with the media either as producer or consumer has been aware for years now that something big has been going on in the industry, a sea change as deep and radical as the arrival of the new technology in the 1980s. Practising journalists have from time to time expressed their unease. Why do readers and viewers no longer trust us? Are we guilty of dumbing down? Have we fallen for government spin? And, more fundamentally, what are journalists for?

Readers and viewers have, of course, found it difficult to air their dissatisfaction. But they but have voted with their purses—newspaper circulations are declining all over the Western world, viewing figures for news and current affairs are down, and there is a general public contempt for the media. So it has been left largely to the world of academic journalism to try to articulate what this sea change has been and what might be done about it before it is too late. Some journalists will no doubt resurrect the old cliché about the difference between those who do and those who teach, and be scornful of such efforts. But, in this special issue of *Journalism Studies* at least, the academic writers have done the research that journalists do not want to do or do not have the time to do. They have measured the column centimetres, analysed and classified the television hours, spoken with the viewers—and the journalists—and have produced the facts and figures. And, my God, how damning they are.

Are the media, particularly TV, in the business of the “mass production of ignorance”? Is it possible that the more TV news we watch, the less we know? Greg Philo, of Glasgow University, says there is a case to answer on both

counts. If it is the media’s job to interpret the world for us, why did the total output of factual programmes on developing countries drop by 50 per cent between 1989 and 1999? What and who decides our news values? Conflict in Africa since the end of the Cold War has been responsible for 90 per cent of the world’s war dead. Yet Africa turns out to be the least-covered continent on TV and in newspapers. The old newsroom saying in America—“One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth fifty Arabs who are worth five hundred Africans”—may be racist but it is sadly true.

What has happened to the old-fashioned foreign correspondents, the experts on their area who had the language, knowledge and background not only to report on what was happening but to explain why it was happening? Killed off by technology, suggests Virgil Hawkins, of Osaka University. He says the process goes: greater competition leads to budget cuts so resources for newsgathering are diverted to buying and maintaining high-tech equipment. This means foreign correspondents are expected to cover larger areas of the globe and in the process lose their specialist knowledge. “They race from one humanitarian disaster to another, with little time or background knowledge to grasp the issues behind the conflicts they cover.” This tends to produce highly emotional first-hand accounts, described by Claudia Monteiro, of Leicester University, in her analysis of the Portuguese media on East Timor, as “good cause journalism ... journalism of affection” with the journalist as hero of his or her own story.

While all this has been happening, govern-

ment interest in the media has intensified. It is as if governments realised even before the television and newspaper bosses that the power, reach and influence of the modern media are enormous. Daya Kishan Thussu of Goldsmiths College, University of London, makes the point that CNN News Group is available to 800 million people across the globe and BBC World can be viewed in more than 167 million homes across 200 countries.

For any political party, the ability to handle the media is seen as an essential element in gaining power and then, once in government, in maintaining it and carrying out policy. The British government has a "Director of Communications and Strategy" whose job it is to manage the media and manipulate public perception of government actions. The United States underpins its "hard" power (its awe-inspiring military capacity) with "soft" power (its ability to achieve its goals through the media), and its practitioners speak of a different world of journalism in which "global media strategy" and "international perception management" use journalists as pawns in a new Great Game. This influence of government is most pervasive in conflict and so-called humanitarian intervention, which is why this collection of essays is so important. As Els de Bens, Laurence Hauttekette and Heidi Lagast of the University of Ghent and the Belgium Erasmus Hogeschool, puts it, "In times of war the media function as an instrument of war. They are important agents of power ... It is a mistake to assume that they are neutral."

The contributors discuss everything from the "CNN factor" to how, despite early setbacks, NATO press officers got the better of the media in the war in Kosovo; how even maps in newspapers and on television have a role to play in bending public opinion—"For people who want to change the way we think about the world, changing our map of the world is often a necessary first step," says Peter Vujacovic, of Canterbury Christ Church University College.

Eve-Ann Prentice, a Balkans expert who came under friendly fire while covering the war in Kosovo, writes about the effect that an influx of young, inexperienced war correspondents had on the way the war there was perceived in

the Western media. There is a dispiriting account of how a well-meaning attempt at "peace journalism" in Northern Ireland failed because of the tendency of editors to prefer bad news to good and because of the constraining nature of news texts.

The one point that all the contributors seem to agree on is that in a world of 24-hour news services seven days a week, the media have more influence than journalists seem to realise. Virgil Hawkins defines the "CNN factor" as "the process by which the media influence foreign policy by evoking responses in their audiences through concentrated and emotion-based coverage, which in turn applies pressure to governments to act". But he also notes that the opposite applies: lack of media coverage contributes to lack of policy. He gives an example. "Operation Assurance" was a proposed intervention to help refugees in eastern Zaire in 1996. It was cancelled when conditions grew somewhat better. But a former diplomat revealed to Hawkins that the United States, which had initially decided to participate in the operation, pulled out when it became clear that the media were not particularly interested in covering it.

Greg McLaughlin, of the University of Ulster, concentrates on war correspondents and their relationship with their sources of information, especially when those sources are official ones. He concludes that correspondents are well aware of the way these sources attempt to manipulate them, and many do question what they are being told. But he says most do not try to discover what they are not being told, and he quotes the Sky correspondent Jake Lynch criticising his colleagues covering Kosovo because "they were prepared to accept the fundamental framing of the conflict which NATO was conveying, namely that this was all the fault of Slobodan Milosevic for being unreasonable/evil and that therefore the only way of resolving it was to coerce the Serbs into backing down". After a poor start, with NATO reluctant to admit bombing errors and civilian casualties, the NATO press officer, Jamie Shea, altered his approach and with advice from the British government's chief spindoctor, Alastair Campbell, Shea won the day. "I'll never forget

one of my final briefings ... when we had another one of these incidents, number thirteen, when NATO struck a block of flats in a little town on the Montenegrin border." McLaughlin quotes Shea as saying, "I didn't wait for journalists to ask me for information. I came straight out with it because I had all the information. And not one journalist asked me a question, not one! Whereas a couple of months earlier Djakovice had become the single dominant issue. It was almost by that time treated as what the French call a *fait divers*, a passing little story of no great significance. We made more of it than the press did at the end. It was almost a reversal of roles."

Eve-Ann Prentice draws attention to a factor in the reporting of the war in Kosovo that many have overlooked. "At the time of the fall of Communism—in the run-up to the break up of Yugoslavia—a huge number of very young and very brave journalists were suddenly picked up by all the press in the West. Some were backpackers who were hoping to go into journalism one day and who picked up phones and said, 'I'm in Prague'. All they had to write was 'I can see people jingling keys'. But then they got contracts and some were taken on as staff on newspapers. Then the Balkans happened, and they thought that the Balkans was going to be similar to the fall of the [Communist] dominoes and all they would have to do was sit around and describe crowd scenes. The people who really knew the Balkans, the real analysts, were either a bit too old and/or too sane to go to be war correspondents in what was obviously going to be a really vile series of conflicts, so they tended to stay at home writing their think pieces. But the problem is you can't really write think pieces unless you've seen it on the ground and this allowed 'colour writing' to take over the entire analysis and we were back to describing scenes of bloodshed and massacre."

This is depressing enough but the failure of a brave attempt at peace journalism adds to the gloom. Two Northern Ireland newspapers—one nationalist, the other unionist—attempted in the late 1990s a historic exercise. They published joint editorials urging compromise in a dispute that had played a major symbolic role

in the conflict—the annual Orange Order parade at Dumree. But when it came to reporting events at Dumree neither newspaper really developed the conciliatory arguments they had put forward in their joint editorials. Liz Fawcett, of Coleraine University, concludes, "Newspapers are bound to act strategically, finding the frame which best suits their purpose as politician and storyteller."

All but one of these essays were written before the terrible attack on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington, so we need to look at the challenges that have faced the media since 11 September. From the beginning it was clear that the war against terrorism was going to be a war without historical precedent—although as Betty Houchin Winfield, Barbara Friedman and Vivara Trisnadi, of Missouri's School of Journalism, point out, the media reached into history to try to make sense of the 11 September attack. But once the war began—appropriately in the dark—with American and British strikes on Afghanistan—both governments were determined to dictate the way the war was presented to the public.

The truth is that governments wage war to win and do not greatly worry about how they do it. To them the media are a menace and unless there is an actual declaration of war and they can impose censorship then they have to try to persuade or coerce the media to get on side. This is never an easy task and in the case of Afghanistan more difficult than usual. The spectacle of two of the world's most powerful industrial nations bombing a Third World agricultural one in the middle of a famine was never going to be an edifying one.

So the American Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, formally warned American media chiefs that they could expect little cooperation from the Pentagon because this was a new type of war in which secrecy was paramount. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, called media bosses to Downing Street to ask them not to rebroadcast video messages from the Taliban, ostensibly because they might contain coded messages to their followers, but actually to deny the enemy the oxygen of publicity. Neither need have worried so much. Since few

war correspondents managed to get into Afghanistan when the bombing was at its peak, and those who did risked their lives (at the time of writing eight correspondents have been killed and only two or three servicemen, so it is apparently safer to be a soldier than a journalist), there was none of the graphic reporting of civilian suffering that could have eroded public support for the war.

By force of circumstances, the main source of news became official statements and thus the reporting of war came full circle. Before the first civilian war correspondents in the middle of the nineteenth century, generals reported their own wars. Today, in the war on terrorism if we want a version of what is happening, we turn on CNN or BBC television and there is an American general at the Pentagon, or the British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon at the Ministry of Defence, telling us what they have decided we should know about the war. Unfortunately this flood of material that contained no real information, coupled with the insatiable appetite of 24-hour rolling TV news and the demands of newspaper foreign desks for scoops, made the temptation to invent stories difficult to resist. In the first week of December, with the fighting winding down, the story became the whereabouts and activities of Osama bin Laden. If you were a British tabloid reader you could take your choice. Bin Laden was in his mountain cave busy digging his own grave (*The Sun*), or in his mountain cave planning his live suicide on the Arab TV network al-Jazeera (*The Mirror*). If you watched TV, then CNN said he was directing his fighters on horseback. If you read *The Times*, then you could have studied an illustration showing bin Laden sitting in his seven-floor home in a mountain cave, with the family car parked conveniently in the driveway. This sort of coverage split the media. *The Times's* own defence editor, Michael Evans, described it as "responsible speculation", and added, "If you've got three facts and eight hundred words to write, it's perfectly possible to file a good story, but it will need some informed speculation. No one in Afghanistan is getting the full picture."

Nor will they—in Afghanistan or wherever else the war on terrorism is next waged—if you

accept the view of the noted military historian Sir John Keegan. He says that the media should concentrate less on "nosy-parkering" that could endanger lives and leave the military to perform its task. "What's happening [at the front] is none of the media's business, frankly. It's their duty to report the number of dead and wounded, but anything else is media prurience."

That is one way of looking at it. Here is another. In 1999 a group of American congressmen travelled to Yugoslavia because they felt that they could trust neither the American government nor the American media to tell them what was really happening there. On their return they reported, "The enormous confusion which has taken place due to media manipulation on all sides has only contributed to the blood lust which—if it is the only basis for decision-making—could lead to a much wider and longer war."

I see three main changes that the war on terrorism has imposed on journalists who have been reporting it. The war is so diffuse, so complex and so fluid that hard information is difficult to come by. Since journalists feel under pressure to report something, then speculation—responsible or otherwise—becomes rife. Next, it is much more dangerous and journalists are now considered legitimate targets. This is understandable. Consider this: you are not a terrorist and have never heard of them and had no say about whether your government harboured them. Nevertheless you are bombed—even if you were not deliberately targeted. Your house is destroyed and some of your family are killed. Then your country is suddenly swarming with reporters, TV journalists, cameramen and crew who all want to record your agony. Is it surprising that you might identify these people with the military who attacked you, and that you might seek revenge? In the war on terrorism, the death toll of war correspondents will only go up.

Finally, the arrival of patriotic reporting on a scale not seen since the Second World War may banish many of the conventions of journalism that have given the craft some dignity and respect—fairness, balance, responsibility and knowledge. The Fox TV news channel in the

United States has significantly increased its ratings by its all-out support for the war, encouraging its correspondents and presenters to express anger and a thirst for revenge, and to present the conflict as a biblical battle of good versus evil. Geraldo Rivera, Fox's correspondent in Afghanistan, went armed and said he would consider killing Osama bin Laden himself if he got the chance. Brit Hume, the presenter of *Special Report*, the Fox 6 p.m. news programme, said he deliberately played down stories of civilian casualties from the American

bombing. "The fact that some people are dying, is that really news? And is it news to be treated in a semi-straight-faced way? I think not." If Fox's stance continues to increase ratings, then other TV channels and even the print media could find themselves under pressure to follow its line. Reporting conflict has never been easy but I believe reporting the war on terrorism poses the most difficult and dangerous problems war correspondents have faced in their brief history. Dark days lie ahead.

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