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Reporting from the Sandstorm: An Appraisal of Embedding

BRENDAN R. MCLANE

“The reasons behind US actions and the types of actions being taken are increasingly discussed in public and the media. The result is that military secrecy is becoming increasingly rare.”

— Lieutenant Colonel Beth Kaspar, USAF

“A Bradley under fire cannot be covered dispassionately, like a news conference or a political rally.”

— David Zucchini,
embedded reporter, *Los Angeles Times*

On several occasions during Operation Iraqi Freedom, sandstorms obscured the live coverage for hours, and yet the television audience in the United States still had a clear and current idea of what was happening in the war. In an age of the continuous media cycle and information transparency, Operation Iraqi Freedom marked the first time so many reporters were provided so much relatively unrestricted front-line access. Journalists who signed a contract with the military were embedded with units in every military branch. All news media—the major US television networks, 24-hour cable news stations, print, radio, and comparable international outlets—carried exclusive coverage from their embedded reporters. While most thought the “embeds” enriched the coverage, two criticisms were frequently repeated: the embedded reporters were compromised by their relationship with their units, and the focus of their reports was too narrow. And one haunting, hovering question was raised: If the war had gone very badly for the United States and Coalition forces, what would have happened to the embedding program?

In order to address how the military can obtain the most beneficial coverage in the next conflict, this article explores how the media intend to im-

prove their wartime reporting. An initial brief review of the history of war reporting, followed by an examination of the Operation Iraqi Freedom coverage, demonstrates a trend toward greater media-military cooperation. This trend analysis is followed by an appraisal of the embedded reporter program, with a careful look at the postwar critiques. An attempt to peer into the future is then made through the example of the financial news media's coverage of the last years of the 1990s bull market. This comparison shows how bad news caused a sea change in the attitude of financial and business news and illuminates the potential pitfalls of embedded war reporting: *understanding*, not mere information, makes the difference between fair coverage and a negative feeding frenzy.

The media will have to be granted greater access to future military operations if they are to reach this higher plateau of understanding. Reporters must appreciate the operational level of war in order to place the minute-by-minute events in context. Since both the media and the military positively evaluated the recent embedding experiment, it is a fair assumption that the Department of Defense will try to accommodate the media in the future by increasing access. Some might argue that the military and the media will never be able to agree on the ground rules of such an arrangement, but the affiliated trends of greater media-military cooperation and information transparency point toward greater embedding of reporters in the future—perhaps even in the drafting as well as the execution of operational war plans.

A Brief History of War Reporting

Embedding reporters with the military is a natural outgrowth of a relationship between the two organizations dating back to the Crimean War. Since then, the interaction has waxed and waned between adversarial and symbiotic, but the general trend has been toward greater cooperation. In tracking this trend, it is interesting to note that the fundamental obstacle to a close working relationship has not changed much over time. In times of crisis, the military experiences a greater urgency to conceal its strength, location, and intent. This runs squarely counter to journalists' desires to quickly report what they see and hear.

The type of media-military compromise brokered in the Crimean War would be frequently repeated to solve the issue of how bad news from the front

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was to be reported. Before the Crimean War, this had rarely been an issue, since newspapers obtained their war coverage from foreign journalists or by paying junior officers to describe their experiences.¹ This changed when the *London Times* dispatched William Howard Russell to report on the Crimean War. He overcame several challenges just to reach the war zone, only to be banned by the military from the battlefield. He adapted by interviewing soldiers returning from battle, but was not satisfied at how firsthand accounts were often contradictory. Russell had his newspaper exert sufficient pressure to have him granted access to the action, and he henceforth observed battles from high vantage points. This perspective allowed him to judge British progress for himself, and in his reports he faulted the military leadership for their lack thereof. His damning stories, particularly on the infamous “Charge of the Light Brigade,” lacked analysis but gave his British readers the first independent appraisal of their military leaders. The British army reacted by impugning the patriotism of the newspaper and its correspondent and by citing the need for security of “artillery positions, gunpowder requirements, [and] identification of specific units.”² The *Times*, not wanting its loyalty to the crown questioned, conceded and agreed to self-censor by reporting only on completed military operations.³

In the American Civil War, the technological advantage of the telegraph increased the speed of reporting, but censorship prevented much of the criticism of military leadership. This was enforced by interrupting transmissions and even arresting and court-martialing reporters.⁴

The adversarial relationship in the United States was patched up in World War I by inducting reporters into the US military. In this early form of embedding, uniformed reporters accompanied units to the front and had unlimited access to the battlefield. While the British banned reporters completely from the war zone, the Americans gave reporters access, but imposed a mandatory censorship. US journalists, for reasons of patriotism and close proximity to action, complained little about the restriction.⁵

The US policy of inducting military reporters was continued in World War II. A more relaxed form of censorship was complemented by the Army’s own publications like *Stars & Stripes* and *Yank*, as well as its radio stations. “Instead of attempting to stifle bad news, the services (especially the Army) succeeded in releasing enough information to keep the press reasonably satisfied.”⁶ Indeed, from the military’s perspective, this was the golden age of war reporting.

The age ended and a modern era began in the Korean conflict. Reporters found their own ways into the country and arrived on-scene as the North Koreans poured into Seoul. While there was no censorship, there was also little assistance in the way of transportation or communication.⁷ All went well for the first year. General MacArthur praised the press for its good cover-

age “without . . . a single security breach.”⁸ But when China entered the war and journalists reported successive US defeats, the military was unable to clearly identify guidelines on which newsworthy items could be reported and was increasingly frustrated by the negative coverage. The system broke down, and a strict censorship was imposed.⁹

The media-military relationship only soured further in the next decade, when it became clear that the US efforts in Vietnam were not bearing fruit. Journalists were in the unique position of hearing the US military’s assessments and then going out into the field unrestricted to make their own observations. President Johnson’s position that the “South Vietnamese armed forces were an effective fighting force, that the programs launched by the US were improving life for peasants, and US military efforts were making progress” was initially put forth and reported until the press realized that it was not conforming to reality.¹⁰ The military’s attempts to stay “on message” and to appeal to reporters’ patriotism led to a growing credibility gap in which the media were caught between supporting the President and reporting the truth. Despite—but perhaps also because of—this moral quandary, the press viewed its Vietnam experience as its golden age of war reporting.¹¹ There was no significant censorship, only guidelines; unrestricted access combined with accommodating transportation; the new technology of television; and a great story: the press was reporting the “real truth” about what was happening in Vietnam. The experience profoundly affected both the media and the military. For the former, the bar was set as the standard against which all future coverage would be measured; for the latter, the press had become an enemy, which in the future had to be tightly controlled.

For the US military, the British experience in the Falklands Campaign of 1982 presented itself as a case study on how to tightly control the press. The British Task Force imposed a news blackout on Port Stanley, and any reporter without permission was apprehended.¹²

In the 1983 invasion of Grenada, the United States tried a similar approach: “For the first two days of the operation, the media [were] restricted to a neighboring island. Some journalists attempted to independently rent boats to take them to Grenada but were intercepted by US Navy ships and held for two days.”¹³ Even though the media’s protest about this treatment fell on unsympathetic ears—polls showed that the American public supported the Administration’s restriction of press access¹⁴—the military subsequently convened a commission to review the media-military relationship. The panel was appointed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Vessey, and was named after its head, Brigadier General Winant Sidle.

One of the results of the Sidle Panel’s findings¹⁵ was the idea of a military press pool, which was stood up in 1984. The first opportunity for

press pool war coverage, the US invasion of Panama in 1989, was not deemed a success. The reporters expected to witness the fighting but were only shown areas where action had already taken place. To make matters worse, reporters who were not in the pool got their stories out first.¹⁶

During the first Gulf War in 1990-91, the press pool policy remained in effect, but was vastly larger in scope. In Panama, the pool had consisted of eight journalists. In Operation Desert Storm, there were 1,500 journalists in the Gulf region, and the only way for reporters to legally get into Saudi Arabia was through the pool.¹⁷ While the military set ground rules for coverage and attempted to grant access safely, journalists still were disappointed in the press pool arrangement. The media's critique argued that the restricted access directed the reporting and was, thus, indirect censorship.¹⁸ The military, for its part, could not logistically handle a pool of 1,500 reporters. To put the numbers in perspective: in World War II, 600 journalists were assigned to cover the entire South Pacific, and 30 reporters covered the invasion of Normandy.¹⁹ Another aspect which appeared beyond the military's control was the speed of the reporting. If Vietnam was the first TV war, then Desert Storm was the first war of live coverage. CNN could broadcast via satellite continuously from Baghdad, using reporters outside the press pool.

The first experiment with modern embedding came in 1995, when the United States deployed peacekeeping forces to Bosnia. Initially journalists were allowed to report everything they heard, unless they were specifically told it was off the record. That changed after an incident involving a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, Tom Ricks:

[Ricks reported] a conversation in which a commander warned some of his soldiers, who were African-American, to be careful of the Croats, whom he described as racist. The commander was immediately heavily criticized for his comments by senior government officials. Subsequently, the Department of Defense issued a new set of rules for embedded reporters, stating that from that point on all conversations with troops were to be considered off the record unless otherwise stated. This rule, widely criticized by members of the media, became known as "Ricks' Rule."²⁰

Embedded Reporting in Operation Iraqi Freedom

Despite initial media reservations about how much access would be granted, both the military and the media were pleased with the results of the policy of embedding journalists with military units in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Over 600 journalists participated in the program, which began with a week-long "Embed Boot Camp." The first of these was held in November 2002 for 58 reporters from 31 news organizations. Their first three days were spent aboard USS *Iwo Jima*, where the embeds were taught such things as basic pipe

patching, safety awareness, and cruise missile fundamentals.²¹ The following five days were spent with the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia, where reporters were familiarized with direct fire, nuclear-biological-chemical attacks, minefields, combat first aid, tactical marches, being taken captive by the enemy, and military jargon. They slept in barracks bunks, rose at 0500, and were outfitted with military packs and Kevlar helmets. Andrew Jacobs of *The New York Times* described it as “alternately enlightening, entertaining, horrifying, and physically exhausting.”²² It taught him combat survival skills and gave him a visceral appreciation for how the subjects of his coverage lived. He was alert to the bond created by “marching, commiserating, and drinking with the Marines” and knew it would have to be tempered by the realization that the military expected him and his colleagues to “beam triumphant clips to living rooms across the country.”²³ To get all the journalists through the training, numerous other boot camps were held at locations like Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Kuwait. The experience was not for everyone, and some journalists have written candidly about their decision to withdraw from the program.²⁴

After signing a contract stipulating that they would not report missions in progress or their specific results, specific force sizes, or future missions, and that they would not travel in their own vehicles, reporters were free to join their units. Once the war began, embedded journalists reported from aircraft carriers, Special Forces units, the 3d Infantry Division, and the 1st Marine Division. Their stories were mixed with reports from un-embedded reporters and analysis from news anchors and retired officers.

In making the initial postwar assessments of the embed experiment, many of the higher-profile journalists agreed it was a success. NBC’s Tim Russert thought it had “worked extremely well” and “when you looked at all the various slices together, you had pretty close to a complete picture.”²⁵ Wolf Blitzer, who had headed CNN’s War Desk from Kuwait, called it a win for the public, the media, and the military.²⁶ The extensive training and concomitant understanding the embeds received through the program, from boot camp to the day-to-day military routine, no doubt contributed to the quality of their coverage.

In order to anticipate the ways in which the media will try to improve their coverage, it may be valuable to consider the criticisms the media have raised about their embedding experience. The criticisms have centered on two issues. In many self-searching analyses, embedded reporters have written about their fear of having succumbed to “Stockholm Syndrome”: having their work influenced by their close relationship with their units. Reporters from both print and television have recounted how they assisted their units in combat, shared physical hardships, and felt accepted as one of the group. These reporters bonded with their units and felt guilt in returning to the

United States while their units were still in Iraq. While this closeness did not necessarily prevent them from objective or critical reporting, journalists worried about losing their impartiality nonetheless.²⁷ The second significant criticism was that the embeds failed “to give a sense of the war as a whole.”²⁸ Whether or not this shortcoming was the fault of the news organizations, who did not coalesce a comprehensive context for the story, many agreed that “the program offered frustratingly narrow views of the action.”²⁹

Both of these criticisms have been merged into a larger question of whether the war made for “good TV.” Some media critics have argued that the quick action sequences from correspondents made viewers “too fascinated by the level of detail” and encouraged them to become “passive, follow-along tacticians.”³⁰ Others have complained that “within a week or so, the television coverage of the invasion had become so confusing, so repetitive—so boring, for the most part—that it was almost as burdensome to turn it on as it was not.”³¹ Thus, despite the overall favorable reviews, the media will be inclined to improve several aspects of their war coverage.

Similarly, military leaders became frustrated by how quickly front-line issues which soldiers had discussed with the embeds would turn into questions at the Pentagon or at the coalition headquarters in Qatar. One indicative comment was that a Pentagon spokeswoman “is being peppered almost hourly with queries from the battlefield about topics as varied as checkpoints, rations, rescues, and killing of civilians.”³² Even more frustrating for the military and the Bush Administration, though, was the “growing chorus, including several retired generals, questioning whether the war plan of Mr. Rumsfeld and his lieutenants was ill advised and whether the Administration [had] fueled unrealistic expectations that Iraqis would welcome American troops with open arms.”³³

When Lieutenant General William Wallace, the Army’s V Corps Commander, remarked that “the enemy we’re fighting is a bit different than the one we war-gamed against,” his comment was blown out of proportion by pundits, news anchors, and retired generals who employed it as ammunition in their criticism of US strategy.³⁴ In response, “the White House went into attack mode.”³⁵ According to senior officials, the President was irritated and switched from a public hands-off approach to taking “personal control of the message machine for the war.”³⁶ And yet, even the embed who had asked the question realized that General Wallace “was just voicing the frustration and the anxiety that he was feeling at the time out there.”³⁷

Considering how large the fallout over the seemingly innocuous comment was, however, one wonders how negative the coverage and subsequent fallout would have become if US forces had suffered large numbers of casualties or a significant setback. Most media critics have agreed that the

embed system never truly withstood the test of bad news. Negative embed stories—which covered failed supply planning, civilian casualties, fratricide, and theft—never caught the public’s attention. Apparently these stories lacked sufficient sensationalism to rise above the clamor of the military’s success. Even the embedded reporters themselves cannot say whether the absence of sensationalism was a result of their “Stockholm syndrome” or rather a greater *fingerspitzengefühl*, or feel for the war, a greater understanding which they had developed through their training and experience.

Financial News Media Reporting

Since there is no convincing way to satisfy the question of how dramatically negative news over a prolonged period would have been covered by embedded reporters, an example of a similar situation might shed some light on the issue. There are many parallels between the coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom and financial reporting in the late 1990s. In the mid-1990s, cable financial news stations like CNBC began broadcasting from the New York Stock Exchange trading floor. This form of “embedding” journalists within the financial scene lent credibility to the financial reporting and gave it an added immediacy. Similar to reporting from the fog of battle, financial journalists, like the experts they covered, “are feeling their way in a blizzard, squinting through the snow, straining amid the white noise to make out the next trend or market movement or sizzling stock.”³⁸ Just like military intelligence in battle, “financial intelligence itself became a growth market for the media.”³⁹ Finally, the difference between the traders, brokers, and analysts, who are responsible for millions of dollars, and financial reporters, who are responsible only to their editors and readers, is similar to the difference between service members, who “are assigned responsibilities for life, property, and mission,” and war reporters, who “by and large, do not acquire anything approaching comparable responsibilities until they become editors.”⁴⁰

Based on these parallels, it is revealing to observe how financial reporting changed from “cheerleader” in a bull market to “corporate fraud investigator” of the bear market. “In an era of round-the-clock news, the chief executive officer had become a spokesman-in-chief, marketing maven, and certified media star. . . . The cult of the CEO was born.”⁴¹ While some executives like Donald Trump or Lee Iacocca had become business celebrities in the 1980s, “the hunger for 24-hour business news made it inevitable that new players would emerge” and at a faster rate.⁴² The volatility of internet stocks made for exciting stories, and CEOs were the heroes. For instance, *Time* magazine named the creator of Amazon.com, Jeff Bezos, its “Man of the Year” in 1999, even though his company had never turned a profit.

The hero angle of financial reporting was popular because it took a difficult subject and made it personable and easy to understand. Many of the correspondents were by no stretch of the imagination financial experts, and they covered traders and analysts who had never experienced a real declining stock market. In the financial news audience, “there were two full generations of amateur investors who didn’t remember the way some stocks had plummeted in the 1960s and 70s, let alone the crash of 1987.”⁴³ Thus, it struck few as peculiar that of the 15,000 investment opinions covered in 1997, “less than half of one percent involved a recommendation to sell any stock.”⁴⁴ More experienced or properly trained journalists could have turned the situation into an educational opportunity for their audience. Instead, they accepted the fanciful notion that the “new economy” had no rules.

Financial new shows like *Squawk Box* on CNBC were purposely designed like ESPN’s *SportsCenter*, so that the financial reporters could appear like sports enthusiasts discussing scores and games. In the network’s logic, otherwise uninterested viewers could be drawn to coverage of complex financial dealings, as long as they were explained in sports terms. CNBC tapped into a gold mine, and the show developed such appeal that it began to affect the stock market on its own. Traders who knew a stock would be featured on the show would start buying it before the segment even aired.⁴⁵

Reporters were not troubled by this dilemma. The speed at which business news traveled, combined with the growth in the sheer number of financial news outlets, had made it harder and harder for reporters to be the first to get a story. While the science, engineering, and economics of the companies were too difficult for most reporters to master, it did not matter, since quickness beat comprehension in the rush to be first.

Then, when the stock market became jittery in 1999 and 2000, the financial news media began to tear down the gurus they had created. “In this anxious environment, journalists like nothing better than a rhetorical shoot-out between well-known personalities.”⁴⁶ This type of verbal fireworks simplified “the numbing complexity of market gyrations and interest rates and economic trends to an old-fashioned spit-ball fight.”⁴⁷

When the markets started to whiplash in April 2000, Wall Street became a soap opera, with the sharp up-and-down swings played out on every front page, news broadcast, and talk show. The triple blows of 9/11, the Enron bankruptcy, and WorldCom’s \$3.8 billion accounting scandal soured the financial news. The declining markets were accompanied by increasingly negative reporting. The media coverage became “like a car wreck.”⁴⁸ A feeding frenzy took over, and the stories focused on the excesses of CEOs like Tyco’s Dennis Kozlowski, fraud and largess in big companies, and retired investors who had lost their life savings. Similar to the coverage of the bull market, the

story lines stayed with what would be easy to understand—stories that would evoke empathy or disgust—and thus avoided the complicated explanations for what had happened.

This financial news media example suggests that if reporters do not truly understand the background, the deeper issues, the how and the why, they will fall back on sensationalism designed to evoke resonance with the viewer or reader. Likewise, when faced with truly bad military situations, embedded military reporters might resort to quick criticism, “gotcha” journalism, and catastrophic predictions—if they do not understand the events in the context of the operational and strategic levels of war.

Recommendation

The late Michael Handel, who taught at both the Army and Naval War Colleges, used to refer to the first Gulf War as “war deluxe.” The same could be said about the second Gulf War, and therefore all lessons learned from that conflict should include a caveat. Even though the media and the military were pleased with the embedding program, one must remember that it was never tested by a tragic setback. The next conflict might well bring such a calamity, and it would be prudent for the military to consider how to make the most of the coverage in such a situation. The options of the past—censorship and restricted access—will not work as well in an age of satellite imagery and cell phones.

Most reporters, especially the ones who risk their lives in combat zones, take their loyalty to the truth very seriously. The temptation to sensationalize a negative story can thus only be tempered by exposing reporters to the truth and a better understanding of the big picture. When the bad news hits, reporters need to already have considerable experience under their belts to be able to put their observations into context. If the military, from the outset, allows journalists to glimpse the making of operational plans—allows them to witness the care and consideration for all possible contingencies, the deliberate avoidance of collateral damage, and the cooperation with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations—then those journalists will have a much greater appreciation of the situation.

If the military denies correspondents access to operational planning and execution, reporters will draw their own, possibly erroneous, conclusions and assign blame where they think best. Their efforts will be aided by retired generals and admirals, who will judge progress from back in the studio and can only guess at what the operational plans included. The resulting fallout will have to be answered by senior military leaders, if not the White House. If President Bush felt he had to take over the “message machine of the war” after the “this wasn’t the enemy we war-gamed against” comment, it would be safe to assume that serious military setbacks or even minor ones will

require White House involvement in the subsequent public relations damage control. Any organization dislikes such involvement, since it invariably appears reactive and defensive.

Some will argue that reporters cannot be trusted with the highly classified material discussed at the operational level, that if correspondents had access to operational plans, those plans would be compromised. While the compromise of operational war plans is a serious concern, selecting trustworthy journalists with a proven track record could mitigate it. Moreover, journalists like Ted Koppel or Rick Atkinson already have openly admitted they had access to top-secret briefings and discussions with general officers.⁴⁹

Furthermore, in an age where much military information can be gleaned through open sources, secrecy has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Commercial satellite imagery, cellular and satellite telephone intercepts, and the internet can all be employed to track the movements of military forces.⁵⁰ A fusion of that information, combined with the full-page war maps of *The New York Times* and the retired generals' analysis on television, could have provided the Iraqi military an accurate picture of the US dispositions.

In closing, the historical trend toward greater media-military cooperation and the increase in information transparency are both harbingers of the next step: granting selected journalists access to the operational planning and execution of the next war. Failure to get out ahead of this trend and position the media within the operational level could, in the case of military setbacks in the next conflict, bring public relations disaster upon the Pentagon and the White House. Similar to the trust the Department of Defense placed in the embedded reporters at the tactical level—knowing that the soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines would make a great story—so should trust be professed at the operational level. Giving the best reporters the chance to observe such planning and execution will be rewarded with great stories.

NOTES

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44. Ibid., p. 32.
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49. Marvin Kalb recounted a conversation in which Ted Koppel said he had attended morning briefings of the 3d Infantry Division. Interview, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 29 April 2003. Rick Atkinson noted that his complete access to General Wallace entailed the responsibility to refrain from reporting Wallace's reactions to the passions of the moment. Atkinson, "Did Embeds Provide Clear Snapshot of Combat in Iraq?"
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