Embed with the Enemy?: War Correspondence as a Facet of Public Relations

Daniel E. Trucil
Communication

Since the dawn of recorded history, scholars estimate that over 3000 wars have been waged across this planet (Kohn, 2000). In each, countless lives have been lost in pursuit of both victory and defeat. Between 2004 and 2008, for example, the Iraqi government posits that close to 60 citizens died *daily* in the "War on Terror" (Antelava, "Who is counting," 2009). Over the course of this long and storied past, the face of modern war has shifted almost as frequently as the civilizations and technologies that sustain it. So too have the central precepts of its portraying war to the public.

Writing for a Chinese audience in 500 B.C.E., the famed philosopher-general Sun Tzu summarized quite nicely the nexus between combat and communication. As he suggests: "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near" (500 BCE/2009, p. 3). Though describing military tactics in general, Tzu could just as easily have summarized the role of the contemporary war correspondent—the journalist who occupies that unique "danger zone" between the facts and fictions of war.

War correspondents observe and report the execution and effects of conflict for an audience almost always not present at the combat scene. Microcosmically, their stories are purportedly objective assessments of the "who, what, when, where, and why" of war. More broadly, however, the trajectory of media relations in the theater of war offers compelling evidence that its content, construction, and dissemination deeply impact how conflict is "framed" for victims, victors, and viewers. Approaching combat from a socio-historical perspective, this article examines critically the progressive development of war correspondence over time and the unique rise of "embed" reporting both before and during the crisis in Iraq. More specifically, I present contemporary theoretical critiques of combat reporting to suggest how the rise of embedding has elevated the framing and agenda setting capacities of the government, thereby robbing the news media of their essential regulatory function.

War Correspondence: A History of Military Tension & Media Relations

As Knightley (2004) has suggested in his thorough history of war correspondence, understanding the role of media relations in combat necessitates an appreciation for how that role has developed over time. For Knightley, furthermore, this history is inexorably tied to the development of information technology. Great Britain was the first country to utilize the war correspondent for sustained coverage of the Crimean War in the late 1850s (Knightly). The increased efficiency of both continental travel and the postal service allowed British newspapers to send their own reporters directly into the war zone rather than "lifting" relevant stories from localized competitors (Knightley, p. 11). In this early heyday of the English newspaper, journalism was guided at least in theory by a model of objectivity (Liebes & Kampf, 2009). Liebes and Kampf describe how "the journalist [was] positioned only as a passive spectator…balancing between two (sometimes more) different views, present in public discourse. This position…ensured the appearance of professionalism, allowing the journalist to keep a distance from the issue at hand" (p. 240). Perhaps ironically, however, both national and international coverage of the American Civil War—less than ten years after the employment of correspondents at the Crimean front—was anything but objective and everything but "distance[d]" from the issues at hand. Of the 500 journalists sent to cover combat for pro-Union publications, for example, most produced stories rife with strategic ignorance, dishonesty, and a willingness to "dicker" with casualty figures (Knightly, p. 2).

As early as the 1860s, therefore, the public relations undertones of correspondence were already influenced by an editorial need to produce news content both aligned with and supportive of a paper's combat stance/ideology. There was a sense that the press constructed news content to fit public opinion rather than allowing reader sentiment to coalesce through impartially descriptive text. Not surprisingly, most contemporary scholarship engaging news content from the Civil War and Antebellum eras deconstructs a cautious but rampant editorial bias on either side of the Mason-Dixon line. Cronin (2009), for example, analyzed Southern press treatment of major moments throughout Lincoln's presidency to determine the level of objectivity with which each assessed the Union leader. Her survey of such coverage suggests that Southern editors either ignored Lincoln or were cautiously critical of his influence prior to the election of 1860, after which there was a liberal manipulation of facts to suit the needs of the burgeoning Confederacy. At least in part, such assessments are surprising in their recognition of public relations as a practice well before its establishment as a legitimate field/profession in the early 1900s. Reporters, editors, and even the

military were keenly aware that mediated messaging could, at the very least, sustain public sentiment.

With the Spanish-American War came the rise of "yellow journalism" and the dawn of a new journalistic phenomenon in the field of war reporting: censorship. Knightly (2004) describes how "correspondents worked under harsh and repressive censorship. One censor used to throw correspondents' dispatches straight into the wastepaper bin without bothering to read them" (p. 77). Resultant from such practices, journalists tempered objectivity to reflect the growing functionality of the media industry (Knightly, p. 77). Scholars and professionals recognized that journalists could interpret and factually report the news without remaining detached while government officials grappled with the public right to freedom of information and the private need to spin news to their advantage.

By the start of World War II, martial and governmental establishments had capitalized on the public relations influence of mediated messaging through the "strategic management" of war coverage (Knightley, 2004, p. 76). They acknowledged that traditional censorship blocked the production of a particular story or perspective, but it did little to promote the establishment's official stance. By the 1940s, therefore, American military officials ingeniously transitioned from ad hoc post-production censorship to the more subversive, public relations-based "source" censorship: "Within the United States, the army and the navy…tried to prevent correspondents from learning anything they did not want them to know. The criterion was: 'Is it a good thing for the army (or the navy) to have this information made public?'" (p. 300). From the government perspective, war correspondence became an implicit facet of military-media relations, and journalists were all too eager to sacrifice traditional objectivity for immediate (if limited) access to formerly classified information.

The absence of a critical gaze, however, was amended following the United States' involvement in Vietnam. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, television had become the central focus of the mass media industry (Knightley, 2004). As Liebes and Kampf (2009) explain, with the rise of TV and the increasingly vocal dissent to American intervention in Southeast Asia came a new form of war correspondence:

> Whereas the move from objectivity to social involvement developed in the era in which journalism's main home was the printed press, the gradual but unstoppable move to television had a massive impact on the profession in other directions. It did not take long for journalists to understand that the order of the day ha[d] become authenticity, live action, and drama, all of which have contributed to create a new model, one that we entitle "performance journalism." (p. 241)

Viewed from this perspective, the public relations capacity of war correspondence was troubling not only because it directed the ebb and flow of information transmission but also because it bowdlerized the otherwise necessary critique provided by the media as a social watchdog.

Vietnam taught the American establishment a great deal about the importance of media control. Both journalists and readers/viewers voiced their willingness to turn a critical eye towards the execution of martial tactics at home and overseas (Cortell, Eisinger, & Althaus, 2009). Of particular importance to the public relations practitioner, however, government officials now recognized that both camps were equally willing to accept information as delivered by the establishment, and that working *with* the media rather than against might actually prove beneficial (Cortell et al.). Partly a social experiment and partly a response to critiques of the handling of Vietnam, the American military thus developed the "media pool" system as the foremost method for disseminating and controlling information in times of war.

As defined by Knightley (2004), "pooling" was a correspondence tactic wherein a limited number of reporters were granted access to the war zone and permitted to travel in "pools, escorted by military officers to cover various stages of the action as chosen by the military" (p. 490). In his contextual assessment of "new" war journalism, Nohrstedt (2009) has explained how media pooling during the First Gulf War "was perfectly adapted to the goal of the PR strategy of portraying one's own side's fighting as 'civilized,' unlike that of the opposition…[P]ublic affairs officers made a conscious effort to spread the image of a high-tech war without innocent victims" (p. 97). Though by now public relations was recognized by name, military personnel crafted PR as an ingeniously elaborate veil to hide government influence behind a veil of journalistic integrity. Messaging remained both regulated and controlled by a central governing body, yet now it was disguised and endorsed by a purportedly credible intermediary—namely, the media. Gardner (2007), for example, synthesized the Pentagon's approach to "sustain[ing] its war narrative through control of media access" to examine chronologically the ramifications of the media pool system. As he has observed, of the six major combat efforts involving the United States between 1987 and 2001, pool reporters were strategically detained wherever and whenever access threatened the military establishment. As a popular t-shirt for such correspondents ironically observed: "When there's News…We're in the Pool" (Gardner, p. 112).

The media pool system sufficiently served the needs of the military, yet it left much to be desired from actual coverage. Citing Carey (1995), Stauber and Rampton (1995) describe how

[PR] propaganda [must] play…a more covert and sophisticated role in technologically advanced democratic societies, where the maintenance of the existing power and privileges are vulnerable to popular opinion."…The latter half of the twentieth century has been marked by growing disillusionment as the American people have learned of the gulf that separates official rhetoric from…actual conduct. (pp. 148-154)

Attempting to balance both message control and freedom of the press, therefore, it was ironically the second Bush administration that developed a program reconciling these seemingly disparate public interests (Nohrstedt, 2009). Their solution: embedding correspondents with troop details.

Sleeping with Our Subjects: Embedding as the "New" Media Relations

As Cortell et al. (2009) explain, the Department of Defense (2003) defines media embeds as those journalists who "live, work, and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations" (p. 669). Whereas the media pooling system strictly controlled the type of news content journalists could access, the embed program offered correspondents purportedly free reign. Journalists were censored only with regard to so called "not releasable" information—nineteen items related to troop movements and locations designated classified for security purposes (Cortell et al., p. 669).

While embedding is a relatively new technique, the practice has nonetheless gained widespread social and scholarly attention—particularly as related to its use in America's ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In their analysis of embedding in Iraq as a form of performance journalism, Liebes and Kampf (2009) have contextualized the Bush administration's controversial decision to utilize embedding against the backdrop of war correspondent history. Reifying Knightley's (2004) hypothesis that journalism in general is a product of social and technological progress, Liebes and Kampf stress how embedding was the unique result of (1) advances in the methods of war reporting, (2) a shift from national public broadcasting to international commercial media conglomeration that emphasized ratings over quality, and (3) the governmental transition from public affairs censorship to public relations collaboration (see also Cortell et al., 2009; Herber & Filak, 2007). Bush advisors (many of whom were employed by the President's father in the mid- and late-1990s) learned from their mistakes in the First Gulf War and saw the mounting conflict in Afghanistan as a PR opening for "new strategies" towards media-military relations (Cortell et al., p. 661; Herber &

Filak, 2007, pp. 38-39). From a public relations perspective, embedding would afford military officials the same control and functionality they enjoyed using censorship/media pooling while offering journalists the opportunity to record coverage from behind enemy lines.

Observed broadly, scholarly assessments of the embed process and the War on Terror have (1) scrutinized the usefulness and efficacy of "new" war journalism and (2) attempted to assess the benefits and consequences of such reporting tactics. Fahmy and Johnson (2005), for example, surveyed reporters embedded in Iraq to assess their satisfaction with working conditions under the new correspondence policy. Most correspondents were pleased with the coverage produced and praised the program for affording them the opportunity to observe and catalogue conflict directly. For them, embedding was a useful practice that allowed for access largely free from direct censorship, promoted first-hand accounts of conflict in real time, allowed for the media to self-correct discrepancies in official war messaging, and offered previously unknown insight through daily interaction with frontline officials.

At the same time, however, the authors' assessments of the journalism produced by such correspondents suggests that embeds over-emphasized the weakness of Iraqi infrastructure and the relative ease with which American troops negotiated enemy surrenders (Fahmy & Johnson, 2005). Non-embeds ("unilateral" journalists stationed in Iraq though not officially sanctioned or protected by military personnel), on the other hand, were far more likely to publish stories detailing civilian anger with American occupation, the negative impacts of foreign occupation, and both civilian and combatant casualties. When confronted with these differences, furthermore, most embeds affirmed their overall positivity towards new media tactics. For them, integration into military units did not compromise journalistic objectivity since the ethical obligations of individual reporters would prevail over systematic control.

Lindner's (2009) content analysis of some 742 print articles published by 156 national and international reporters yields similar results. Lindner compared the coverage produced by embeds with that of Iraqi nationals and rogue "freelance" reporters who traveled to Iraq of their own accord. Overall, embeds produced more coverage of actual combat, utilized military officials more frequently as content sources, and fused treatment of the two in human interest stories on soldiers stationed in the Middle East. Those covering the War on Terror for Iraqi outlets, on the other hand, were far more likely to publish stories on bombings (both suicide and American), infrastructure damage promulgated by sustained martial occupation, civilian deaths, and human interest stories on fellow Iraqis' struggles with the US presence in their country. Not surprisingly, Lindner found that independent journalists evidenced the most balanced coverage of stories

from the Persian Gulf, tempering positive assessments of martial intervention with critical analyses of the long-term ramifications of the Bush administration's decision to invade.

Such observations are telling for what Knightley (2004) perceived as the willing deterrence of reporting "from the other side" prompted by embedding tactics (p. 539). Lindner (2009), in fact, has suggested that embed reporters suffer from a journalistic Stockholm syndrome since they rely on American military personnel for "transportation, health care, and supplies" (p. 23). In light of such considerations, Fahmy and Johnson (2005) posit that while embedding does tremendous good in the short-term, overtime it (1) curtails the maximum freedom to report, (2) conspicuously circumvents objectivity, (3) proffers a strictly American perspective bordering on Pentagon spin, and (4) suggests the inaccurate absence of combat thanks to advances in military technology. In short, embedding is well suited to the PR needs of the military but its critical perspective is one-sided (read: American) at best (Gardner, 2008, p. 114; Nohrstedt, 2009).

In a related vein, Lewis and Reese (2009; see also Reese & Lewis, 2009) conducted interviews with American journalists from *USA Today* to examine the semantics of the phrase "War on Terror." Their interactions with correspondents suggest not only that the news media use this title as a space-saving ideological symbol but also that such framing was both known and endorsed by those who adopted it at the implicit urging of the Bush administration's PR machinery (see also DiMaggio, 2009; Herber & Filak, 2007). Such findings were corroborated by Vultee's (2009) content analysis of US newspaper articles that used the term "War on Terror" between 2001 and 2006. Studies as late as 2008, in fact, have suggested that less than ten percent of news sources utilized in 2003 could be classified as "anti-war," and that the framing of the Iraqi conflict by purportedly conservative (Fox) and liberal (CNN) outlets alike were nonetheless pro-war in overall positioning (though perhaps not to the same extremes) (Johansen & Josslyn, 2008).

Attempting to determine whether increased education counteracts the negative influence of such "lopsided" news coverage, Johansen and Josslyn (2008) surveyed American citizens on their academic backgrounds and the accuracy of their understanding of the war in Iraq. To their surprise, educated viewers of traditionally biased outlets such as CBS and Fox were just as likely to be misinformed about the War on Terror as their uneducated counterparts. As the authors succinctly observe: "Ideally, news media act as a filter, sifting and sorting information in a manner that ensures a reliable and accurate source from which citizens can base judgments about war. [As of late, t]he news media fell far short of this ideal and exacerbated the spread of misinformation" (p. 591).

From Practice to Theory:
Unpacking the Consequences of War Correspondence

Knightley (2004), among others, has suggested that the history of war correspondence is a product of our need for information and the development of technology that allows for its pursuit. Beyond mere chronology, however, the development of the war correspondence craft has offered social scientists a lens through which to view the public relations consequences of news content. As the aforementioned studies have suggested, understanding the "what" of war correspondence history is just as compelling (if not more so) than the "why" and "how" constitutive of its larger social importance. Developed in the late 1970s and expanded over time, the theories of agenda setting and journalistic framing illuminate not only how news is crafted but also what that crafting says and does to the viewing and reading public.

In their seminal text from 1972, McCombs and Shaw have suggested that "[t]he world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media" (p. 177). This is the central axiom behind their agenda setting theory. As defined by its designers, agenda setting rests on Cohen's (1963) precept that "the press 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*'" (McCombs & Shaw, p. 177, citing Cohen, p. 13). McCombs and Shaw explain how "[i]n choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from [its positioning and the] amount of information in a news story" (p. 176). The agenda setting premise is disconcerting principally because it suggests that news construction, by its very nature, circumvents the ideals of objectivity that have long been staples of journalism.

As initially envisioned by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda setting theory was a means for explaining disparities between reality and reality perception among American voters. Nonetheless, its implications for the study of war correspondence have gained increased notoriety since the end of the Vietnam War, particularly as regards a subset of agenda setting scholarship known as "issue framing" (Hiebert, 2003). As defined by Herber and Filak (2007), "framing" is the journalistic ability to select some aspect of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicative text. Like agenda setting, it represents a "subtle emphasis on an issue's various aspects, thus making these details more important" (Herber & Filak, p. 42). More specifically, however, framing theory assumes that the journalist's structuring of sources, details, and data within a story coalesce to contextualize the reporting from a particular point of view. Lewis and Reese

(2009) describe how "frames define the terms of debate; shape public opinion through persuasive use of symbols; and, when most effective, lead to public policy change. They are tools used by social actors to structure reality, and their creation and manipulation are often managed by elites seeking to reinforce their discursive dominance" (pp. 85-87). More recently, scholarship has attempted to deconstruct the mechanics of conflict framing, most especially in light of the increased polarization of media coverage throughout the United States.

In a study conducted by Blondheim and Shifman (2009), for example, Israeli, Hamas, and international news coverage of the December 2008 crisis in the Gaza strip was compared to assess differences in reporting styles for combat opponents. Blondheim and Shifman determined that the nature of correspondence was directly related to three "arenas" of war reporting: the home front, the enemy frontlines, and the outside world. In home coverage, both Hamas and Israeli publications emphasized the "official" stance of power proffered by their governments. Whereas Israeli officials attempted to extend this image into coverage in Hamas-controlled territory, however, journalists instead highlighted Israeli vulnerability. Similar failures were found in the Israeli desire to appear vulnerable abroad; here, journalists were far more likely to emphasize the power of Israel, most especially when tied to allies. Hamas coverage suffered from similar strengths and weaknesses. Journalists from the home front supported power scripts, but violence and disaster, respectively, were the framing images in Israel and abroad.

Overall, the Blondheim-Shifman (2009) assessment is compelling evidence that the willing acceptance of official war positioning by *domestic* correspondents may undermine the critical nature of national news. As Lindner (2009) has suggested, reporter tactics routinely homogenize coverage; when these "gathering tactics" are directly correlated with governmental messaging (as is the case with embedding) it becomes more and more challenging to evaluate the system from within.

Conclusion: Should All War Be Deception?

From a public relations perspective, the exponential growth of embed correspondence is both a blessing and a curse. It affirms the value of communication tactics in relationship cultivation—an integral objective of any public relations plan—but it also suggests that PR strategies themselves undermine the value and validity of our national news coverage. The success of promotional public relations for the War on Terror has been mixed at best and misrepresented at worst. Viewed through the lens of scholarly critique, however, the depth and breadth of studies reported here suggest that new developments in media relations

policy have real and concrete consequences for audiences both at home and abroad. In a crisis situation, strategic public relations can do tremendous good for reputational maintenance and mediated messaging. At the other extreme, however, the potential to abuse information channels is a real and present danger. Stauber and Rampton (1995), for example, remind their readers that one of the most highly paid consultants for the fledgling Nazi government was none other than Ivy Lee—the venerated father of American strategic communication. More recently, White House executives have acknowledged that "[most] people still get their news from their local papers"; when such coverage is fatally flawed at the source, however, how can a national public be fully and impartially informed ("White House trying new," 2003)?

While the socio-historical assessment here presented is neither positive nor negative in its outlook, it is an acknowledgment that embed reporting has "come from somewhere" and must, in turn, grow and develop beyond its present state. Though Sun Tzu's assertion that "[a]ll war is based on deception" may not be far from truth, therefore, perhaps it is deception itself that has changed. Modern war correspondence is more open and accessible than ever before, yet its purview hardly reflects such freedom—possibly because truth is subjective, or possibly because "the Third World War has already begun—but thanks to public relations, it simply hasn't been announced" (Stauber & Rampton, 1995, p. 178).

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